

# **IT'S 3:00 p.m., DO YOU KNOW WHERE YOUR CHILD IS?**

## **THE IMPORTANCE OF AFTER-SCHOOL ACTIVITIES**

**David Lowenstein, Ph.D.**

After-school programs are critical for many young children today. We know that as many as 15 million children are left unsupervised during non-school hours. We also know that juvenile crime triples when the school bell rings at the end of the day.

Did you know:

- ✓ Children and teens are more likely to be the victims of crime during the after-school hours than at any other time?
- ✓ Children and teens are more likely to participate in violent crimes during the after-school hours than at any other time?
- ✓ Children and teens are more likely to engage in risky behaviors such as tobacco, alcohol or drug use or sexual activity during the after-school hours than at any other time?

Is it any wonder that psychologist and law enforcement officers have denoted the hours after school until parents get home the “Witching Hours”?

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

### **Why Extracurriculars Matter**

After-school activities benefit your child in ways that might surprise you. According to a recent study, 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.

Extracurriculars let your child enjoy himself in a fun, stress-free environment, get some exercise, and make friends outside of school. If he 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 in order to give him a "head start" will most likely lead to him resenting both you and the activity. Give him other options and encourage other interests, so he 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.

### **How to Choose**

After you have an idea of the possibilities, talk with your child about what he's interested in. Give him some options that complement his 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 extracurriculars. 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 breakdown for 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 the activities themselves. At any age, if schoolwork begins to suffer, it is time to cut back.

Once you've narrowed down the options, visit them while they are in session so you can get a real idea about the environment, the staff, and the program.

When you visit, look for:

- 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 2nd grader should be practicing the 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 kindergartener's after-school life simple and free — one or two after-school activities a week are more than enough. Wait until he's adjusted to the daily school routine. Then find an extra-curricular that involves his creative and/or physical side, such as an art, dance, or music program.

### **Grade 1**

Balance your 1st grader's schedule with play dates, playground visits, and one or two days of an after-school activity per week. Best bets are non-competitive 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, she needs free reign to make mistakes and not worry about winning and losing.

### **Grade 2**

Get your child involved in choosing extra-curriculars. He'll probably tell you what he'd like to do anyway! Steer him towards activities that he 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 around 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 3rd grader needs to move and socialize after school. Team sports are a great choice — now she's old enough to remember and follow rules and can handle losing (though she's still not ready for anything ultra-competitive). Other good choices are activities that use and develop fine motor skills, such as painting, sewing, or learning to play an instrument. Let her 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 4th grader involved in one or two extra-curricular activities that he is good at and loves doing. It will build confidence and help him 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 his pile of homework, so make sure he has adequate time to complete his work without having to stay up late. Set limits on seeing friends and activities if he is often crabby and irritable, if his grades drop, if he has trouble sleeping or complains of mysterious illnesses, or if he shows other signs of stress like overeating.

Don't put too much pressure on him to excel at what should be fun activities. Otherwise he will end up resenting the time he spends doing them instead of playing and exploring. Last, don't forget family together time is still essential. It may need to be scheduled in so your child understands that it's important.

#### **Grade 5**

Overscheduling is a problem you and your child will probably face this year. Your 5th grader is full of energy for everything and wants to spend all her time participating in activities and hanging out with friends. To ensure she's completing her schoolwork and not becoming burnt out, you should make sure she has two free afternoons a week. While you're at it, block out a once-a-week family time that you and your child stick to so she remembers that family is a priority. She should be guiding 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 schooler toward activities that reinforce learning and get him away from the TV. On average, middle schoolers 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 preteen to spend time volunteering, to join school clubs like band, chess, or foreign language clubs, or to sign up for extra-curriculars with a leadership element, such as the school newspaper or student council. It will help him feel more connected to the school community while forging friendships based in common interests and experiences. As always, keep an eye out for signs that he is over-extending himself with after-school commitments. As a general rule, he should be spending fewer than 20 hours a week participating in after-school activities.