"Roll Up and Spend Your Last Dime"

The Merry-go-round of Children’s Extra-curricular Activities in Modern Society

Mardie Townsend & Gabrielle Murphy

“Step up and play” begins the famous hit song 'Penny Arcade'. And so it was for thousands of Australian families, as their eldest child began school this year, and the associated endless merry-go-round of extra-curricular activities also began. But how many of those families realise that the song ends “Roll up and spend your last dime”?

While the perceived benefits of children’s involvement in extra-curricular activities are many and are widely accepted, there are also costs, not only in terms of money but also in terms of time. Evidence from a study conducted in Melbourne highlights the fact that, for many families such as those on low incomes and those headed by a single parent, both the time and the money costs may be prohibitive. This article highlights parents’ perceptions of the benefits and costs of children’s extra-curricular activities, and explores the implications of changing family and household structures for families’ capacity to sustain such activities.

Introduction

A typical weekend for many Australian families is spent driving children to and from their regular extra-curricular activities (ECAs). The term ‘extra-curricular activities’ refers to those regular activities in which children participate after school hours as a form of recreation or leisure. In many households it is accepted as ‘normal’ for the social lives of the whole family to be scheduled around the ECAs of their children.

Figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) indicate that 59% of Australian children aged between 5 and 14 years were involved in ‘organised’ sport outside of school hours in 2000 (ABS, 2000). In addition, an estimated 320,000 primary-school aged children receive dance or ballet tuition (Dyon, J.

pers. comm., 29 January, 1998); there are growing numbers participating in children’s choirs (Smith, 1997); and thousands more undertake music tuition (Thomas, J. pers. comm., 1 July, 1998). Recent ABS figures indicate that 29% of 5-14 year old children participating in one or more ‘cultural’ activities (ABS 2000).

Yet none of the systems for measuring the costs of children take account of this common and, in many cases, expensive item in the family budget, nor have recent discussions of the impacts of the GST addressed the issue. Perhaps even more importantly, in an era of increasing diversity in family and household structures, little if any attention has been paid to the capacity of families and households to sustain this increasingly demanding aspect of family life.

The study

To begin to address this gap, a study conducted in Melbourne during 1998 aimed to analyse the extent of children’s involvement in ECAs, to understand why parents support these activities, and to gain insight into the impacts on families and households arising from participation in ECAs.

The study, for which primary data was collected during the months of April and May, involved parents of children who participated in ECAs and who attended a selected government primary school in Melbourne’s eastern suburbs. Parents provided information through a survey questionnaire. In addition, an activity sheet was completed by each respondent, detailing activity types, child and parent time spent on the activities, and the costs associated with each activity. All respondents to the survey were invited to participate in follow-up ‘case study’ interviews, and interviewees kept a diary of one week’s ECAs of all primary school aged children living in the household. A total of 50 parents responded to the survey and ten respondents participated as case study informants.

Extent of children’s involvement in ECAs

Within the 50 families involved in the study, a total of 77 children participated in ECAs on a regular basis. These 77 children participated in a total of 135 ‘activity units’ (ie. the total number of people participating in each identified extra-curricular activity) across 22 different activities - an average of 1.75 activities per child and 2.7 activities per family. While more than half of the families studied had only one primary school aged child involved in ECAs, 48% of families had two or more children involved. This multiple child involvement (which, of course, has both time and financial cost implications for families) related not only to the number of primary school aged children in each of the study families, but also to the age of the children. Figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS 2000) indicate that as children advance through primary school, the likelihood of their involvement in extra-curricular sport increases, with 32% of 5 year olds playing organised sport compared with 69% of 11 year olds.

Children from the study sample were involved in an astonishing range of ECAs (see Figure 1), including twelve different sports, five different types of performing arts, fellowship and citizenship groups (such as Scouts, church clubs, etc.), as well as several more unusual ECAs - power maths and cartooning.
**Table 1**

Breakdown of financial costs for a range of activities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Classification</th>
<th>Fees</th>
<th>Uniforms</th>
<th>Venue Costs</th>
<th>Other Costs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Av. = $519</td>
<td></td>
<td>Av. = $165</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Av. = $450</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>plus cost of instrument</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swimming</td>
<td>Moderate</td>
<td>$160-$360 p.a.</td>
<td>$0-$80 p.a.</td>
<td>$0-$75 p.a.</td>
<td>$0-$100 p.a.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Av. = $309</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Av. = $177</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Little Athletics</td>
<td>Low cost</td>
<td>$45-$65 p.a.</td>
<td>$10-$60 p.a.</td>
<td>$0-$10 p.a.</td>
<td>$0-$40 p.a.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Av. = $55</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Av. = $43</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Parents’ perceptions of the benefits of children’s involvement in ECAs**

Participants in this study were asked about their perceptions of the benefits of their children’s involvement in ECAs. While the perceived benefits of children’s involvement in ECAs varied depending on the nature of the activity, there were some common themes.

Improved health and physical fitness, and encouragement of social interaction were the two most commonly cited perceived benefits flowing from ECAs. At a time when there is increasing concern about the amount of time children spend in front of televisions and computers, it is not surprising that these benefits rank highly with parents.

However, the perceived benefits were not limited to those aspects of physical and social development. Parents also noted the perceived contribution of ECAs to improved self-esteem, increased capacity to work cooperatively within a team environment, increased independence, improved organisational skills, the development of perseverance and self-discipline. One parent stated:

> "Even though [she] isn't a champion, she thinks she is. And that's really good for her self-esteem."

Despite some past concerns about the competitive nature of children's ECAs, only one respondent noted that her child had become more competitive (in detrimental ways) as a result of her involvement. Far from viewing rewards for achievement as promoting an unhealthy sense of competition, parents noted that children loved being rewarded and recognised for their efforts. Special awards such as ‘player of the match’ or the ‘coach’s award’ were seen as fostering perseverance and a recognition in children that through perseverance goals can be met. Parents saw these attributes - perseverance, independence, discipline, commitment, willingness to work within the rules - not simply as helpful at this stage of their life, but also as important attributes for their children’s future wellbeing.

Another commonly held view was that ECAs instill in children values which parents perceive are important - values such as sharing and sportsmanship.

One respondent highlighted the importance of her child’s involvement in a cricket team in developing his sportsmanship:

> "I've never seen a group of children encourage one another [like this]. It is a real team sport. Just on the sidelines - 'Good work, yeah that was great' - and when they come off, even when they have just gone out, they are still encouraging one another. To see that side of it is great."

However, the children were not the only ones perceived as benefiting from their involvement in ECAs - parents also benefit from the social interaction associated with the activities. Nearly one-third of the activities in which children participated consisted of team sports run during weekends when parents were able to attend. This offered parents a chance to socialise with members of their local community, and for some parents, children’s ECAs became their main source of social contact. As one respondent put it:

> "One of the reasons I ...encouraged my girls when they said they'd like to play is because of the social aspect of the tennis club. The tennis game is a long thing and you become friends with a lot of people. There's always a social part of it as well. It's not just the game."

Parents’ perceptions that communities are less safe for children than they were in the past was another factor encouraging parental support for children’s ECAs, which play an important role in enabling children to socialise in a safe environment. As one parent noted:

> "In my days, kids would hop on the pushbike and ride to the shop. Nowadays you wouldn’t let your kids do that. Down at the ... basketball stadium or up at the cricket club they’re being watched and supervised and still getting that social interaction."

Yet these benefits come at a cost to families and households.

**Costs to families and households arising from children’s involvement in ECAs**

Involvement of children in ECAs has wide-ranging implications for families, not least in terms of financial burden and time commitments. Financial costs related not only to fees or memberships, but also to uniforms and equipment. While the average cost per child within the study sample was $500 per annum, costs ranged from $48 per year to $1000 per year, depending on the activity. In addition, there was also the cost of transport and the inevitable fundraising element, where families were expected to buy and sell raffle tickets, attend fundraising functions and donate goods for fundraising drives.
Financial costs were the most commonly cited difficulty faced by respondents of their children’s involvement in ECAs. One parent, dependent on DSS benefits, said that children's participation in ECAs was “almost impossible.” This respondent stated that, although most ECA organisations allow parents to make staggered payments, there are no reduced fees for pensioners.

Time commitments are also costly, both for the children themselves and for their parents. Within the study sample, the average time spent by children at ECAs was approximately 2 hours per week. However, the direct time commitment varied according to the activity, with cricket demanding more than six and a half hours each week (on a seasonal basis), and football, calisthenics and Little Athletics involving more than five hours of participation. In addition, children were generally required to devote time to practice for ECAs (for example, piano practice, football practice, etc.), with children from the study sample averaging one hour per week in practice, but with some committing up to five hours. Parents spent an average of over four hours per week at the venues of their children’s ECAs, as well as a further 20 minutes per activity per week travelling time. The longest travelling time cited was 180 minutes (return trip) for basketball when the child played ‘away’. This level of travelling is not such a common occurrence in urban settings, but for rural families, it is ‘par for the course’.

In general, according to the study respondents, the lower the cost of the activity, the higher the amount of parent time spent (or required to be spent) at the activity. For example, low cost activities such as Little Athletics depended on parental help to supervise and judge events, whereas higher cost activities such as piano tuition generally did not require parental involvement. The exception to this pattern was calisthenics, which had both high cost and high time demands on parents.

In terms of both money and time, this study showed that parents typically underestimated the demands made by children’s ECAs. Diaries from the case study respondents indicated that both the monetary and time commitments made in relation to children’s ECAs were greater than the amounts estimated by parents. Nevertheless, parents seemed not to resent the costs but to see them as necessary and beneficial. Comments included:

“I think the cost is fair enough because the girls really enjoy it.”

“The free time I don’t resent at all basically because that’s what I’m here for.”

Overall time demands were compounded by timetabling difficulties resulting from activities being scheduled at inconvenient times, clashing with the activities of other children being held in the evening. Evening activities were particularly a problem for single parents with other younger children in their care. Younger children were often forced to accompany their parent to venues during the evening to drop off and pick up older siblings. This resulted in all children going to bed late and younger ones in particular being tired for school the next day. Interruptions to meal times and conflicting demands on children’s time (for example, homework versus ECAs) added to the difficulties.

Implications of changing household structures for the sustainability of ECAs

It is, perhaps, instructive to note that over half of the respondents to this study had gross weekly household incomes of over $750, and that recipients of government benefits comprised only a small minority within the sample (4.2%). In part at least this was due to the fact that the sampling method for this study limited the potential respondents to those parents whose primary school aged children were involved in ECAs. However, a study measuring the perceptions of all parents, whether or not their children were involved in ECAs, would shed more light on the extent to which families from lower income groups are prevented from participating in ECAs because of the cost. Evidence from the literature (Kirk et al. 1997) supports the findings of this study that household income is a key factor influencing participation in ECAs. The income of lone parent households is, on average, equivalent to only 68% of the income of dual parent households (De Vaus & Wolcott 1997). It seems likely, therefore, that the increasing incidence of single parent households - up from 3.2% in 1992 to 8.9% in 1996 (ABS 1996) - will pose problems for the future economic sustainability of some ECAs. Certainly, the cost of ECAs both currently and in the future will limit equity of access, with the more expensive activities likely to be accessible only to those families or households with higher incomes. The impact of the GST is likely to have exacerbated this situation.

A second issue relates to the capacity of parents to commit time to their children’s ECAs. As noted above, many ECAs depend heavily on parental involvement. However, with the growing number of single parent families, the number of ‘parent-hours’ available to support children’s ECAs is diminished, especially where the time available has to be spread across supporting and/or caring for more than one child.

In both single parent and dual parent households, the increasing level of parental involvement in the paid workforce (De Vaus & Wolcott 1997) results in the time available for parents to commit to children’s ECAs being limited. Moreover, the trend to an increase in non-standard hours of employment (Brennan 1999) further limits the capacity of working parents to support their children’s ECAs. In single parent families, where the responsibility for supporting children’s ECAs may fall substantially or totally on one parent, involvement in the paid workforce may exacerbate further the problems affecting parents’ capacity to support children’s activities. Where such activities are heavily dependent on time input from parents, changing family structures and increasing levels of workforce participation may undermine the ongoing viability of ECAs.

Conclusions

It is clear from this research that parents do, in large numbers, ‘roll up’ and board the merry-go-round of children’s extra curricular activities, and that they do this because they recognize the many benefits ECAs offer to their children. However, the parents who responded to this research project also noted some negative impacts of ECA involvement both on children and families. Some parents expressed concerns that their children were tired and stressed, and cited their own difficulties such as meeting costs, and accommodating awkward timetables. For some, it was almost a case of ‘spend your last dime’ (or your last ‘time!’)

While the research indicated that parents had an interest in the continued support of these activities because they perceived that the benefits children receive are valuable for life, it also highlighted the need for further studies to be undertaken to measure the financial cost to families. At present, child leisure costs appear to be underestimated in estimates of the costs of children. There is a need for quantitive research so that a more accurate assessment of these costs can be incorporated into such measures.

Although the results from this research study cannot be generalized because of the limited scope and size of the sample, the fact that the responses from the case study informants mirrored those in the more broadly-based survey questionnaire suggests that the results could be indicative of the wider population. The widespread acceptance of the importance of these activities is apparent, but if stresses for individuals and families are to be managed, the implications of changing social structures and policy frameworks for the sustainability of such activities should be investigated further.
References


Footnotes

1 In assessing the costs of children, households with a gross income of less than $738 are regarded by the Australian Institute of Family Studies as 'low income' (De Vaus & Wolcott 1997).

Author Notes

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