

by JESSICA JANE SAMMUT

THE SCHOOL DAY IS INCONGRUENT TO THE TRADITIONAL WORKING DAY, BUT WHAT CAN BE DONE? SHOULD THE SCHOOL DAY BE LENGTHENED AND IS IT TIME THE SCHOOL SYSTEM WAS DRAGGED INTO THE 21ST CENTURY?

You work. Your partner works. Your little one starts school. Suddenly, there is a problem. Who is going to take your child to school and who is going to collect them? You and your partner both need to be at work before the school day begins, and your workdays end after the school day finishes.

It's a conundrum that many of us go through, and it's one that not only causes a complete re-jiggle of work commitments/the disposal of a career/the use of extra people in raising your child/the calling-upon of after-school care facilities (if your school has them), but it's also the cause of an immense amount of family stress. And for what? And why? Surely, in today's modern society there is a better way? Or is there?

"There really are no easy answers," says Dr Justin Coulson, one of Australia's leading parenting experts and author of *21 Days to a Happier Family*. "Can young children cope with a longer day at school? Maybe. In relation to the number of hours a child should be learning... it depends. Is the learning stimulating? Or is it learning by rote? Are the children playing and excited? Or are they being controlled and drilled? If the learning is play-based and if the experience is developmentally appropriate, then of course they can cope. But there are costs to extending the school day without massively changing the way we think about education."

"Expanding the school day can however, in and of itself, potentially increase stress for children," warns leading clinical

neuropsychologist Dr Ash Nayate who has been working with families for over 15 years. "It can reduce the opportunity they have to be at home with their family, reduce their motivation for learning and tire them out (bringing with it the associated behavioural issues that come from being fatigued). We see this happening in the US and in many Asian countries where the school day is extended. Children face increased performance pressure, and as a result, experience wellbeing difficulties."

WHAT OTHER COUNTRIES DO

So what do other countries do?

With Finland possessing one of the most progressive and successful education systems in the world that values play, curiosity, autonomy and a well-funded egalitarian model (including an absence of standardised testing), do they experience a longer school day?

Interestingly, no.

In fact, you'll find the average school day in Finland is only five hours long, with very little homework to complete at the end of the day.

Conversely, Korean students are typically in school from 9am to 5pm (or 7:30am to 6pm for some adolescents), with huge amounts of study to be done afterwards and often additional classes to attend at night.

HOW CHILDREN LEARN

To determine whether it might be possible to extend the school day therefore, the most important question of all has to be whether young children are actually able to cope with a longer day.

"Young children learn through play, movement and human interaction," explains Clare Crew, child development consultant and founder of Thrive Education and Wellness (www.thriveeducationandwellness.com.au). "Six hours a day in the classroom where the emphasis is on academics is plenty. If a mix of learning was available, there might be more scope for an extended day, but this would require an approach to teaching not often modelled or supported by our system. As it is, such little brains and bodies are not yet ready for the equivalent of an office working day, and we need to focus on what is best for children, not what is best for the workplace."

"The younger the child, the more play-based learning is crucial," adds Dr Ash. "Kids need to be in unstructured environments so that they can learn creativity, problem solving skills and social skills amongst other things. A classroom setting is highly structured (lots of rules and regulations) and therefore doesn't confer the same benefits as outdoor unstructured play. In my opinion, therefore, a longer school day should be avoided. The issue isn't so much whether kids can 'cope' (humans are pretty resilient!) – it's about what's best for their learning. Spending almost their entire waking hours in school, largely in structured settings, is NOT an optimal learning environment for kids. In many cases, children need to do LESS in order to enjoy more ... and ironically, they end up learning more in the long run – because whatever they are learning tends to stick around. We want to educate children to be great thinkers (rather than simply great test-takers). As Albert Einstein said, 'Play is the highest form of study.'"

"THE MIND IS NOT A VESSEL TO BE FILLED, BUT A FIRE TO BE KINDLED."

~ PLUTARCH

THE EFFECT OF STRESS

So, if we are ensuring that our children are looked after from a learning and development standpoint, what about the effect of the long-term stress on families who find it tough to adhere to school commitments, struggling consistently to meet the conflicting demands of their child's day and their working day? Surely this has a knock-on effect on children, not to mention parents?

"Yes. Chronic stress impacts on our immune system and makes us more susceptible to illness (there is a whole field of study called psychoneuroimmunology dedicated to this)," cautions Dr Ash. "It can also leave adults and children more susceptible to anxiety, depression, substance abuse (eg. alcohol), disordered eating and sleep disturbances, and we're more likely to perceive the world as negative or hostile. In addition to this, our brains often don't function as well when we're stressed, we have trouble thinking clearly and we're more impulsive in words and actions. We can also be irritable or grumpy, which can affect the way we relate and respond to others."

The importance of dealing with this issue and finding that balance between the needs of the school/work day cannot be underestimated therefore.

EXTENDING THE SCHOOL DAY

THE PROS

- 1. Increased education enrichment:** "Many young children are currently attending after-school care several days a week already," says Jenny Atkinson, primary school teacher of 30 years experience and an education transition specialist and founder of Sparks Education Australia (www.sparkseducation.com.au). "Whilst they are well taken care of, extended hours in school would give them opportunity for more educational instruction."
- 2. Short-term parental/work benefits:** By extending the school day, parents can meet the demands of their work, confining their jobs to their workplace, not having to bring work home and squeeze it around family life which can be very stressful. The home also becomes a 'sacred' place of family engagement.
- 3. Happier parents who are able to fulfil their career potential:** A longer school day will allow parents to continue on their chosen career path without the frustration of trying to fit it around the school day, modelling fulfilment and ambition to their children. Happier parents = a happier family unit".

THE CONS

- 1. Strain on teachers:** If teachers do not get time to adequately prepare for lessons, then any gains achieved as the result of extended time in school can be lost through an overworked, stressed or less-prepared teaching body.
- 2. Less play:** If young children lose their free time after school, where will they have time in the day to explore, play or be creative in ways that they choose? "Not enough 'downtime' can lead to overstressed children, which is counterproductive to learning," warns Jenny.
- 3. More stress:** "Children who are overworked and overtired (and overstressed) are more prone to illness, irritability and mood swings," reveals Dr Ash. "They are also more likely to engage in conflict (eg. with parents and siblings) and may be more likely to experience chronic feelings of anxiety or sadness. These long-term effects of stress can affect the entire family unit."
- 4. Less downtime/balance:** A child who is at school for long periods of time is out of the family home and is not with his parent for the majority of the day. He therefore has less time to connect with his loved ones and less time to recharge for the next day of learning.
- 5. Greater fatigue:** A child who is at school for too long can become worn out, and a worn-out child can regress academically. This is particularly prevalent for children in the younger years of school or for whom learning is challenging.





THE MIDDLE ROAD

So where might the balance be?

“Keeping the day as it is, to be in line with meeting children’s holistic development, ensuring ample places are available in quality before- and after-school care, and securing a greater flexibility from workplaces with regard to our most precious resource of the future, our children, is the way forward,” says Clare.

“Let’s not replace wellbeing with convenience. In my mind, the crux of the issue is the workplace. We need more employers and companies to come on board, offering flexible working hours to parents. When there’s less of a work-life divide, most employees will feel supported and bring their best version of themselves to a job, which can only be better for all concerned in any event.”



WHAT YOU CAN YOU DO TO MAKE THE SCHOOL DAY EASIER ON YOURSELF

Here are some ways you can make the school system work a little better for yourself:

Collaborate with another family: Make an arrangement with another family to share school pick-ups/drop-offs – on one day one parent does school pick-up/homework time/dinner, and on another day the other parent returns the favour.

Sign up to after-school activities: See what after-school classes are available at school that your little one might like to attend. Is there an art class or gym class that takes place at school which does not require your presence so you can collect your child later?

Share the drop-offs/pick-ups with your partner: By doing this, you have automatically halved your ‘school hours vs. work hours’ issue.

Consult with your employer: See if you can go flexi-time so that you can arrive/leave your job later, and perhaps make up for it once your kids have gone to sleep or your partner has arrived home to take over the child wrangling.

Investigate any after-school care options: Many schools offer this service which allows children to play in a relaxed environment with their peers while you finish work. Many of these services are also subsidised by the government, making them often reasonably affordable.



WORD FROM A HEAD TEACHER

“Society’s priorities should be focused on providing the best opportunities for our children, not on working. So, perhaps we would do well to ask: what’s best for children rather than what’s best for the workplace? Children could cope with a longer day, but what’s most important in a child’s development is forming a strong, positive relationship with an adult – ideally their parent.

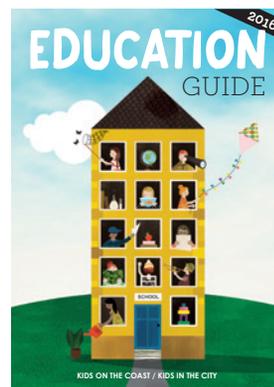
“In addition, many people don’t fully appreciate the amount of hours a good teacher puts into their day outside the classroom. Whilst most teach approximately 20 hours face-to-face, this doesn’t include at least another 30 hours preparation, marking, planning, extra-curricular activities and professional development. A good teacher’s workload is far bigger than what many people realise.

“And finally, too often the question is phrased as ‘care’ vs. ‘work’, rather than pondering what is in the best educational interests of a child. At the end of the day, schools aren’t child-minding services. They exist to help educate young people in partnership with their family.”

- Dr Paul Browning, Headmaster of St Paul’s School, North Brisbane

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