

Extracurricular Activities

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Extracurricular activities are opportunities for children to attain levels of enjoyment and learning outside of their regular school day. These activities variously complement the kinds of learning experiences generally incorporated within the school curriculum, and may be leisure-oriented, scholastic, artistic, athletic, or recreational in nature. Sometimes gifted, talented, or high-ability learners find that a school program does not have the capacity to meet their particular learning needs or exceptionalities, such that they acquire additional challenges on an extracurricular basis, before or after school, evenings, or during organized and targeted sessions throughout the scheduled lunch hour. These activities may be developed administratively, (as might occur with mentorships, or yearbook writing) or they may be co-created by parents, teachers and/or children based on current interests (such as involvement in topical or news events-related initiatives). Extracurricular activities are very often appreciated by students, and these learning alternatives can provide relevant and mind-stretching ways to broaden conventional educational offerings.

Extracurricular activities provide an exploratory and social outlet for children, enabling them to extend their boundaries in venues that are often considerably less formal than traditional schooling. Activities or programs may be presented in a variety of forms, such as enrichment, down time, subject-specific learning alternatives, or pursuit of special interests. Benefits include keeping children engaged in meaningful learning; honoring individual's choices in what they want to know more about (beyond the standard curriculum); alleviating before and after school boredom; helping children find pleasure in doing something new, creative, or challenging; and facilitating social interaction among those who have a common interest or shared enthusiasm. Each of these benefits has the added potential of infusing other areas of a child's life by developing or improving their feelings about learning (e.g., engagement and achievement); their feelings about self (e.g., what they can and cannot do); their feelings about others (e.g., sharing ideas and building relationships); and their feelings about life itself (e.g., all the excitement and myriad experiences that it has to offer).

Considering the Options

Extracurricular activities can be sourced directly through schools, or at the district or board level. Parents and children might also consider checking out local newspapers, community centers, and active parent associations for offerings. It takes time to carefully and discerningly network online venues, but this approach, too, can yield extracurricular possibilities. With a bit of creativity and a resourceful attitude there is no limit as to the types of extracurricular involvement children might envision, tap, and enjoy. Options include but are not limited to the following:

- *Music*: playing an instrument or participating in a choir, band or other ensemble
- *Physical activity*: gymnastics, sports, martial arts
- *Theatre*: costumes, make-up, clowning; script development lighting, sets, puppetry
- *Art*: painting, sculpture, photography
- *Crafts*: woodworking, pottery, quilting, model-building, jewelry design
- *Writing*: stories, poems, articles
- *Robotics*: design, development
- *Performance*: dance, song, comedy
- *Leadership opportunities*: tutoring, interest groups, religious and community organizations
- *Clubs*: chess, astronomy, cooking, computers

Extracurricular activities can serve as a bridge between the sterility of the more “official” school milieu and the vitality of real life learning. However, there are important preparatory matters and other factors to keep in mind. Parents (and teachers) should listen carefully to a child’s opinions about activities, and respect his personality, concerns, viewpoints, time constraints, and preferences. Consider, too, the advantages of any one activity relative to expense, expectations, and distance from home and school. The activity’s social atmosphere should align comfortably with how the child functions, whether independently, in pairs, or in small or large groups. Are special learning needs accommodated? High-level development cuts across cognitive, affective, social, and behavioral domains and areas of experience, and thus a child’s learning profile should be taken into consideration. Accelerated programs may be advantageous. Think about what is new, interesting, potentially useful, and career oriented. And, can possibilities be combined? Some children thrive when they are given multiple opportunities to be actively involved in the world around them, whereas others relish a chance to have quiet time for reflection, reading, or relaxation. Over-programming children can be counterproductive. A schedule that is overwhelming or that demands constant juggling can compromise a child’s well-being. Too much busyness can lead to stress and fatigue, and threaten healthy productivity and family harmony.

Fundamentals

Nevertheless, choice is good. As a result of choice, more reflection, planning, and extensive decision-making may be required, however it makes sense to offer children a broad range of options from which they can then select activities that will be most meaningful to them. Some of these may not be well represented in academic programs. Ultimately, children should find pleasure in the supplementary activities in which they choose to participate, and they should be able to define a sense of accomplishment that is not based on grades. They may be encouraged to take reasonable risks and to try something different just for the sake of trying something different—and to accept errors in areas of relative weakness, as well as areas of strength. There should be flexibility, and an ongoing effort to ensure that an extracurricular program matches the needs and aspirations of the individual.

For many children the social aspect of extracurricular involvement provides a welcome opportunity for informal get-togethers, pleasant interaction, and fun. The sharing of commonalities can be a wonderful springboard to friendship. Examples of extracurricular activities beyond those mentioned above that can help to build and cement relationships include community service involvement (for instance in youth organizations, global causes, political affiliations); camps (summer or weekend experiences specializing in interests such as sailing, language immersion, or horseback riding); university-affiliated programs (in cross- disciplinary areas, geared at or beyond high school level); and competitions (whereby teams work collaboratively in different subjects such as math, science, or history, and then compete locally, regionally, or even nationally in organized events). Extracurricular activities are real-world options that can enhance learning *and* the joy of learning. They can mean the difference between a day and a curriculum that is full, and a day and a curriculum that is fully extended and shared in meaningful ways.

Further readings on Extracurricular Activities:

Matthews, D. J. & Foster, J. F. (2005). *Being smart about gifted children: A guidebook for parents and educators*. Scottsdale, AZ: Great Potential Press.

Rogers, K. (2002). *Re-forming Gifted Education: Matching the Program to the Child*. Scottsdale, AZ.: Great Potential Press.

See also *Friendships; Out of School; Saturday Programs, Summer Programs; Competitions*

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