

## After-school activities for Young Children

Each one of us wants to provide our child with the best exposure, and help him/her develop essential skills required to succeed in this world. Many of us send our young children to various activities after the school hours, thinking that it will keep them engaged and give them an early start in life. In many cases, where both the parents are working and live in a nuclear family, sending the child to a day care center or a caretaker becomes almost a necessity.

Research says that for young children, the family at home and the teachers at school are the best educators, and the stimulation needed for such development mainly comes from them. However, in cases where the parents feel the need to send their children for after-school activities, it is extremely important that parents choose such activities and places carefully. Such after-school activities should enhance the child's development and supplement the learning that happens in school and at home. It should not put pressure and unrealistic expectations on children for which they are not yet ready. There is a fine line between providing underexposure and overexposure to young children!

### After-school activities - expectations by age Playgroup and Nursery

At this age, it is not recommended to send children for any after-school activities. Adjusting to the school environment outside home is itself a feat for these young kids, and sending them to still another environment is not advisable. They need enough rest, sleep, comfort of few significant adults and a familiar environment to develop a sense of trust in the world around them.

### Kindergarten

The after-school life of kindergartners should be simple and free - one or two after-school activities a week are more than enough. Wait until the child has adjusted to the daily school routine. Then the parents can find an extra-curricular that involves his/her creative and/or physical side, such as an art, dance, or music program. Such programs should not expect young kids to develop specific skills and should not at all be competitive. It should be for the child to gain exposure and have fun out of own interest without any adult expectations.

### Grade 1 and Grade 2

The after-school schedule of first graders should be balanced with play dates with friends/cousins, playground visits, and one or two days of an after-school activity per week. They like activities that build on their interests, and pursuing those gives them enthusiasm, motivation and self-confidence. First graders could pursue non-competitive sports and other physical activities since this is the age when they are starting to get a grip on own physical abilities. Sports with strict rules should be avoided. At this age, the child needs free reign to make mistakes and not worry about winning and losing. After a few more years, the child can also take up and pursue a particular sport. Extra-curricular activities that are hands-on and involve exposure to creative areas like art, dance, music and various hobbies (depending on the child's interest and without adult expectations for particular skill development) could also be taken up.

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### **Choosing an after-school activity place**

- Ensure that the environment of the place is clutter-free and the culture is child-friendly.
- Understand about the expertise of the founder, and the person who is running the place.
- Learn about the quality of facilitators conducting the activity, their training and background, their attitude, and how they interact with young children.
- Visit them while they are in session so that you can get a real idea about the environment, the program and the staff.
- Choose a program that is compatible with your beliefs about how children learn and how they should be handled. If you believe in real life hands-on learning, pressure-free and fun experiences for children, then even the after-school program which your child attends should be providing such an environment.

### **Things to take care of**

- Do not put overwhelming pressure on young children to succeed in one thing. They need to be experimenting and sampling with many different activities at this age to develop and discover their interests.
- Avoid over scheduling the day and week of the child with tons of activities. 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.
- Do not push your child into tons of lessons in a particular area such as language, math, dance, etc, as it will most likely lead to him/her resenting both you and the activity/subject.
- Do not compare your child's activities with the activities that others' children are doing. Your child is a unique individual, with own interests and abilities. Find out about his or her uniqueness and seek to nurture that.

### **Activities with Parents**

Young kids love doing hands-on and fun activities with their parents! Beyond school hours and on weekends, engage the child in different activities with yourself-

- At home, do various activities with your child like art and craft, creating music, gardening, reading books together, creating songs and riddles, cooking, playing games, among others, depending on your own and your child's interests.
- Exposure to different places and people enhances curiosity, thinking and observation skills, language skills, general knowledge, interests, etc., in young children. Take your child for visits to interesting places such as nature parks, zoos, museums, temples of different religions, community and culture related places, performing arts shows, and many more.
- Engage your child in socially responsible and community field-work activities like cleaning public gardens, making use of waste, visiting old age homes, caring for animals and pets, etc.
- Play informal games such as kho-kho, kabaddi, langdi, football, hopscotch, etc., with your child in gardens/parks and encourage him/her to play such outdoor games with own friends and cousins.

There is so much that we can do with our children at home, which can enhance their knowledge and skills across different areas. Parent-child activities can result in learning while having fun and can also build strong positive emotional bonds between the parent and the child!