

MUSIC, ART, SPORTS?

What to Look for in After-School Activities



by Heidi Smith Luedtke

Though school work should take priority, the academic, social and physical benefits of extracurricular programs are hard to ignore.

The Afterschool Alliance, an information clearinghouse and advocacy group, says kids who participate in after-school programs have better school attendance, higher grades and loftier aspirations about graduation and college attendance. They're also less likely to use drugs or get into trouble with police, and – because they log less screen time – are at lower risk of obesity. Kids also develop social and leadership skills in after-school programs, as they interact with peers in cooperative roles and mentoring relationships.

Before signing up your kid, use these guidelines to help you sort the best from the rest.

Content

If possible, let kids choose activities based on their personal interests, says Susan Kuczmariski, author of *The Sacred Flight of the Teenager: A Parent's Guide to Stepping Back and Letting Go*. Help your child find activities that reflect who they are and what they want to learn, instead of imposing your preferences on them. Kids flourish when they're deeply engaged.

Quality

The best programs offer much more than homework help, says Sara Hill, senior consultant for the National Institute on Out-of-School Time. Discipline-based activities that allow kids to create a quality product over a period of time are best, she says. For instance, kids might learn math and science by building a boat or practice art and leadership by putting on a play or musical.

Staffing

Staff members should be professionals with bona fide skills and experience. Programs with strong community connections usually have the best resources, Hill says. Kids may get to work with artists, scientists, and athletes from local organizations, like museums and colleges. These opportunities expose kids to real-life role models.

Movement

After-school sports show kids the value of practice and encourage persistence. But the benefits of exercise are even bigger. Dr. John Ratey, associate clinical professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School and author of *Spark: The Revolutionary New Science of Exercise and the Brain*, prescribes exercise for kids with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (and everyone else) because exercise boosts mood, improves learning and memory, and relieves stress.

Leadership

Extracurricular activities, including sports and clubs, are ideal places for kids to explore and practice what it means to be a group leader, Kuczmariski says. When kids take responsibility for organizing group work and producing results, they learn social skills. Encourage your child to take on leadership roles whenever possible.

Logistics

Rather than causing burnout, after-school activities can provide balance to a class schedule that is overly academic, Kuczmariski says, if locations and timing fit your lifestyle. It's okay to keep kids busy, but avoid signing on to so many programs that you'll be scrambling from one to the next.

After-school activities can provide enrichment, adventure and variety. They shouldn't be driven by high-stakes testing and they shouldn't be box-fillers for college applications. Kids don't want to participate in programs that are just more school after school.

Innovative programs promote learning without rote or repetition. If you can't find quality after-school activities near you, contact your school district to advocate for programs you'd like to see. Out-of-school shouldn't mean out-of-opportunities. □