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THE HOME ECONOMIST: For teens, time can mean more than money

Over-scheduled kids are quick to buy material things as a coping mechanism. Find the sweet spot by giving teens some control over their schedules.

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Coconut Grove resident Dr. Elizabeth Leight has four kids, including two teenage girls ages 14 and 15 years old. Naturally, their calendars are packed with schoolwork, sports and social engagements. So when it comes time to booking an appointment at the orthodontist or an enrichment class after school, she insists that they phone up and schedule these things themselves.

"I know I'll be the one driving them there," Leight says. "But this empowers them. They gain control over their own time."

They also become desensitized to the harsh winds of competitive materialism plaguing so many of South Florida's teens, according to new science. Researchers have long known a few things about young adults and money, mostly that each generation cares more about cash than the one before, and as a result, is more miserable. But now they've found surprising results proving teens who feel in control of their schedules — with not too little or too much free time — think less about caustic shopping and feel better about themselves.

Perhaps Leight — who says she could probably afford to spend on designer items but doesn't find her kids particularly interested — knows this time affluence is a perception, not a reality. That's why having power over their own schedules — in addition to a few other tricks for time management — can improve their views of the day and instantly boost well being.

"As parents we have to allow our children to make their own decisions about how they spend their time," says James Roberts, professor of marketing at Baylor University in Waco, Texas. "Most kids have either no free time or too much — and those are the two worst groups to be in."

That's because over-scheduled kids are quick to buy clothes, sunglasses and other status items as a coping strategy to reduce stress, Roberts says. Those with too much time in their hands become captivated by marketing ploys on television and by merchandise in malls. What he found after surveying 1,300 9th- and 10th-grade students is that teens who perceive their schedules to be manageable, lined with many fulfilling activities but also the downtime required for creativity to blossom, were the least materialistic and more likely to forge fulfilling friendships.

"When we base our happiness on money and compete with others for possessions, our well being is diminished," Roberts says. "What really makes humans happy is how we feel about ourselves and the quality of the relationships we have."

Problem is, Roberts can't say how many free hours or minutes a kid needs because the sweet spot



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doesn't depend on conventional time measurements but rather on the teen's own perception of them. Two kids can respond quite differently to the exact same schedule.

If eliminating extracurricular activities for your stressed out teen is not an option — as is sometimes the case for, say, working parents — there are ways to change her perception of the program she's following, says Dr. Ingrid Vasiliu-Feltes, assistant professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine. People respond positively to a choice they make themselves, she says. So after explaining to your teens you can't pick them up until 7 p.m., provide a list of classes available during that time and let them select how they spend their time. If the schedule is still packed with a dreaded activity, link it to a positive one. For example, you can tell a baseball-enthusiast that he can have his piano lesson before or after practice — his choice. Same goes for other non-negotiable engagements, such as dentist appointments.

"If a child has a feeling of a choice — or a perception of one — then they don't hate it as much," Vasiliu-Feltes says. "That's the problem with marketing targeted to them. Commercials make you feel like you have a choice, but they give you very specific options to choose from."

If you have the opposite issue, which is a long and uninspiring summer ahead, you can perhaps find a Miami-based program for almost any subject and sometimes for under \$1,000, says Karen Meister, a partner in Aventura's Camp Experts & Teen Summers, who advises South Florida families for free about suitable programs (the camp or organization will pay her if you enroll.) She's representing tennis programs at every level and classes for computer training — including video game production — at the University of Miami. There's also SAT training, theater programs and Sea Camp in the Florida Keys.

"You can do something short," she says, "but at least it's a growth experience."

For even lower-cost activities, assign your teen a long-term project, says Kristin Fitch, a family fun expert and editor of ZiggityZoom.com. An artist can prepare an exhibition while an entrepreneur can come up with a business plan and perhaps even a product. Pay for an online web design class and have them create a site. Or put them in charge of planning a fun weekend for the whole family — such as a camping trip.

"Come up with something they enjoy doing," Fitch says, "And give them encouragement every day."

*This is a monthly column by Miamian **Brett Graff**, a former U.S. government economist who writes about how economic forces are affecting real people.*