The Easter season is upon us, and amid the fashionable pastels comes another hallmark of spring—practices, games, and rehearsals. Baseball, track, and soccer seasons overlap with spring musicals and concerts. Add in a first communion, confirmation, and graduation, and you’re likely to have at least one day where your daughter is changing out of her frilly dress in the church bathroom and scrambling into her cleats and uniform. Some parents embrace the many opportunities their children have, feeling there is little downside. Other parents approach their kids’ activity level more cautiously, wary of injuries and burnout that can happen when kids do too much too soon. Most parents are looking for that sweet spot of balance—finding the activities that engage their children without sacrificing the pleasure of having unstructured time as a family.

How young is too young? Some experienced parents admit they got out of the blocks too fast with their first child. Maureen, mother of five ranging from toddler to teen, says, “Early in my parenting career, I felt pressure to get my young children involved in everything. I felt as if my kids would be socially awkward if I deprived them of activities. Several kids later, by the grace of God, I have wised up and learned that overdoing activities wreaks havoc on good families and makes everyone feel crazy. Most importantly, ‘If Momma ain’t happy, ain’t nobody happy.’ Our current family rule is one activity at a time.”

Reginald, father of five children under 10, believes that young children first and foremost need time with parents. “My wife and I only have so much time to try and parent everyone while they are in the young ages,” he says. “Running them around takes us away from face-to-face time. I heard a speaker say that every kid needs a small town. And I think that as parents and a family, we are their first and hopefully strongest small town. I hope to develop other small towns for them—through more activities—when they are older.”

See children’s talents as gifts from God. Denise and Arthur, parents of three children ages 4 to 11, keep guidelines in mind as they choose activities for their kids. “The younger the child, the more time with us. The older the child, the more time with others and making decisions on how to
balance time,” Denise says. “If we miss signing them up for something for which they have a real talent, we are not going to stress over this. We believe God is generous and gives us more talents and gifts than we can ever really use.”

Parents who feel they may never say no to their children’s desire to join one more sport or activity are at risk for a frenetic family life that damages parents and children alike. The responsibility of parenting a gifted artist or athlete includes helping the child develop a sense of stewardship regarding his or her gift.

John and Anne, parents of four, take this approach. “We value making choices, and weighing value. We try to discern what God’s will is for our time and talent—who is served by what we do,” says Anne.

Listening to kids—and teaching them to listen to themselves.

Parents of middle-schoolers and teens need to begin to nudge their children toward their own decision-making but also keep an eye on the child’s physical, emotional, and mental health.

“What has kept our daughters in certain activities and out of others has been their desire, enjoyment, and level of skill and interest,” says Pam, mother of two. “We have watched as friends have chosen a state cup soccer game over a graduation, and we have not agreed with those choices. I think parents get so caught up that their child gets to a high-level team that they accept Sunday morning games, tremendous expenses, and family stress to maintain that status. Our place of peace has come from asking, ‘At what price?’”

Maria, mother of two teens, says, “When my kids have approached me with ideas, I try to listen to them and ascertain what’s in it for them before I clobber it with any of my preconceived notions, anxieties, or hesitations. I love watching my kids become who they want to be without me putting a handprint on it.”

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In Our Schools...

The season of Lent offers us a time to look at our lives and how we can rebalance them to ensure God is kept at the center. St. Emily School in Mount Prospect helps students on their Lenten journey of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving to help remind them what is truly important.

Students learn the value of forgoing purchases and using their allowance and other money raised to support two charities in the area. Preschool through third grade students support Heather’s House in Des Plaines and the fourth through eighth grade students support The Baby’s Closet in Palatine. Both agencies provide support for mothers who are pregnant and who have young children to develop parenting and other skills necessary to be successful and with needed baby supplies.

Students also take an active role in the liturgical life of the parish. The entire student body participates in the Ash Wednesday liturgy, the Triduum services, reconciliation, and Tennebrae services during the Lenten season. Eighth grade students do living stations of the cross for the school and parish.

All of these activities allow students the opportunity to see that they are connected to a community and Tradition that is bigger than themselves. It opens them to experience the joy that Easter brings.

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