



Building CALM into Children's Schedules

Helping our children find calm and peace does not necessarily require adding new activities and opportunities into their schedule intended to achieve this goal—in fact, I would argue that it is more helpful to re-assess our current schedules and to learn how to engage in activities that we already perform in a mindful manner.

Over-scheduling is a major issue that results in children (and caregivers) being over-stimulated and stressed out. A schedule that has no breathing room and which feels hectic for parents, feels just as chaotic for children. Except, children won't ask us to cut back on their extracurricular engagements—they will just demonstrate symptoms of stress, such as whining, arguing, becoming picky and/or fussy, refusing to go to bed as well as tossing and turning once they finally get there.

Many parents feel worried about cutting back on sports, tutoring, music lessons or other extracurricular activities because society has made it loud and clear that if we're not providing enough enrichment for our children, our kids will get left behind.

But research on the impacts of childhood stress is unequivocal—if children don't have adequate sleep and downtime, they cannot reap the benefits of all the activities we jam-pack into their schedules anyway. Hectic schedules significantly hinder our ability to create mindful, happy and meaningful lives, because instead of enjoying the present moment, we are in a constant mode of planning and doing—with no time to just be. Downtime is required to connect, be creative and ensure healthy brain



development, which are more likely indicators of future success and happiness than enrolment in excessive extracurricular activities. While I am by no means suggesting that you clear your child's schedule of opportunities to socialize, learn and grow, I recommend that you are mindful about which and how many activities, as well as what they do before and after stimulating activities.

One or two extracurricular activities a week are healthy and beneficial for child development. Research indicates that children who don't engage in structured activities actually tend to fare worse in school, have fewer friends and experience less confidence.

An exercise I regularly complete with families I work with, who are looking to help their children find more calm (which translates to children who sleep, learn, socialize and grow better), is completing a colour-coded daily/weekly schedule to reflect periods where children are stimulated versus enjoying downtime. It is a real eye-opener for many caregivers to see their child's schedule in this format, and it helps them understand why their children may be demonstrating signs of stress, even though there are no direct and significant stressors present in their life.



Sample of my two year-old's weekly schedule (Stimulating activities = Red; Calming activities/
Downtime = Blue)

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
7:15-8:00 AM	Morning Routines	Morning Routines	Morning Routines	Morning Routines	Morning Routines
8:00-8:30 AM	Breakfast	Breakfast	Breakfast	Breakfast	Breakfast
8:30-9:00 AM	Movement Break	Movement Break	Movement Break	Movement Break	Movement Break
9:00-9:30 AM	Structured Learning	Structured Learning	Structured Learning	Structured Learning	Structured Learning
9:30-10:00 AM	Unstructured Play (Blocks)	Unstructured Play (Dress-Up)	Unstructured Play (Sensory Play)	Unstructured Play (Crafts)	Unstructured Play (Music)
10:00-10:30 AM	Snack	Snack	Snack	Snack	Snack
10:30-11:00 AM	Mindfulness Activity	Mindfulness Activity	Mindfulness Activity	Mindfulness Activity	Mindfulness Activity
11:00-11:45 AM	Structured Learning	Structured Learning	Structured Learning	Structured Learning	Structured Learning
11:45-12:00 PM	Dance Party	Dance Party	Dance Party	Dance Party	Dance Party
12:00-12:45 PM	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch	Lunch
12:45-3:15 PM	Nap	Nap	Nap	Nap	Nap
3:15-3:30 PM	Snack	Snack	Snack	Snack	Snack
3:30-4:00 PM	Unstructured Play	Unstructured Play	Unstructured Play	Unstructured Play	Unstructured Play
4:00-6:00 PM	Errands in Community	Errands in Community	Errands in Community	Errands in Community	Errands in Community
6:00-6:30 PM	Unstructured Play	Unstructured Play	Unstructured Play	Unstructured Play	Unstructured Play
6:30-7:30 PM	Dinner	Dinner	Dinner	Dinner	Dinner
7:30-7:45 PM	Breathing/Meditation/Yoga	Breathing/Meditation/Yoga	Breathing/Meditation/Yoga	Breathing/Meditation/Yoga	Breathing/Meditation/Yoga
7:45-8:15 PM	Bedtime Routines	Bedtime Routines	Bedtime Routines	Bedtime Routines	Bedtime Routines



Please note the following:

- Leisure activities that are adult-led and require children to follow rules are stimulating and not considered downtime. We have to let our kids play, with age-appropriate supervision but without constant adult direction.
- Unstructured playtime is considered downtime.
- Transitions: We can buffer the impact of stimulating activities by surrounding them with downtime (i.e. instead of driving to tutoring lessons straight from school, consider taking a quick break to stop at a park and enjoy eating a snack or to sing songs in the car for even just 5 minutes).
- To make mornings less hectic, prepare from the night before (i.e. lunch, clothes, have a planned breakfast ready, if possible). Otherwise you and your child will arrive to work/school in a state of stress. How you begin the day significantly impacts how long it will take to settle down and be ready to learn/work, as well as how much children can absorb while learning.
- Homework is more effective when it challenges and engages students, rather than depending on rote memorization or repetition.
- For younger children under 9 years of age, I suggest two entire afternoons/evenings for unstructured activity and one weekend afternoon/evening.
- Eating dinner together is so important! Research demonstrates that families who eat together have better bonds, better communication and that children do better in school, believe their parents are proud of them, experience fewer eating disorders and are less likely to use drugs or alcohol. One of my favourite dinner time activities is "Rose-Bud-Thorn". Each family member takes a turn discussing the best thing that happened to them during the day (rose), one thing they are looking forward to (bud) and one thing that didn't go as well as they had hoped (thorn).



Age-appropriate Suggestions for Mindful Routines & Schedules

For Children 0-5 Years old

- Provide predictable routines and try to plan outside time each day. To truly enjoy the present moment, we need to allow ourselves and our children to just be. An outdoor environment is the perfect place for children to be creative, to get fresh air and to engage in moment-to-moment awareness.
- Limit the use of electronic toys or equipment. Enforcing healthy limits from a young age will make it easier to set and enforce limits as children get older.

For Children 5-10 Years old

- Determine what your child finds to be calming for them (i.e. taking a morning bath or shower, eating a comforting breakfast) and build this activity into their morning routine. It is important to help our children start their day (and move on to learning activities) in a peaceful state of mind & body, so that they are receptive to learning.

For Children 10-13 Years old

- Encourage your child to get their things together and to make lunch the night before so that there is no last minute search for homework, socks or sports equipment!

For Children 13+ Years old

- Most teenagers don't like getting up in the morning, so it's critical that everything they need for the next day is in place before they go to bed.
- Make breakfast a time for connection. As children get older and have more commitments, it becomes harder to engage in regular family time with them, such as eating dinner together. Wake up early and make a yummy breakfast for you to enjoy with them. Although they may be old enough to make their own breakfast, think of this as starting the day with an act of kindness. Sit with them, avoid technology and enjoy a conversation about the day to come.