

Multitasking, a way of life

Students have to juggle a host of extracurricular activities in their daily schedules



By Tessy Koshy

Students today have perfected the balancing act to the hilt. Along with school studies, homework assignments, tests and projects, they also find time to juggle a host of extracurricular activities in their daily schedules. Be it learning art, music, dance or a foreign language, students have their plate full pursuing several creative interests along with schoolwork.

After-school activities

From gymnastics to tennis and drama classes, most students in the UAE lead an active life outside the classroom. With the number of options available in the emirates, they are spoilt for choice when it comes to selecting an activity suitable to their interests and budget.

Parents, too, understand that they need to equip their children with a host of skills to succeed in the 21st century information age. It is no longer about only doing well in school. Parents realise that students need to be encouraged to develop creative thinking, social collaboration and communication skills. "I am happy to see my daughter doing many things simultaneously.

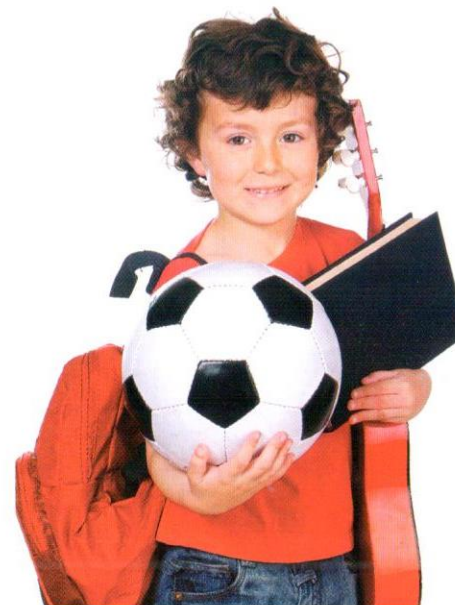
These will help her develop her personality, increase her confidence, learn time management skills and at the same time keep her busy," says Dimple, mother of nine-year-old Calista, a grade four student in Dubai who finds time for mental maths, arts and crafts, and physical fitness classes. Except for a break on Friday, Calista goes for classes in the evenings all through the week.

Several schools in the emirates offer creative classes as part of their after-school activities. To give students a wholesome experience, schools offer specialised sports coaching, yoga, karate, creative writing, instrumental music, elocution and theatre lessons. Students are also encouraged to be part of volunteer activities.

Internet as an educational tool

Additionally, the internet has emerged as a formidable force in helping students enhance their skills. It is today an indisputable educational tool, giving access to various forms of self-education to millions of web users. From sourcing information for class projects to learning complex math theorems, students are increasingly referring to the internet for a variety of reasons. "The internet is a great blessing. My daughter surfs Google and YouTube for her school projects and for supplementary reading," says Dimple.

The schools, on their part, encourage an integrated teaching methodology that requires students and their parents to use



the internet on a daily basis. This means that, along with pursuing extracurricular interests, students find time to surf the web as well. With the increasing number of tablets and smart phones in homes today, youngsters have more access to these gadgets. The popularity of social media is yet another factor favouring increased internet usage among students. Students are, therefore, experiencing the world in many different ways rather than only through textbooks and school assignments.

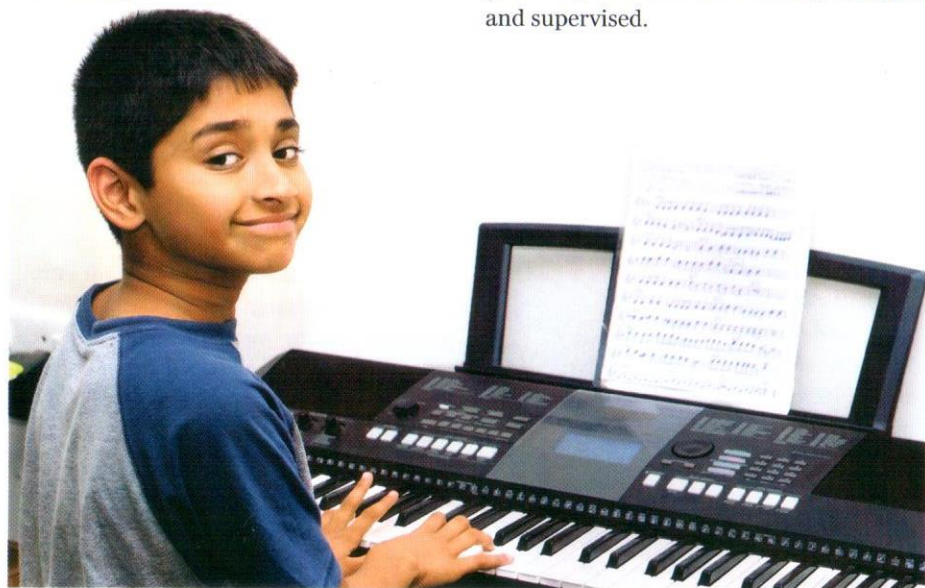
Besides using it to browse course-related information, students use the internet today to learn many new skills. From enrolling in foreign language courses online to watching videos on art techniques, technology has narrowed the distance between teachers and students the world over. They are learning and adapting to the world using new forms of communication. It also helps them keep pace with new educational developments worldwide and compare notes with their peers in other parts of the world.

Benefits of multitasking

Experts say juggling multiple activities, or being busy is good. As students steer their time and energy through class projects, extracurricular activities and the web, they simultaneously learn many things.

To begin with, multitasking teaches youngsters the art of time management and maintaining priorities. "They learn about long-term commitment and develop diverse interests that allow them to experience different skills," says Dr. Thoraiya Kanafani, Clinical Psychologist at the Human Relations Institute & Clinics, Dubai.

Being part of several activities also helps build self-esteem, communication and social skills among school students. A study conducted in 2006 by Joseph L. Mahoney of Yale University and his colleagues suggested that children and teens involved in several organised activities were found to be better adjusted than those who were not. Such children also had better academic performance and more functional family relationships.



Most of all, keeping busy brings a feeling of accomplishment. Students get an adrenalin rush when they achieve success pursuing multiple interests. It gives them a sense of purpose as they are learning and developing new things. It also teaches them how to be organised, push their boundaries and be more efficient while acquiring new skills.

When students participate in physical activities such as sports classes, it helps them not only to keep fit, but also to learn about team spirit, sportsmanship and leadership skills. "My daughter enjoys extracurricular activities, which work as a stress-buster for her," opines Rama Devi, mother of fourth grader Nitya Saran, who attends weekend dance classes and weekday violin lessons at home. Soon, Nitya plans to find time in her busy schedule for art classes.

For working parents, getting their children busy with after-school activities has an advantage. Instead of coming home to an empty house or spending weekends and summers idle at home, activities are a great way to make sure kids stay occupied and supervised.



Finding a balance

But there are always two sides to a coin. Being overburdened with activities, school work and social media can have negative effects on children. "Students who are part of too many activities may end up with academic difficulties, excessive fatigue and a feeling of being overwhelmed. Being too busy can cause a great amount of stress and put a lot of pressure on students as they balance schoolwork, family commitments, friendships and activities," cautions Kanafani.

At such times, life becomes a chore and students remain busy out of parental or personal pressure. They can suffer from anxiety, depression, headaches and insomnia, and might lag behind in school. Kanafani lists some signs that parents should look out for to determine if they are overburdening their kids or not. "If a child answers 'no' to any of these questions – Can you still find time to do homework? Are you getting eight hours plus of sleep each night? Are you able to enjoy family time and play with friends? – then he is doing too much," she suggests.

Parents play a key role in helping their children find the right balance. They

should help in scheduling their kids' activities. Internet activities should be monitored and chosen according to a child's age, temperament, abilities and interests. "It is very important for me to play a dual role at home of being a liberal mom and at the same time getting strict when required. I make sure that Nitya is not under stress and enjoys both studies and activities," says her mother Rama Devi. She follows simple strategies such as setting time limits for her daughter to complete tasks, studying with breaks and more extracurricular activities on weekends.

Keeping a calendar to organise your child's busy life will stand him in good stead. The calendar can be pasted on noticeable spots at home. Kanafani suggests the use of a weekly planner where each hour is dedicated to a certain task. "This will also help in figuring out if your child's schedule is unrealistic."

With the myriads of opportunities available today, students are going to remain busy, but it is equally important for parents to not overstress them and let them enjoy life's little pleasures.