



Best Bets for After School

It's a common quandary: Is it time for my child to start an extracurricular activity? What's the best on? How do I find a good program? Read on for the answers you need to get started.

Why Extracurricular Activities Matter

After-school activities benefit your child in ways that might surprise you. According to a recent study by the Nellie Mae Education Foundation, children who participate in after-school programs are more engaged in and have a better attitude about learning; perform better academically; and enjoy an increased sense of accomplishment, competence, and self-esteem. Participation also lowers children's risk of becoming depressed, using drugs and alcohol, and experiencing other behavioral problems.



Extracurricular activities let your child enjoy himself or herself in a fun, stress-free environment, get some exercise and make friends outside of school. If your child shows a special talent, it's great to nurture that ability through lessons or classes. But don't think that an early start in anything will lead to a career—remember that most children do not grow up to be professional musicians or athletes. Pushing your child into tons of tennis lessons or dance classes for a "head start" will most likely lead him or her to resenting both you and the activity. Give your child other options and encourage other interests, so he or she doesn't feel an overwhelming pressure to succeed at just one thing.

How to Find

Start your search at your child's school. Ask his teacher or the principal what options are available there. It's also important to talk to other parents about what their children are involved in and get recommendations for kid-tested classes and activities.

Also check out community resources such as

- Community and recreation centers
- Places of worship
- Museums and libraries
- The YMCA or YWCA
- Boys & Girls Club of America
- The 4-H
- Police Athletic Leagues
- Girls, Inc,

How to Choose

After you have an idea of the possibilities, talk with your child about his or her interests. Provide options that complement these interests - an artistic child might enjoy a ceramics class, while a boisterous one can work off energy dancing or playing a vigorous sport. But don't overlook what might seem like unlikely matches. Shy children often enjoy expressing themselves on stage in a drama class; "fidgeters" can find a way to focus through martial arts. You can also target specific skills through different activities: music lessons enhance math aptitude, and team sports boost social skills. If your child will attend a daily after-school program, try to select one that offers a variety of activities, including ones that get him on his feet, as well as a quiet area to relax and do schoolwork.



Also consider your family's schedule when planning extracurricular activities. Will adding an activity adversely affect family time? Will you, a caregiver, or another family member be available to chauffeur your child to and from classes and lessons? If not, consider activities that can be done at home, such as music lessons and crafts, or those that are held at school.

Review the grade-by-grade guidelines on how often your child might spend time in an after-school program. But there's no one-size-fits-all answer and it's important to watch your child for signs of over-scheduling. In younger children, this most often takes the form of irritability, avoiding eye contact, and tantrums. In older children, look out for mood swings, recurrent sickness such as stomachaches, and complaints about themselves. At any age, if schoolwork begins to suffer, it is time to cut back.

What to look for during and after your visit.

- At least 1 adult for every 12 children - in younger groups the ratio should be closer to 1 to 10
- Whether there are any "hidden" costs, such as for uniforms, costumes, or equipment
- Friendly, enthusiastic staff. Are they certified or otherwise expert in their field? Feel free to ask for references and check them.
- A space clean, safe, and spacious enough for the activity. Is there enough equipment and other resources for everyone?
- A calm, but energized environment. Does the activity appear well organized and supervised?
- Happy, enthusiastic kids

Grade-by-Grade at a Glance

Wondering how many days a week your second grader should be practicing guitar? Searching for good ideas for after-school programs for your 10-year-old? Use the following guidelines to steer your decisions but remember that you know your child's maturity and temperament best.

Kindergarten

Keep your kindergartner's after-school life simple and free. One or two after-school activities a week are more than enough. Wait until your child is adjusted to the daily school routine. Then find an extracurricular activity that involves his creative and/or physical side, such as an art, dance, or music program.

Grade 1

Balance your first-grader's schedule with play dates, playground visits, and one or two days of an after-school activity per week. Best bets are noncompetitive sports and other physical activities since this is around the age when your child is starting to get a grip on the abilities of her own body. Plus, after being in school all day, she needs an outlet to play and run. Avoid sports with strict rules. At this age, he or she needs free reign to make mistakes and not to worry about winning and losing.

Grade 2

Get your child involved in choosing extracurricular activities. Your second-grader will probably tell you what he or she would like to do anyway! Steer your child towards activities that he or she likes and doesn't get to do at school, whether it's sports such as swimming or skating, computers, or art or music lessons. Many kids start learning piano or violin round this age. Make sure your child has at least one or two days free a week for "alone time," which he is starting to need to unwind. If after-school activities are starting to interfere with schoolwork or if your child seems stressed, you need to drop an activity or two.

Grade 3

After sitting all day in a classroom, your third-grader needs to move and socialize after school. Team sports are a great choice - now he or she is old enough to remember and follow rules and can handle losing (though children of this age are still not ready for anything ultracompetitive). Other good choices are activities that use and develop fine motor skills, such as painting, sewing, or learning to play an instrument. Let your child explore different interests but make sure to set aside still-needed family time among the team practices and play dates.

Grade 4

Try to get your fourth-grader involved in one or two extra-curricular activities that he or she is good at and loves doing. It will build confidence and help manage stress, which is key at this age when cliques and social pressure in school are beginning to build.

Another thing that's growing is the pile of homework that is assigned in fourth grade. Make sure your child has adequate time to complete his or her work without having to stay up late. Set limits on seeing friends and activities if your child is often crabby and irritable, has trouble sleeping or complains of mysterious illnesses, begins to struggle with school work, or shows other signs of stress like overeating.

Grade 5

Overscheduling is a problem you and your child will probably face this year. Your fifth grader is full of energy for everything and wants to spend all of his or her time participating in activities and hanging out with friends. To ensure that your child is completing his or her schoolwork and not becoming burnt out, keep two afternoons a week free. While you're at it, block out at least a weekly "appointment" for family time so that your child remembers that a family is a priority. Your child should be guiding his or her own

activity choices, but now is a great time to suggest community service activities like helping senior citizens or young children.

Middle School

Try to steer your middle school child towards activities that reinforce learning and get him or her away from the TV. On average, children in middle school spend an equal amount of time every week watching TV and socializing with friends - about 20-25 hours apiece.

To improve academic performance, encourage your child to spend time volunteering, to join school clubs like band, chess, or foreign language clubs, or to sign up for extracurricular activities with a leadership element, such as the school newspaper or student council. It will help your child feel more connected to the school community while forging friendships based in common interests and experiences. As always, keep an eye out for signs of too many after-school commitments. As a general rule, your child should spend fewer than 20 hours a week participating in after-school activities.

Source: Bochan, T. L. (2004). Best bets for after school. Retrieved October 13, 2005, from the Accor Services North America, Inc. database.

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