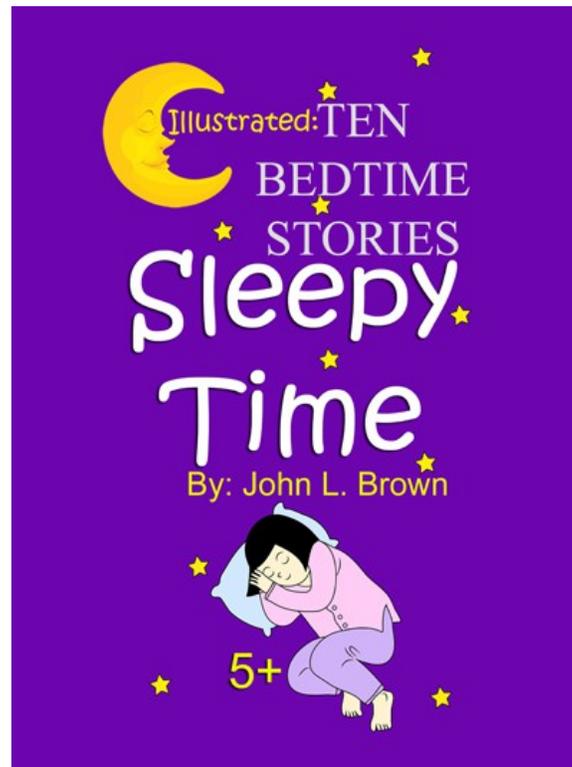


AFTER SCHOOL ACTIVITIES

THE VIRAL MONSTERS



This book is Illustrated, but not with full page Illustrations. At the end of each story there is an Illustration that pertains to that story, and most of the stories have only two pages of story.

Sleepy Time has ten short bedtime stories with an extra story that is the name of the title of this book, Sleepy Time. A real cute story. The ten bedtime stories are anywhere between 500 words or a little over 500 words.. All are on the topic of sleeping, or dreaming.

The stories:

Sleepy Time: Extra Short Story

Fantasy World

I'm A Dreamer

The Upside Down Cake That Turned Downside Up Last Night

Sleeping Rock Star

Go Nighty Night

Mommy I Have An Angel

The Lollypop That Nobody Wanted

The Little Key Couldn't Sleep

King In My Dream

Sad Dream Mommy

Author: John L. Brown

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After school activities and burnout

For millions of parents around the world, the day does not end with the school bell. There are still pictures to be painted, songs to be sung and games to be played. This all adds up to keeping children happy, safe and out of trouble. But, parents have to steer away from going overboard.

After school is not baby-sitting:

After school activities thrive only if it is backed by sufficient parental involvement. What would a soccer match be without parents cheering their little heroes from the sidelines?.

Research and choose:

Instead of convenience being the decisive factor, find out things that will interest your child. Once you select a program, get the fine print and find out what you have to contribute.

Free time:

Many children attend piano classes, followed by ballet and squeeze in some time for play dates in between just before they rush home in time for bed. This rigor is too much for a child. So, go slow.

When to quit:

Often, parents enroll their child in an activity to discover that he may not be the prodigy they thought he would be. This is the time to let go. Your child may not become the next wonder-kid. But, let him cultivate an interest that he enjoys. Remember, happiness and fulfillment are all that matter.

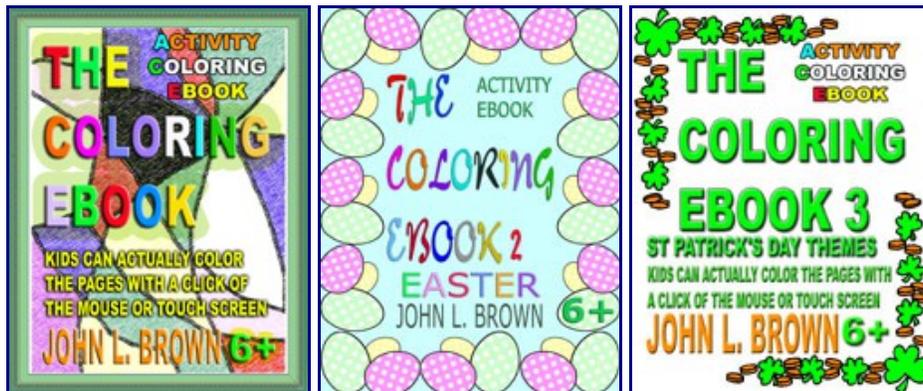
THE COLORING EBOOKS

After school activities for the overweight

Research and studies show that our children are growing fater by the day. Many families all over America are struggling to keep the weight of their children within reasonable limits. As a parent, I know that it's nearly impossible for me to look into the tear-filled eyes of my son and refuse food.

So, what's the alternative? Studies show that the number one reason for obesity in children is not junk food and colas. It's actually TV. Children tend to plo p themselves on the sofa and munch away happily when they are in front of the TV sets. But, once the set is off, their natural buoyancy will lead the children to do stuff and to move their body. They will then be diverted from eating.

Recreational after school activities are a must if you feel that your child is beginning to put on undesirable fat. It is better to begin these activities as early as possible. The more weight the child gains, the harder he has to work to shed it. Football, swimming, skating and Karate are just some activities he can participate in. Structured and disciplined exercise is possible only when one is put into a formal environment. That is why an overweight child simply HAS to be put into an after school program of this kind.

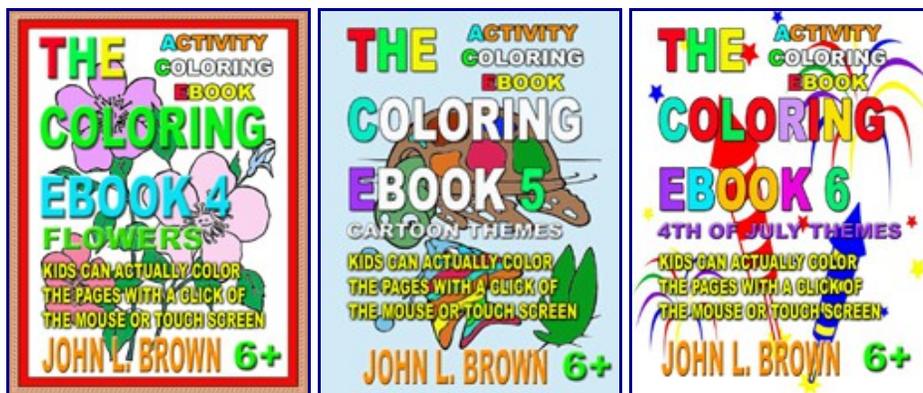


After school programs and discipline

How important is discipline when it comes to after school programs? Since most of the activities are recreational, does a program have to adhere to strict rules? Discipline is just as important here as it is in activities that pertain to the school. The child is sent to a program because you want him to learn more. Discipline in one form or the other is necessary to facilitate learning.

Every program should begin by laying down the rules. The supervisor or teacher should explain each rule and can thus prevent future mishaps. Misbehavior should be addressed as and when it occurs. Deal with the problem in such a manner that it causes the least disruption. It is unwise to turn a blind eye to misbehavior because it catches on like fire, and soon you will have a bunch of unruly children on your hands. Besides, however much they resist it, children like to operate within the safety net of strict guidelines and rules.

When a child misbehaves, it is mostly due to a craving for attention. A supervisor should observe the children and find out what the child wants. Talk to the child so that you can understand what he or she wants. Appropriate disciplinary measures should be taken if there are no apparent reasons for bad behavior.



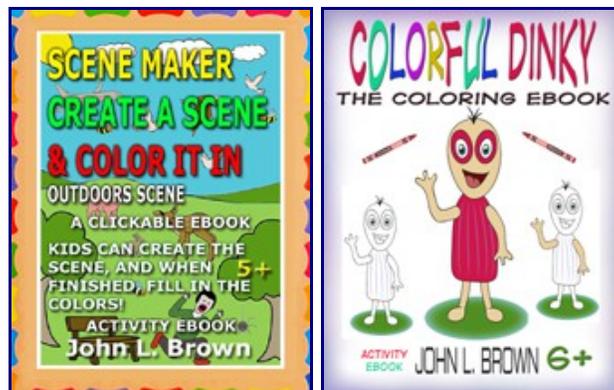
After school safety - tips and reminders

When parents send their children for after school programs, they take it for granted that the child is safe. But since the number of children participating in these activities has increased, it is necessary to look into safety issues.

Children are vulnerable when they are outside the classes. While going or returning, they should know the safest route to take. Many kids hang out with their friends just after these classes. Find out 'danger zones' from your neighbors and make the children aware of these.

The child has to know how to handle emergencies. It is better to discuss various scenarios with your child. Tell her what she should do in case the class is suddenly canceled. Show her the first-aid kit at home and make sure she knows whom to call in an emergency. Post any important contact information in a place that is easily accessible to the child. If the child will be alone at home, discuss a few unexpected things with her. Tell her to use the safety chain ALWAYS.

Relay on your neighbors and friends when needed. Let your child know who can be contacted at times of emergency. Ask your child to check in by phone. Above all, always tell the child to be in a group. Visiting toilets all alone or going home via isolated streets must be avoided.



A home-based after school program

So, your son's school does not offer any extracurricular activities. You are worried of depriving your child of all that extra knowledge and fun. What should you do?

After school activities need not be taught in a school-like environment by professional teachers in a structured and timely manner. There is a lot YOU can do to support your child's academic, physical and social development. Do not be too concerned about formal programs, as many of our children are already over-scheduled.

Obviously, school is top priority for children. They need to go to school, and finish their homework. They should then do their daily reading or writing work etc. This may take about 30-60 minutes. In the course of his daily work, your child may develop certain academic preferences and interests. In that case, you can try and find a program in a college or a community center that will help him and encourage him. In the age of the Internet, information is really not a rarity. Allow him to use the net to find more information about thing that he likes. Encouraging the child to do independent research to gain in-depth knowledge is something that no formal program does.

If you are concerned about the lack of social life, enroll him or her in a club - a reading club maybe. Visit public libraries or even the theater, if your child is interested. It is not necessary for your child to make friends with children his own age. A parent-child book club is another interesting option. If you can round up a number of like-minded children and their parents, you may well start your own after-school program.

When there is no organized group activity, look to your community. Many children love to get involved in social problems. They get their first real taste of suffering, charity and community help from such experiences. Volunteering for clean-up sessions, adult education programs etc could be a real eye-opener for your child. The lessons thus learnt are invaluable.

If physical activity or the lack of it is your major concern, enroll your child for some dancing classes. If organized sports are impossible to get, try to enroll her in a gym. She may find friends there and may take to the treadmill.

Your child does not necessarily have to be a part of an organized group to benefit from after-school activities. There are various avenues open in front of you. Roping in the enthusiasm of your children in daily household activities like cooking, cleaning etc can also provide them with a refreshing extracurricular experience. Moreover, it will improve family ties too.

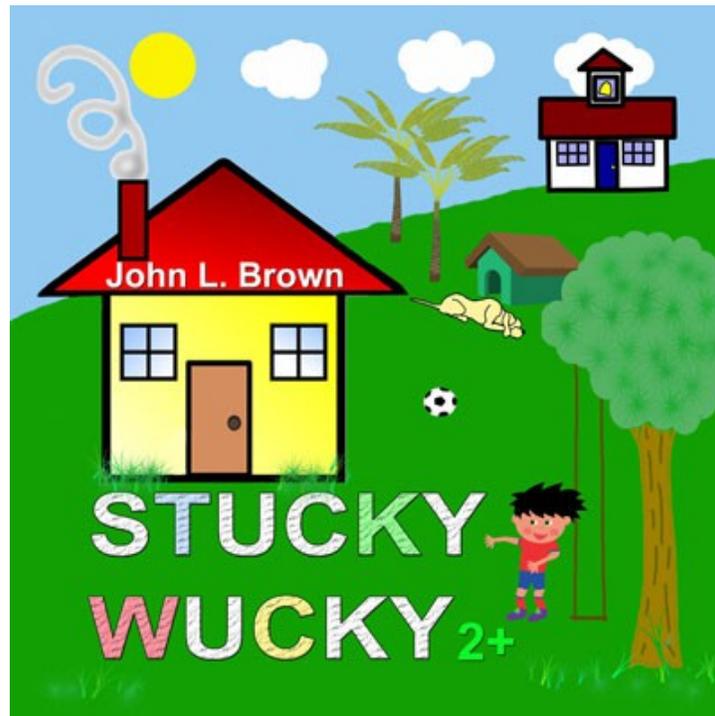
Art-based activities

A recent report by several independent researchers concludes that participating in the arts nurtures the development of social, personal and cognitive skills. Programs based on Arts can improve academic achievement and decrease the tendency towards delinquency. It helps youth form positive attitudes about themselves and build self-esteem.

Arts programs involve communication, interpretation and understanding of complex symbols, much like mathematics and languages. Thus it fosters higher-order analytical skills and skills of evaluation and synthesis. Many of the programs make the child regularly use multiple skills thus making him dynamic and versatile.

Development of imagination, judgment and philosophy are fringe benefits of an arts-based activity. As opposed to the short 45-minute duration of the art classes at school, the extra time allowed in after school activities allows the child to get more involved. This results in more satisfactory opportunities for development of latent capabilities in the child. In turn, the child learns to set high standards of achievement. He understands what sustained focus is and learns that regular practice is the way to excellence.

In the shy or the withdrawn child, theater, speech or drama lessons may be an outlet for pent up emotions. As drama entails getting into the 'skin' of another person, the child learns to verbalize emotions and express thoughts. These reasons account for the popularity of arts-based activities.



Benefits of a good after school program

Children grow up in a society that demands expertise in everything. You really cannot sit back and decide that learning from textbooks is enough for the overall development of your child. It's the age of specialization and your child cannot afford to miss out on this window of opportunity. So, scour your locality for the most advantageous programs and enroll them for the ones you think are the best.

After school programs are basically designed to develop a talent or a skill that is ignored by regular schools. These programs could be educational or recreational in nature. Whatever type they are, they basically aim to keep the child active and interested.

The most important advantage of a good after school program is that it widens your child's area of interests. He or she is introduced to new things, sometimes interesting, sometimes challenging. Mastering a new art form or a new skill increases the child's self-esteem. It also allows you to introduce your child to new career options. A child attending a music class may decide that she likes it so much that she wants to make a career out of it in the long run.

Socialization is another great advantage of after school programs. Children get to meet others who share their interests and make new friendships. An acting class or a soccer class can be lots of fun. Many of these programs coach children for performances or matches. Performing on stage or playing a match can be a great experience for a young child.

After school programs keep your teenager busy. He or she thus has some amount of protection from destructive habits like drugs and alcohol. Surveys indicate that children who are kept busy through diverse absorbing activities are less prone to abuse, depression and burnout. Significant increase in achievement and attendance and a reduction in drop out rates are other advantages of a good after school programs.

Most after school programs have children interacting with one or more adult. This allows them to benefit from positive relationships with adults. Children often find it difficult to confide in parents and teachers, but may open up with other adults.

Many children are put into recreational after school programs so that they reduce weight and remain healthy. A newly emerging trend shows that about 15% children below the age of 16 are obese. Parents who cannot put their children on a strict diet resort to sports and games to burn fat. With cases of child diabetes on the increase, this has become a prime focus of many after school programs.

A good after school program has many benefits. It keeps the child entertained as well as busy, and thus prevents children from becoming addicted to TVs and PCs. By giving them ways to burn up their excess energy and explore their creativity, after school programs help to shape the overall personality of the child.

Boring after school activities

Why does Lisa grumble when it is time for her to go for her piano lessons? How come Johnny abhors the sight of his skates now? After all, these children were very enthusiastic about the programs when they started off. What happened? Parents are often confused by the disturbing and often incongruous signals they receive from their children. One day the kids are excited about the new theatre class and in just a few short weeks they wail and moan when it's time to go.

The first thing a family should do when a child begins resisting a previously loved activity is to listen and investigate. Do not jump into conclusions. A little bit of intelligent sleuthing is required. Ask your child what he or she does in the class. Find out what exactly is the cause of the problem. Then ask the teachers the same questions. Compare notes. You may stumble on some important clues. Usually, children start out on an activity thinking it's all fun. But when they realize that they cannot just hang out and that they need to follow rules etc, they begin to resist. Your child may feel stifled if the program is too structured. If the discipline is too rigorous or the activity too painful (like a karate class) some children balk. Use your own instincts. Does the program feel like fun? Would you want to attend it yourself? Are they offering enough motivation to keep the child interested?

The teacher-to-child ratio is also an important factor. Children need attention. If the number of teachers is just enough to handle a class, it is possible that your child is not receiving enough attention. State recommendations usually specify that there must be 1 teacher for 15 children.

Children try to avoid problems they cannot solve. If there are no perceivable problems with the class and the teachers, perhaps you need to have a chat with your child. If your judgment says that the place is good and the activity engaging enough, then it's time to work with your child. More often than not, social pressures may be at work here. Does your child have friends there? If she is lonely or miserable because of the lack of friends, help her find a friend. If she finds a friend, she will get more involved in the activities

If your best efforts do not pay off, and your child still resists that fantastic guitar classes, then it's time to let go. Shift your child to some other program. If he or she still retains interest in guitars, you can take it up after a few months. Never force the child, especially when it comes to extra-curricular activities. Since they are 'extra', they must bring in extra happiness and extra enthusiasm too.

Developmental after school programs

As a child grows into an adult, different aspects of his physical, emotional and mental self needs development. To help a child reach his full potential, it is necessary to recognize the child's developmental needs and abilities. To be effective, after school programs should assist children with tasks they must accomplish during each stage of development.

A child's growth curve can be divided into three main parts:

- 1) Young child (ages 3-5)
- 2) Middle school (ages 6-8)
- 3) Older school (ages 9-12)

The four important domains of development are: The Physical Domain, the Social Domain, the Emotional Domain and the Intellectual Domain. Each of these domains needs to be separately addressed during the various phases of a child's growth. After school programs should concentrate on developing each domain as applicable to the age of the child. Although the children participating in these programs may have similar developmental needs and age, do not expect development to be uniform. Children will develop as and when they are ready.

Physical Domain:

When children are young, they want to perfect skills that they have just learnt to control. A variety of movements such as jumping, catching and throwing delight them. The middle school child, on the other hand, wants to learn more complex skills and get involved in team sports. This is also the best time to learn about rules and discipline in sport. The older school child is ready for more adult-like activities that need greater structure and discipline, like dancing, gymnastics, music classes etc.

Social Domain:

Young children are observing others and will be interested in games where they play the roles of family members. They develop short-term friendships and need an adult's presence to assure them. The middle school child is intrigued by society and will love trips to factories, public buildings etc. They want to know the 'how' and 'why' of things. The older school child is ready to learn about different cultures, food and customs. They want to do some amount of social work too.

Effective after school activities

When there are so many activities on offer, and each one looks as good as the next, how do you gauge the worth and effectiveness of these activities? Sure, you want an activity that junior enjoys. But, we really cannot afford to waste time on pleasure for pleasure's sake, do we? There needs to be a grain of gold somewhere in there. Given below is a list of characteristics that any good after school activity must possess.

Clarity in objectives and goals is the first important thing. What does the course offer? How does it propose to achieve the results? How many kids make up a batch? Ask questions. After all, when you are dishing out the dough, you really need to understand what you are getting in return.

A good after school activity will provide lots of opportunities for the young to increase their level of understanding of complex concepts. This is true of recreational activities too. Learning to pitch a ball, or dance to a tune - regardless of the activity involved, the child should be encouraged to grapple with and conquer new concepts. This not only keeps boredom at bay by challenging the child, but also builds up his self-confidence. Development of academic, personal and social skills is one of the prime aims of an after school activity. As the skills develop, the child's self-esteem also increases.

After school activities are all about boosting a child's sense of competence. Good and effective after school activities promotes the resilience of youth and encourages them to grow stronger, be it mentally, emotionally or physically.

Safety is one of the first requirements of an after school activity. The staff should be qualified, adequate and alert. Never put your child in a program where safety is a matter of accident instead of a matter of priority. The staff should be friendly and should have a positive relationship with the child. Therefore, the program should have professional and trained staff that loves to interact with children. The program should maintain a cooperative and supportive attitude and a structured environment. Participation and collaboration as opposed to competition and antagonism must be encouraged.

Some programs involve the children in planning activities and making decisions. Adults often forget to get the opinion of their children. By giving the children an opportunity to voice their opinion, programs become fun activities that children are motivated to participate in. Young people thrive when they are listened to, respected and allowed to contribute their mite.

Routine evaluations are an important part of after school programs. If the child does not benefit from a class, don't waste time being over-optimistic. Try something new.

You are now ready to look for the perfect after school activity for your child. But don't let us forget that having fun is also an important part of growing up. The child deserves a few hours of pure delight. Remember, all work and no play.

How much is too much?

Should your child go for the football practice 5 days a week? Are 3 days enough? It is common for parents to be a little confused when it comes to deciding how much is too much with reference to after school activities. They argue that since most of the activities are fun (as different from studies), children will simply lap up these classes. But, too much of fun can also make a child sick. Here is a simple guide that will help you decide how much is too much for your child.

Kindergarten:

Your child is just beginning to learn to interact and get used to discipline. His or her after-school life should be simple and carefree. One or two classes per week are enough at the beginning. Once the child settles down, look for more challenging activities like a music program.

Grade 1:

One or two activities per week, play dates and playground visits are recommended. Avoid competitive sports activities. The child is still too young to have to worry about winning and losing. After the rigors of a full day at school, he or she needs a healthy outlet for pent up energy. Physical activities and noncompetitive sports are best for this age.

Grade 2:

Your child is old enough to voice opinions on what activities he or she wants. Sports, skating, swimming or computers - steer him towards things he likes. Many children begin lessons on a musical instrument around this age. But, allow your child some 'alone time' during which he can unwind and just do whatever he wishes.

Grade 3:

Socialization begins to take center stage. Team sports are a good choice. Developing motor skills, painting, drawing etc are good too. Let the child explore areas of interests. But leave aside enough time for the family and for fun activities.

Grade 4:

At this age, the child will tell you what he likes. He needs to get involved in activities that will boost his confidence. This will also help him manage stress as this is the time when social pressure is beginning to build. But, beware of the homework demon. Your child needs more time with his studies. Balancing his schoolwork with other activities is very important.

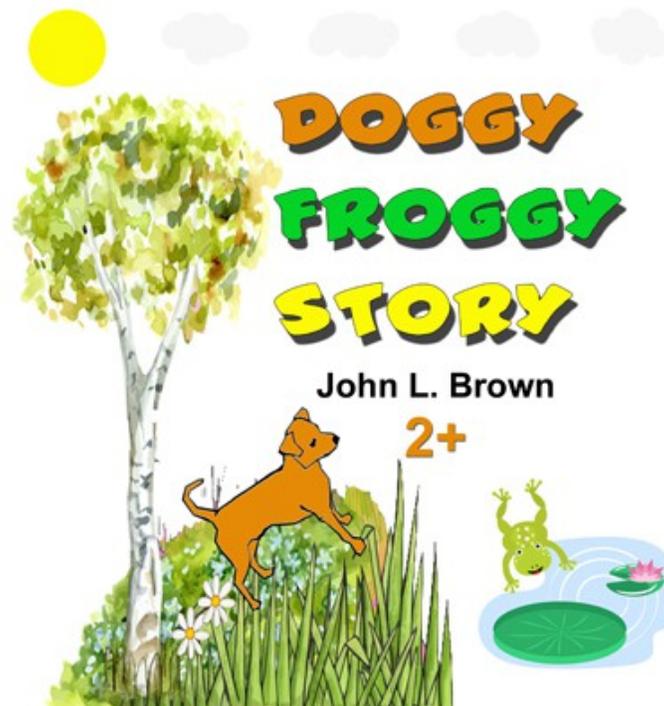
Grade 5:

The fifth grader is bubbling with energy and will want to do just about everything. But she or he may conveniently push studies to the background. So, close supervision is needed. Keep one or two days free for family time and other activities. Now is a great time to get your child interested in community service.

Middle school:

Steer him away from TV. Get him engaged in activities that reinforce learning. Academic performance can be improved by encouraging your preteen to join clubs like the Girl/Boy Scouts program, language clubs, chess clubs etc. As a thumb rule, 16-20 hours a week of extra activity should be more than enough. But look out for signs of burnout.

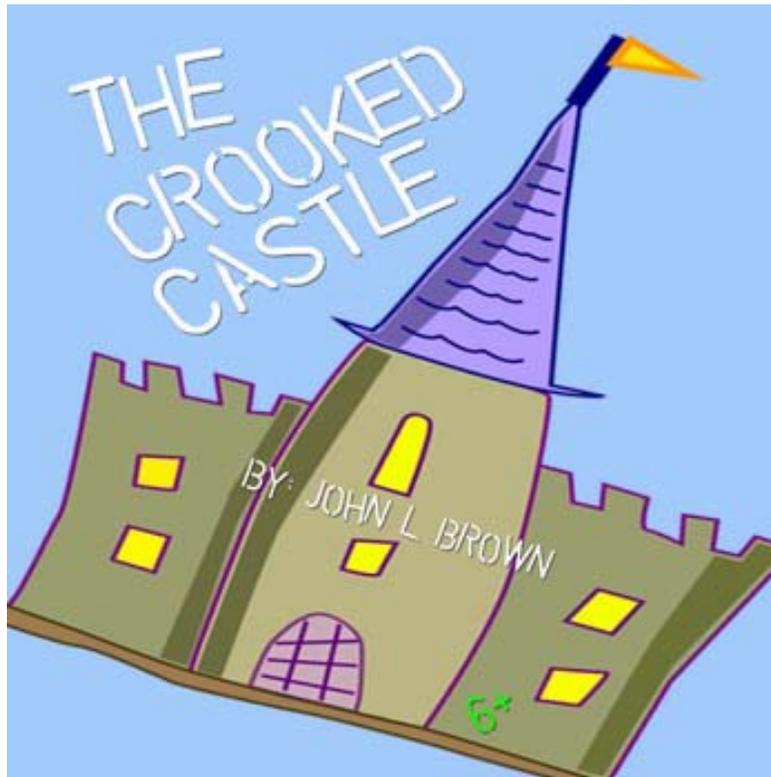
What you select for your child and how long he should work at it is basically decided by the child's temperament. As a parent, you should closely observe your child and base your decisions on feedback from the child himself.



How to find after school activities

Start off by making inquiries. Nothing can beat the power of information. Approach the school authorities first. Find out if they are offering any after school activities. Get a list of the various classes that are available in your school. In case the school does not provide any extracurricular activities for the child, approach your neighbors. Collect information about any after school programs, the quality of the courses taught and the timings etc. Also, check out some of the community resources. These may include places of worship, community centers, Museums, libraries, the YMCA, The Boys and Girls Club etc.

After you have collected all the necessary information, discuss the various options with your child. Find out what his interests are. The best way to find out what is most suitable is to ask your child. When little children are too small, you cannot completely rely on their feedback. In this case, monitor the development of the child on a regular basis. If the child shows excessive resistance to an activity, it may be necessary to look for other options. Always consider your family's schedule when planning the extracurricular activities. If it is difficult for you to chauffeur your child, you may want to employ tutors at home or conduct some activity at home itself.



Keeping children motivated

Initial enthusiasm in after school activities tends to wane after the first excitement is over. This is but natural. The trick is to keep up the hard work even after this. How do you keep your child motivated? This is of particular importance when the child goes in for educational after school programs.

Make the career-academics connection early on: Let your child understand how important studies are. Let him know that an excellent career is wholly dependent on wholesome learning. To develop his interest in studies, plan family activities that are connected with his studies. Emphasize the real-world connection to academics whenever possible.

Set goals:

Let your child know, through example, that hard work will be rewarded. If your child believes that achievement is a natural by-product of effort, he is more likely to put in hard work. Such children are also less likely to drop out of programs and college at a later stage.

Reward success:

When a child achieves something, it is necessary to praise his hard work. Positive reinforcements enhance confidence and increase self-esteem. Conversely, beware of criticism. It can ruin the frail ego of children and play havoc with their minds.

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Need for after school activities

When children are literally up to their gills with the learning and sport activities in school, it may seem superfluous to enroll them for after school activities. In spite of this, after school programs are sprouting up in large numbers and most of these are booked full. This shows that there is a real need for after school activities.

The unavailability of parental supervision is the leading cause for the surge in after school programs. It is seen that many children spend about 20-25 hours a week unsupervised and alone at home. And as the saying goes, "An idle mind is a devil's workshop". Children who are left alone to contend with too much free time invariably fall into the wrong company. Drug abuse, alcohol, tobacco and crime come knocking at their doors sooner rather than later. Parents enroll children to various after school programs to keep them occupied in a productive manner. This way, the kids are free to enjoy themselves in a supervised activity.

Crime is considered to be at its peak during the after school hours, between 3- 4 p.m. During such a time, children need protection. Getting the children together under one roof and encouraging them to participate in a group activity is protection enough. It diverts the children from ennui too.

Obesity is a matter of growing concern in this country. It is noticed that more and more children are becoming couch potatoes. After school, many of them relax on the sofa with packets of chips, cool drinks or chocolates while they watch T.V. 30 % of the kids below the age of 19 are considered overweight, and about 15% of these are obese. An after school program ensures that the child shakes off his lethargy and keeps himself busy. This also helps to reduce the child's fascination for T.V and computer games.

After school activities that promote social awareness develop the individual's sense of social responsibility. It is seen that these sorts of programs not only keep kids out of trouble, but also help to produce responsible citizens. To that extent, they are valuable building blocks in a child's personality.

Times are changing and parents want their children to excel in academics as well as in other activities. This may be a reflection of the parent's unfulfilled desire to excel - a remnant from his own childhood. Whatever the reason, parents today encourage their children to enroll themselves in various programs and develop the various facets of their individuality. Children too seem to be comfortable learning many things at the same time, and gain satisfaction from this.

Over-scheduling kids

Several studies are expressing a growing concern that after school programs are pressurizing kids to do too much too soon. They point out that when a child's afternoon is filled with classes, trips, sports and other forms of organized activities, kids do not really get the time to be just kids. They are even being deprived of the cherished family time.

Undoubtedly, there are children who are being burdened with a schedule that places too much demand on their time. This leads to increased levels of stress on the child and the family. As regular studies cannot be ignored, children are almost always on the run to achieve more. Such children are really bearing a burden that is too heavy for their frail little shoulders.

In an ideal world, all children would go home directly after school to loving and caring parents who are waiting for the children to come home. But the social and economic realities show that many children have to attend after school courses because there is no one available at home. For such children, these classes are a boon.

Parents should however restrain themselves from reading too much into these activities. After school programs are complimentary in nature. They give additional support. Therefore, their importance should also be limited.

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Potentials of after school programs

With children becoming the primary focus of society, ways and means to ensure their safety and development are being researched. The Government too has pooled in to make a success of such programs. Here are some of the reasons why after school programs have become so popular:

- 1) Preventing Juvenile Delinquency, crime and violent victimization: About 10% of juvenile crimes happen between 3 P.M. - 4 P.M. Children need to be kept safe and out of trouble at such times
- 2) Preventing alcohol, drug and tobacco use. Risk-taking behavior that seeks to establish superiority in a clan is mostly seen in 'latchkey' children. Children in their pre-teens, if they have a meaningful relationship with a mentor, are less likely to indulge in these kinds of destructive behavior
- 3) Decreases appetite for Television: An average child watches about 23 hours of TV per week. When enrolled for some activity, the child utilizes his mental and physical skills to meet challenges.
- 4) Improving academic achievements
- 5) Improving school attendance: More confidence in self and increased interest in school leads to greater attendance in school. A program that helps children with their homework also gives the child a much-needed feeling of self-achievement.
- 6) Improved behavior and inter-personal skills Children who attend after school activities handle conflict better and cooperate more with authority figures.
- 7) Closer family and community ties.

Quirky after school programs

With the growing interest in after school programs shown by the Government as well as parents, new and hitherto unheard of programs are being explored. In an attempt to make a child aware of his responsibilities as an individual and as a citizen, these after school programs make use of a child's natural curiosity and his irrepressible energy.

Investigative Skills:

In some schools in Kernersville, children are developing their investigative skills. Children meet with adults who introduce them to the details of fake non-violent crimes. They take notes, visit the scene and gather information. Students learn to listen to alibis, collect fingerprints and gather any other pieces of evidence. According to the principal, these activities challenge her students' problem solving skills. Children learn to think critically and to form informed judgments.

Fisheries and sciences:

In North Carolina, children who are interested get a chance to win a scholarship through their after school activity. Here, students are given a chance to face hands-on fisheries science experiments in a freshwater or marine setting. Professionals, educators and experts from the world of Fisheries act as mentors. Students accepted into the program get a \$3,000 scholarship.

The above examples go to show that after school activities are becoming serious. They are slowly morphing into important parts of a child's education and moving away from the fun-and-frolic-only programs of the past.

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Reading activities

In a world that is slowly but surely turning away from books and getting glued to monitors or television screens, the importance of developing a passion for reading cannot be overlooked. Reading is a habit and should be established when the child is relatively young. What can you do to foster this habit?

Enroll your child for reading classes:

There are many well structured after school reading classes that aim to draw the children to books. They help kids with diction, idioms and phrases. For young children, these classes can be fun with animated characters and pictures. Illustrated picture books, rhymes, silly songs and pretend stories all attract the young child. Use creativity to capture the child's vivid imagination.

Pique your child's interest:

If your child has a favorite character, pick a series of books that features this character. For my son, it was Spiderman. Thanks to friendly neighborhood spidey, my son latched on to comics fairly early in his childhood.

Build a home-library:

A skill like reading cannot be learnt in isolation. Do not leave all the hard work to the after school program. Pick up books that you think your child will like. The Internet is also a rich resource of reading games that will attract little children to the fine art of reading.

Recreational after school programs

After school programs can be divided into 3 broad categories: academic, recreational and social. Balanced development takes place when there is compatibility between the physical, mental as well as the educational achievements of the child. As the name suggests recreational after school programs are based on a sport or recreation. Some of the more common physical activities include football, swimming and basketball. Some clubs offer programs like gymnastics, trekking and hiking. In this case, youngsters are often given a short class in first-aid class also.

Recreational after school programs offer children an opportunity to let off some steam and to destress themselves. The closed classroom atmosphere and a day full of textbooks and writing cause the child to repress his natural enthusiasm. He curbs his energy when he is required to sit quietly in class and learn. Physical activity is an all-time low during such times. This physical lethargy and inaction is countermanded by recreational activities. Growing concerns of obesity and child diabetes make it necessary for children to indulge in some strenuous exercises that will allow them to work up some sweat.

Unlike educational programs, recreational programs do not tax the mental processes. But, they do aid the learning process by making the child more active. A child who is physically active is mentally fit, and is able to focus his thoughts on the work at hand. Additionally, recreational programs teach discipline, mechanics of teamwork and fair play. These are important lessons in the growing process.

As more and more nuclear families emerge, the child faces greater isolation. Many children shuttle between their classroom and their bedrooms and do not have any meaningful relationships outside these. Recreational programs offer ample avenues for socialization. This is a place the child can go to and play even when his neighbor is not the most welcoming. The Boy / Girl Scout programs are excellent recreational after school programs. Lately, survival classes and camps have devised to combine important survival skills with sports and games to educate children on how to handle emergencies.

Like any good after school program, recreational programs are designed to give children a safe area where they can indulge in some group activities that interest them. This is one of the most effective ways to keep kids out of the streets and out of trouble. But, one has to be careful when enrolling children for recreational classes. The age of the child, his temperament and his physical caliber has to be taken into account before you choose the right program for your child.

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School based after-school programs

In an effort to keep children motivated and safe, the U.S. Government sets aside a good amount of fund for financing after school programs every year. A report by the U.S. Department of Education and Justice points out that after school programs are very effective and is in the interests of the society as a whole. Interestingly, it was found that Americans liked providing school-based after school-programs in their community.

Other than safety, boredom and loneliness, the poor performance of many students also led to the need for after-school programs that are based on the school curriculum. Children coming from low-income families were found to lag behind in reading and grammar after a long break in the summer. Statistics prove that if school-going children are left unsupervised after their school, the chances of poor grades and drop out are considerably higher. The funds provided by the Government will allow rural and inner-city schools to provide activities during the summer, over the weekends and after school. These activities will take place in a drug-free, safe and supervised environment.

Positive augmentation of critical skills is the prime focus of these school-based after school activities. Thus they enhance the skill level of the child. Most school-based programs offer assistance in math tutoring, reading, comprehension and problem solving. Many programs provide engaging activities that seek to prepare the students for college. Hands-on experience is provided for children who want to invest in a career in teaching. Access to telecommunication and technology and involvement in music and art are other benefits of these programs. This becomes invaluable, especially in low-income sectors where such activities are considered to be a luxury.

As far as children are concerned, the snacks provided in after school programs are an added incentive. School sponsored after school programs are entitled to receive funds for snacks. The National School Lunch Program is designed to do just this. Free or reduced price snacks will be provided for children from schools that apply for it. The CACFP reimburses expenditure depending upon the child's income status. But this is applicable only till the age of 13. The funding that schools get depends upon the area in which they are situated. A low-income area gets more funding. Supper can be served to children below the age of 19. Longer programs can provide both supper and a snack. With the participation of non-profit private organization, it is possible to feed deserving school children breakfast, supper and a snack.

Successful after school programs

What marks a successful after school program? What are the things that you should look for when enrolling your child into one such program? Other than the obvious advantage of learning something new, successful programs incorporate many things that help the development of the child.

Development of social skills is one of the more important objectives of a good after school program. In a recent survey, parents indicated that while they do want their children to respect others, they also wanted them to imbibe skills like getting along with other children and getting used to children outside the immediate circle of friends. Many children find it difficult to make new friends and get along with people outside their group.

Good after school programs place special emphasis on security and safety. They keep children out of trouble and keep them safe. A good after school program should be fun, especially when the children are young. If the activity is fun, you will not have to worry about keeping him interested or motivated. To be effective, programs should be organized and structured. They must also suit the age of the child. The child must be aware of the purpose of the program, and must be convinced that they are attending the programs to accomplish something.

The Learning environment

There is often a trap in the words 'after school activities'. One may easily believe that since these activities are after school, they are not of much importance. But, one couldn't be more wrong. Research suggests that children pick up some of their most important skills from after school programs. That is why children who do not participate in any extra curricular activities are generally slow and less vibrant.

The learning environment that one fosters in after school activities must be as disciplined and as functional as that found in the school. This is especially true of educational after school programs. This is the best place to teach the child important skills like time-management and goal setting. Time-management is a vital skill, but it is not achieved easily. Children need to feel the discipline that is needed to finish a task and the happiness of finishing the allotted work in a specific time frame.

Children look for different things in an after class program. The learning environment should be attractive, colorful and informative. Use charts, pictures, posters and drawings to liven up a class. Additional resources (resources that are not easily available in the school) will make the classes interesting. For instance, when teaching a biology lesson, allow the child to see through a microscope or see slides of bacteria. This will add to his knowledge and also make him more enthusiastic about his after school program.

Discipline is a must in after school activities. In fun or sport-based activities, it is easy for children to step out of line and wreck havoc. While children should be allowed to have fun, they should be curtailed from unacceptable behavior. The best way to enforce discipline is to lay down the rules at the very beginning. Let the children know what is unacceptable, right at the beginning.

Rewards are an important part of any learning process. The reward can be a simple pat on the back or a token of appreciation. Motivate your children to aspire for higher things by rewarding their achievements. Holding competitions or sport activities where the children can show their proficiency is a reward in itself.

Children can get bored easily, especially in the case of an educational program. The main thrust of an academic program is to repeat what has been taught in class and to allow the child to learn it quickly. It is difficult to pique the child's interest a second time, especially when the child is already tired of one dose of the same lesson. It is best to thwart boredom by using creative techniques like an impromptu extempore on any topic, a quiz program or a slideshow.

After school activities are becoming more popular by the day. Parents want their kids to learn more. Children too have an insatiable quest for knowledge. In an after school program, it is possible to pay individual attention and quench this thirst using various effective techniques.

Too much of school

When my mom finally decided to take that plum posting as a Divisional Head, I knew I was in trouble. Her office hours stretched way beyond my school hours. And anyway, I was privy to the many discussions my parents had about 'Honey, what do we do with the kids?' Well, finally they struck gold - an educational after school program. Won't that be just grand? Kids are learning new things while parents are happily minting greenbacks!

And so, we went directly to another class after our school. The brochure said that they would be 'using fun activities and innovative teaching methods to fill the gap in your child's understanding'. I suppose they meant that the teacher would write down the homework and we were to copy it. At least, this is what happened most of the time. Of course, we didn't tell our parents. How would that help? They'd simply get smart and shift us to a class that would actually make us solve our homework.

I hated the classes. Mostly, I was bored to tears or falling asleep. After so many hours at school who'd want to spend the entire afternoon with the same books? But, as a child, one had little choice in these matters. Especially when one's parents were cleverly telling one that mommy's salary will help get us that spanking new TV or that video game. Lose some, win some!

Then, one day, my sister decided to rock the proverbial boat. She decided she had enough of studying and refused to go to the after school program. That's when my parents began to smell something stale. Shortly after that, they put us in a better program (o, yes, another educational one). This was bigger, brighter and somehow more fun. We had some interesting games, and a COMPUTER too. Each of us got a chance to do something on the PC (this, when PCs were just beginning to make their presence felt). We somehow managed to blaze through our homework, most of which had to be done by us. Then it was time to have fun. We had a little bit of everything. Acting classes, speech, games and of course painting. Those hours we spent splashing color on pages and laughing at silly jokes were really the highlight of an otherwise boring day. Ironically, I began looking forward to my after school program.

Now, so many years afterward, when I need to take up a job and leave my own child alone till I get back, I know how important these after school programs have become. Talk about history repeating itself! I just hope I'd get her into a good one, and yes, it's going to be educational too.

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Conclusion

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