

COMMENTARY

The search for balance

BY ELIZABETH VU

It seems that in today's world, to be successful in adulthood a child must have an impressive resume by the time he or she finishes high school. In reality, the stakes are high for young adults to differentiate themselves amongst their peers, as competition for placement into the best colleges and universities is challenging.

In an effort to prepare children for success in adulthood, many parents begin this process at an early age. There is a great value in this; a well-rounded education, involvement in sports and music, and volunteerism develop positive qualities and skills that benefit children in many ways. A sense of community is established among sports teams, Girl and Boy Scouts, and in spiritual fellowship. Leadership and problem-solving skills are enhanced through involvement in social groups.

Accomplishments build self-esteem and a sense of personal strengths. However, there is a delicate balance between a child who is involved in sports and activities outside of school and a child who is experiencing stress due to high expectations and a lack of needed free play time, especially outdoors.

Children who are overstressed may not communicate this verbally. They may have sleep difficulties, act out angrily, experience mood swings, changes in appetite and/or bedwetting accidents. Some children may complain of stomachaches or headaches or pick up "nervous tics" such as hair twirling or picking at their skin. Other children may distance themselves from family or friends, isolating themselves from those who care most about them.

It may be helpful to talk to your child directly about what is causing these feelings or behaviors; spending more quality time together and improving the balance between scheduled activities and free time outside can have a significant impact. Decreasing sugary foods and sodas, increas-

ing servings of fruits and vegetables, and working on improving quality of sleep may all have a positive impact on your child's stress as well. Relaxation techniques, yoga and meditation can help reduce stress, improve concentration and promote healthy sleep.

There is also compelling evidence that connection with the natural world has emotional and developmental benefits, and that our culture's increasing disconnection with nature leaves an important developmental need unmet. Richard Louv, author of "Last Child in the Woods" and "The Nature Principle" has coined the term "nature deficit disorder," not as a mental health diagnosis but to describe the growing dissociation between children and the natural world around them. The evidence of this can be seen in growing rates of obesity, mood disorders and attention disorders. Re-connecting with nature isn't simply a pleasant or nice thing to do; as Richard Louv states:

"The future will belong to those who are nature-smart — those individuals, families, businesses and political leaders who develop a deeper understanding of the transformative power of the natural world and who balance the virtual with the real. The more high-tech we become, the more nature we need."

Increasing time spent in nature does not require ending all after-school activities and tossing the television out the window. Introducing your child to the natural world in our backyards, nearby parks and nature centers, can be done through simple and enjoyable activities that benefit both child and adult. For example, watch clouds form and learn differences between cloud types; set up a tent in the backyard and camp outside; make a leaf collection; or plant a vegetable garden to-



Elizabeth Vu

gether. Taking hikes as a family (shorter ones with more breaks for the younger ones) can reduce stress, encourage family togetherness, inspire curious minds, and instill a sense of peace. Minnesota has a wealth of state parks to explore, several within a short drive from the Cities. For more ideas, check out www.richardlouv.com/books/last-child/resource-guide/.

For some children, summer is a three month complete break from expectations and scheduled activities. However, it will benefit the child and family to strive for a balanced level of activity throughout the year, so that children learn that enjoying the outdoors isn't reserved for summer break only. The National Wildlife Federation suggests families implement a "green hour" to encourage activity every day outside, be it in the backyard, neighborhood park, or any place that provides a safe, green place for children to play freely (www.greenhour.org). Increasing your child's time, as well as your own, in nature can be done in simple, small steps on a daily basis, and has the potential to help your child develop a strong connection with their natural environment, improve their mental health, and become active participants in the world around them.

Note: The information provided should not be used during a mental health emergency or for the diagnosis or treatment of a mental health condition. A licensed mental health professional should be consulted for a diagnosis and treatment. Call 911 for mental health emergencies.

Elizabeth Vu, LICSW, is a therapist in Washburn Center for Children's School-Based program which serves the Eden Prairie, Minneapolis, and Bloomington school districts. As Washburn Center for Children plans to build a new, state-of-the-art children's mental health facility, the agency has been consulting with Richard Louv to design a facility that creates a healing environment with direct access to natural environments.