

The Effects of Over-Scheduled Children: Perspectives of Childcare Workers

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Abstract

This study used survey research to gather the University of Wisconsin-Stout Child and Family Study Center (CFSC) childcare workers' perspectives regarding the effects of over-scheduling children in Menomonie, Wisconsin. The participants in this study were eight individuals who were undergraduate students or had completed their undergraduate education and six individuals who were graduate students or who had completed their graduate education. The computer program Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to statistically analyze the data by use of frequencies, cross-tabulations, and mean comparisons. Our findings indicate that childcare workers do not perceive children as being over-scheduled. Another finding was that there might have been a gap in the education on over-scheduled children for the staff of the CFSC. Future research could include duplicating this same survey in a larger and more diverse population with childcare workers and teachers.

Introduction

The phenomenon of over-scheduled children has become the wave of the new era. The concept of a carefree childhood with time for leisure play and free time is becoming less of a reality while hyper-scheduling, over-busyness, and loss of family time is becoming more of a reality for many children (LeFebvre, 2005). Children today may be spending a large fraction of time in highly structured activities, such as sports programs, church-sponsored activities, and other school-sponsored programs which leave them with little time for spending quality time with their family and doing relaxing activities such as reading (Hofferth & Sandberg, 2001). Parents likely want to give their children many opportunities to participate in numerous activities, enabling children to build skills and develop talents that would be beneficial to them as they grow into adulthood. A compressed definition of an over-scheduled child is a child who

has very little free time in which they can pursue and enjoy their hobbies or relax, but instead spend much of their time, when not in school or doing basic personal care needs (sleeping, eating and bathing), doing multiple structured activities at any given time (Hofferth & Sandberg, 2001).

Review of the Literature

After an extensive search to find information regarding children's stress levels due to being over-scheduled, very little was found. What was found were journal articles that had information on children's daily activities, varying types of activity and family situations, and amount of time spent doing such activities.

Bianchi and Robinson (1997) used a time-use study to see how randomly selected children spend their time throughout a given day and if there were variations depending on the family composition. The findings were that nearly 90% of children watch television daily compared to only 25% of children reading a book or being read to. It was also found that parental education influenced activities at home. A study done by Hofferth and Sandberg (2001) used time diaries that found as children age, they spend more time in school and less time in day care, especially if the mother is employed, accounting for 15% of the children's time. Structured activities consisting of church, sports, and visiting were found to be more time consuming than unstructured activities; children of working female homes were found to spend more time playing sports. According to Pellegrini and Smith (1998), there are three forms of physical activity play at different ages: infancy peaks their rhythmic stereotypes, preschool years peak their exercise play, and middle childhood peaks rough-and-tumble play. Children face greater need of good physical activity as young children turn into adolescents to gain the physical, cognitive, and social domains they will need to go throughout life. Larson and Verma (1999) concluded that children and adolescents who spend a large amount of their time on routine chores (household) will encounter a dissimilar set of socialization experiences than children who spend large amounts of their time playing or in a certain setting (school). The developmental variable has shown that the investment of one's time into education can raise an individual's lifetime earnings and at the collective level is related to the growth in the society's economy. It is important to determine if children are becoming more stressed with the increasing amount of structured activities in which they are participating.

Theoretical Framework

The theory being used in this study is Human Ecology Theory, developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner. The Human Ecology Theory indicates that individuals

develop within their own human ecology system. The four levels of environmental systems of human ecology are micro-, meso-, exo- and macro-, all of which are interdependent of one another. The micro-system encompasses the relationships and interactions a child has with his or her immediate surroundings including the following: parents, peers, close relatives, schools, childcare, and neighbors. The meso-system provides the connection between the structures of the child in the micro-system including connections with a child's day care provider and the parents. The exo-system is the larger social system which a child is not directly involved with but is affected by. This system's structures interact with the micro-system's structures, including parental workplace schedules and school curriculum. Finally, the macro-system consists of the cultural norms, broad ideological values, and laws by which we live. This system has a trickling down effect on the interactions of the other systems. If it is felt that families are solely responsible for rearing their children, then it is up to the parents to decide the style of parenting they choose involving discipline, activities, place of daycare, and which church to attend if they choose, ultimately developing the child through the areas of parental choice.

As applied to our study, this theory would predict that individuals who have been over-scheduled children throughout life may continue to be over-scheduled individuals throughout the rest of their lives. An example of the Human Ecology Theory subsystems is when a child is being over-scheduled, it may lead to the child being tired, emotionally exhausted, and/or sick. Having a sick, tired or exhausted child at home means the parent may not be able to go to work. With the mother, father or caregiver not at work, there is a loss of working hours for the employer and the individual may also lose pay. Lastly, the economy or the general culture could be hurt from the parent not attending work and not getting paid for the time they need to take of the child. This indicates how one over-scheduled child could hurt or harm others who are not directly involved with the individual.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to survey UW-Stout childcare workers on their perspectives regarding the effects of parents over-scheduling their children. The results from this study will inform family service workers in educating parents on these effects in order to promote healthy children who will grow into healthy adults. Another purpose of this study was to see the effects of parents over-scheduling their children and what effect it had or has on the children's overall well being at the University of Wisconsin-Stout Childcare Center. Our research problem is that parents are over-scheduling their children and we are examining if this has a direct result on children's well being

(i.e., fatigue, illness, etc.). The central research question in the study is: What is the UW-Stout daycare workers' perspective on the effects of parents over-scheduling their children?

Methods

Participants

The site of this study was the University of Wisconsin-Stout Child and Family Study Center (CFSC) in Menomonie, Wisconsin. The participants in this study were eight individuals who are undergraduate students or have completed their undergraduate education, and six individuals who are graduate students or who have completed their graduate education. Thirteen females and one male completed the questionnaire. The participants worked a range of hours: three individuals worked zero to eight hours, four individuals worked seven-teen to twenty-four hours, one individual worked twenty-four to thirty-two hours and six individuals worked thirty-three to forty hours.

Research Design

The study is represented best as a cross-sectional design because it captures the informational knowledge at one point in time. The study sample could not be randomized due to the fact that a small number of individuals worked at the center. This study may not be generalized to a larger population due to the small sample and the inability to randomize the sample population.

The data collection form the research team used was a self-administered questionnaire. The questionnaire contained a written list of closed-ended questions that were clear and easy for respondents to understand. The advantages of using the self-administered questionnaire were that it was less intimidating than face-to-face interaction interview would have been and the expenses and time commitment were minimal.

Quota sampling was used because we surveyed individuals who were easy to access. We used this sample because it is most accessible for us to gain knowledge about over-scheduled children and the effects it has on them. The research team also used purposive sampling by going directly to the University of Wisconsin-Stout daycare center staff because the research team felt the staff would have the information needed to successfully obtain data about over-scheduled children.

The research team's completion of an online Human Subjects Training through the University of Wisconsin-Stout Institutional Review Board ensured the ethical protection of the participants in this study.

Data Collection Instrument

The data collection instrument was designed by our research team to address the major concept of the study. A cover letter was created for the questionnaire which included the following components: introduction of the research team and the institution the research team represented, a description of the purpose for the study along with general instructions which indicated that participation for the study was totally voluntary, and an assurance that each participant and their name were not used and participants would remain confidential.

The University of Wisconsin-Stout CFSC Day Care Staff in the study were asked to report their level of education, their gender, and the hours worked per week on a paper-and-pencil questionnaire. The formation of questions on the questionnaire was developed as a result of reading the literature and choosing a theory that fit with the research questions. In this case, Human Ecology Theory would attempt to explain that an individual develops within an ecology system. The Human Ecology Theory focuses on the interactions between humans and their natural environment. The Human Ecology Theory can help explain that being over-scheduled would affect children's physical and mental well-being as well as their functioning in other environments (school, church, community). According to Pellegrini and Smith (1998) veryday there are a number of children who face being over-scheduled who are forming cognitive disabilities. Children should be involved in these three forms of physical activity: rhythmic stereotypes, exercise play, and rough-and-tumble play. These three activity levels can be significant in not forming cognitive disabilities. Older children are better able to adapt to being over-scheduled than younger children. Children today are more involved in scheduled activities than leisure activities. Hofferth and Sandberg (2001) found that for children using diaries (written journal) on an everyday basis, recording personal information on tasks such as eating, sleeping and personal care, accounted for 55% of a child's day. According to Bianchi and Robinson (1997), the affects of childhood time usage continue to be felt in adulthood. Thus, the questionnaire in this study contained six closed-ended, positively-directed statements regarding the concept of over-scheduling.

The scale used in the questionnaire was the Likert scale. The scale placed different respondents in relation to each other in terms of the intensity of their attitude towards the issue based on a categorical scale from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5).

Validity is the ability of an instrument to measure what it is designed to measure. Content and face validity were the two types of validity used in this study. Content validity indicates that the statements need to cover a full range of concepts under question, in this case, parents over-scheduling their children. Face validity ensures each of the statements on the scale needs to have a

logical link with the concept of the question that spoke to the overall research question.

Since the research team was unable to clarify the questions for the respondents, it was important to pilot the questionnaire to form an overall clarity and understanding of the statements prior to distributing the questionnaire to participants. The questionnaire was piloted to 14 University of Wisconsin-Stout CFSC Day Care Staff in the Day Center on campus.

Procedure

The research team collected data and selected a sample study of University of Wisconsin-Stout Child and Family Study Center (CFSC) Day Care Providers. The questionnaire was completed in the presence of the research team, either at the Infant/Toddler or Pre-School CFSC.

The research team contacted the director of the CFSC to gain permission to approach the staff for them to fill out the questionnaire. After receiving permission, we approached the day care staff either as they were leaving their shift or coming in for their shift of the day. After approaching the staff, we asked them if they would fill out our questionnaire. The directions instructed the staff to respond to a series of six statements by circling a number that best represented their perceptions on over-scheduled children.

Data Analysis Plan

The research team assigned a participant number to each questionnaire. In the process of cleaning the data, the research team verified that every item on every questionnaire had been answered, making sure there was no missing data. If the research team had too much missing data it would lessen the validity and likelihood of being able to generalize to the larger population; there were no missing data.

To code the data, the research team developed a codebook—a set of rules for assigning numerical values to answers obtained from participants on a clean questionnaire. For each of the statements on the questionnaire, the research team assigned a variable name. These variables were based on the main concept of over-scheduled children. The variables were as follows: PSC=parents over-scheduling children, STS=over-scheduling creates stress in children, COG=over-scheduled children are forming cognitive disabilities, AGE=older children better adapt to over-scheduling than do younger children, LES=children are more involved in scheduled than leisure activities, and TIR=children are looking more tired/fatigue driven during the day.

To analyze the data, the research team used the SPSS statistical computer package; the level of analysis was the individual. A frequency distribution was

conducted to detect missing data and to ascertain how many participants responded to each variable and the strength of each response. For example, the research team assigned the number 1 to equal strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=undecided, 4=agree, and 5=strongly agree. The reliability analysis and Chronbach's Alpha (statistical reliability check) helped determine how reliable the statements in the questionnaire were in measuring the main concept.

Results

The variables analyzed were PSC (parents over-scheduling children: "Parents, over all, are over-scheduling their children"); STS (stress: "Over-scheduling creates stress in children"); COG (cognitive: "Children who are over-scheduled are forming cognitive disabilities"); AGE (Age of children: "Older children are better able to adapt to being over-scheduled than younger children"); LES (leisure: "Children are more involved in scheduled activities than leisure activities"); TIR (tired: "Children are looking more tired and fatigue-driven during the day"). The statistical analyses performed on these variables were frequency distribution, and reliability analysis.

All of our variables were subjected to frequency distribution analysis. The results indicated that there were no missing data. For the variable PSC, 28.6% of the respondents strongly disagreed/disagreed, 28.5% agreed/strongly agreed, and 42.9% of the respondents were undecided if parents, over-all, are over-scheduling their children. For STS, 0.0% of the participants strongly disagreed/disagreed, 7.1% were undecided, and 92.9% of them agreed/strongly agreed that over-scheduling creates stress in children, STS. The question COG returned the following results: 42.9% of the respondents strongly disagreed/disagreed, 50.0% were undecided, and 7.1% agreed/strongly agreed that children who are over-scheduled are forming cognitive disabilities. For AGE, 35.7% of the respondents strongly disagreed/disagreed, 21.4% were undecided, and 42.9% of the respondents agreed/strongly agreed that older children are better able to adapt to being over-scheduled more than younger children. For the variable LES, 21.4% of the respondents strongly disagreed/disagreed, 28.6% were undecided, and 50.0% of the participants agreed/strongly agreed that children are more involved in scheduled activities than leisure activities. Finally, for the variable TIR, 28.6% of the respondents strongly disagreed/disagreed, 28.6% were undecided, and 42.9% agreed/strongly agreed that children are looking more tired and fatigue-driven during the day.

Table 1

Frequencies

Variable	SD	D	U	A	SA	Total
PSC	0.0%	28.6%	42.9%	21.4%	7.1%	100.0%
STS	0.0%	0.0%	7.1%	50.0%	42.9%	100.0%
COG	0.0%	42.9%	50%	7.1%	0.0%	100.0%
AGE	0.0%	35.7%	21.4%	42.9%	0.0%	100.0%
LES	0.0%	21.4%	28.6%	42.9%	7.1%	100.0%
TIR	0.0%	28.6%	28.6%	42.9%	0.0%	100.0%

Note. PSC=parents over-scheduling children; STS=over-scheduling creates stress in children; COG=over-scheduled children are forming cognitive disabilities; AGE=older children better adapt to over-scheduling than do younger children; LES=children are more involved in scheduled than leisure activities; and TIR=children are looking more tired/fatigue driven during the day.

The reliability analysis was run to indicate if our six variables (PSC, STS, COG, AGE, TIR and LES) were a reliable index to measure our major concept (UW-Stout Day Care Center perception on the effects of over-scheduled children). Cronbach’s Alpha is a measure of reliability, and in our analysis was .433. This value indicates that our survey items are not a reliable index of our major concept, the UW-Stout Day Care Center’s perception of the effects of over-scheduled children.

Discussion

What is the University of Wisconsin-Stout Day Care workers’ perspective on children being over-scheduled? The research team expected to find children being over-scheduled and what was found through the questionnaire research was that the UW-Stout day care staff did not feel the children were being over-scheduled.

The results of this study did not support the literature review. The research survey was to see if children attending the day care at the University of Wisconsin-Stout are being over-scheduled. The staff responses indicated that they were undecided whether children were being over-scheduled. The litera-

ture review stated children today may be spending a large fraction of time in highly structured activities such as sports programs, church-sponsored activities, and other school-sponsored programs which leaves little time for spending quality time with their family and doing relaxing activities such as reading (Hofferth & Sandberg, 2001). With our finding, the children at the day care center did not experience this impact. Larson and Verma (1999) concluded that it is important to find if children are becoming more and more stressed with the increasing amount of structured activities they are partaking in. We found no relationship between children being over-scheduled with the high stress levels and physical symptoms. The research team did find that the staff at the UW-Stout day care center does recognize that over-scheduling creates stress in children.

Our findings support the theory used with this study. Human Ecology Theory states that one learns within the ecology system where one lives and adapts to it. The theory would say the study found that children are adapting to their ecology environment (home, school, and day care life), and the scheduled activities or leisure within these environments are not considered to be part of being over-scheduled.

Limitations

The limitation for the study was the small, non-random sample size. The limited sample of this study was a small day care center in a rural area. If this study had been done in a larger metropolitan area where more scheduling opportunities exist for children, the study would have produced different results.

Implications for Practitioners

The research results show mixed findings of how University of Wisconsin-Stout day care providers are assessing children being over-scheduled. Could it be that the children they are caring for are not being over-scheduled and are having enough quality time with their family and leisure activities? Or, could it be that the staff members may not be educated on the effects of over-scheduled children or even know what it means to be over-scheduled as a child? Children throughout the United States are continually being over-scheduled with activities (sports, church, church programs, etc.), more so with scheduled than leisure activities. This over-scheduling created stress in children.

This research can be helpful to family practitioners by creating a comparison between different segments of the population and by illustrating the impact of over scheduling upon these different segments. If there was another study done in a larger population, it would be possible to compare the results

between the two. The practical use for this study is to allow individuals in the field of family science to be more educated on what over-scheduling of children is and ways to prevent children from becoming over-scheduled.

Implications for Future Research

The next possible step for this form of research is to duplicate this same survey in a larger and more diverse population with day care workers and teachers. Other questions coming out of this research could include being more aware of what creates over-scheduling (home ecological system) or what makes a child over-scheduled.

Conclusion

Our literature informs others that not all children in the United States are being over-scheduled and more education about over-scheduling needs to be administered to family science professionals. This study adds to the body of knowledge that over-scheduling children can create stress for children.

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