

# How Much is Enough? How Much is Too Much?

By Janelle Durham, MSW, Parent Educator, Bellevue College. [www.gooddayswithkids.com](http://www.gooddayswithkids.com)

Although there are families in America who struggle with the basic necessities of life like putting food on the table, many other parents have access to a huge array of options. Toys to buy, media to watch, vacations to go on, and activities to enroll in. A marketer's job is to convince us these things are 'necessities'. Sometimes they play to our fears: "Playing with this toy will help your child get into college." Sometimes they play on parental guilt: "Help your kid have a great Christmas – show them they're loved." Sometimes they sell joy: "You deserve to have FUN!"

And here's the thing. Lots of those toys and media are fun! Lots of fun! And going on vacations as a family can lead to fabulous connecting moments and can be part of a child's memories of belonging in a loving, happy family. And lots of those classes and activities really will help build your child's knowledge and skills, and help them reach their potential.

So how do we decide which options to take? What is enough? What is too much? Every family has to make their own decisions, based on their child's needs and their own goals and values.

## What do kids need, in order to learn?

Often parents choose toys and classes as enrichment tools to help their child learn and grow. When we go back to the basics of brain development, we know that children learn through: novelty and repetition, guided play and free play, and down time to process it all.

New toys and media offer novelty – lots of interesting stimuli to take in. But if kids are continually bombarded with new things, and not given the chance to play with the same thing over and over, they don't gain the benefit of repetition, which is mastery. If a child only has access to a few toys, he may complain of boredom, but he gets really creative with those toys!

Classes, camps, activities, and sports teams are all guided play and guided learning. They help your child gain new knowledge and learn new skills. But kids also benefit from free play – just having free time with friends or siblings to goof off and play any game they can think up. And they need rest and quiet solitude to absorb everything and make their own connections.

Kim John Payne, author of Simplicity Parenting, talks about 4 keys to raising "happier, calmer, more secure kids": the environment, rhythm and schedule, and unplugging. Let's look at each.

## Environment: De-cluttering to make space for creativity.

If there are too many toys, a child doesn't focus on any of them. They flit from one to the next, never really settling down to play. Their little brains are overstimulated by all the choices. If you keep giving them more toys to "get them engaged" they will get even more distracted.

It is better to focus on having a small number of really excellent toys. Here are some things to think about and look for when choosing what toys to have in your home.

- Think about toys that build diverse skills: if I had only a few toys, I'd want one in each of these areas: big motor skills (balls, bikes, tumbling mats), small motor skills (puzzles, shape sorters, craft supplies), imaginary play (dress-up clothes, toy kitchen), music toys, art supplies, a set of magnetic letters, some dice for math skills, something to nurture (doll, stuffed animal), and toys for playing outdoors (bucket and shovel).
- Choose open-ended toys that can be played with in lots of ways and passive toys where the child has to be creative to use them. Things such as blocks, cardboard boxes and tape, puppets, measuring cups and containers. Minimize toys that can only be played with in one way, and active toys where you press the button and it does all the work.
- Elizabeth Pantley recommends these criteria for choosing toys: long-term play value, durable, washable, solid simplicity, challenge (will teach but won't frustrate), appropriate for your child's current developmental abilities, stimulates creativity, engaging, versatile, fits your family values, novelty (different than what you already have), and fun.
- Spend less time in stores, less time looking at catalogs and shopping online. When you shop, it's easy to fall in love with toys and end up bringing more home than you need.
- Try setting up a "toy rotation" system. Make bins of toys, where each bin has about ten toys in it. Keep one bin out to play with and store all the others in the garage or a closet. Whenever the whim strikes (once a week?), swap out the old bin for a new bin.

Rhythm: Increase predictability by introducing rhythmic moments for connection and calm. And Scheduling: Give kids the gift of boredom. Boredom is the precursor to creativity.

You might have the option to enroll your child in anything from art classes to aikido, from piano lessons to pottery, ballet to baseball, soccer to Spanish, gymnastics to geo-caching, wilderness survival to web design. There are so many cool and exciting things to learn! (And, you can't help but think... it will help someday when they fill out college applications...)

Plus there's the things you have to do – doctor's appointments, picking up the siblings from their activities, grocery shopping. And more things you want to do – movies, playdates, dinner out, outing to the playground, sporting events, farmer's markets, vacations to the beach...

All of them are cool. And all of them are learning experiences. Just make sure you remember to make space in the schedule for down-time, and quiet contemplation, and spontaneous, creative play. And for self-care: sleep, calm meals around a table, snuggling up with a book.

Unplugging: Reduce the influence of adult concerns, media and consumerism on children to increase resilience, social and emotional intelligence.

When allowing your child to use screens (TV, computers, smartphones, tablets, etc.) make conscious choices about the content and about how much, when, and where to use them.

Learn more:

- Watch a video on "The Gift of Boredom": <https://vimeo.com/23054135>
- "The Overscheduled Child: Avoiding Hyper-Parenting" <http://sparkaction.org/node/296>
- If you're concerned about consumerism and the influence on your child, read: [www.ecobabysteps.com/2009/11/27/what-is-a-parent-to-do-about-children-and-consumerism/](http://www.ecobabysteps.com/2009/11/27/what-is-a-parent-to-do-about-children-and-consumerism/)
- On More Good Days blog, read "How Many Toys is Enough", "10 Types of Toys", and lots more on: free play, outdoor time, screen time, brain development, and so on. [www.gooddayswithkids.com](http://www.gooddayswithkids.com)