

Extracurricular Activities in Children's Lives

Peggy Patten

Our AskERIC service responds to many questions related to children's extracurricular activities. Does athletic involvement help or hinder academic achievement? Are formal music lessons a good idea for children? Do young children benefit from second language instruction?

There is some research to support children's involvement in learning a foreign language, participating in athletics, and studying music—including research that points to the positive effect on children's academic achievement. The focus of this article is on the impact on children's development of activities that occur outside the school curriculum. Parents may also find the information useful in their discussions with school district personnel about what to include within the school's core curriculum.

Foreign Languages

Research suggests that knowing a second language gives children many advantages. In addition to developing a lifelong ability to communicate with more people and a competitive advantage in the workforce, many children who receive second language instruction perform better on cognitive and verbal tests than those who speak only one language (Marcos, 1997; Martin, 1999).

In *Why, How, and When Should My Child Learn a Second Language?*, Kathleen Marcos (1997), of the ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics, reports on the benefits of knowing a second language. Marcos says some evidence suggests that children who receive second language instruction are more creative and better at solving complex problems.

Additionally, students of foreign languages score statistically higher on standardized tests conducted in English. In its 1992 report, *College Bound Seniors: 1992 Profile of SAT and Achievement Test*

Takers, the College Entrance Examination Board reported that students who averaged four or more years of foreign language study scored higher on the verbal section of the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) than those who had studied four or more years in any other subject area (Marcos, 1997).

Athletic Involvement

Participation in sports seems to confer many social, academic, and health advantages for youth. The May 5, 1999, issue of *Education Week* reported on recent research on high school students, sports, and school success. In one study, the more involved that 10th-graders were in athletics, the more likely they were to feel confident of their academic abilities or to be engaged in their schools. A second study looked at the frequency of behavior problems among 12th-graders who had participated in athletics at some point in their high school careers and found that sports participation had a positive impact. The effects were twice as strong for black males as they were for white females. Other groups of students fell somewhere in between ("Sports and School Success," 1999).

Research conducted by Maureen Weiss and her colleagues at the University of Oregon suggests an association between motivation, high self-esteem, and sports participation. Weiss's research demonstrated that self-esteem and perception of physical ability can predict achievement behavior, motivation, and positive affect in children (American Psychological Association, 1996).

Researchers at the Center for Research on Women ("Implementation of Title IX," 1999) report that among girls, greater involvement in sports is associated with lower levels of risky sexual activities and fewer sexually transmitted diseases.

Jeanne Weiler (1998), of the Institute for Urban and Minority Education at Columbia University, reports that all girls appear to derive positive benefits from exercise and athletic involvement, although they perceive the benefits differently based on their experiences and social circumstances. Sports can build confidence and a positive body image, characteristics that are linked to lower levels of depression (Weiler, 1998). Although there are great differences among groups of girls, Weiler says, overall there is a positive relationship between sports involvement and academic achievement as measured by grade point average, standardized tests scores, lowered risk for dropping out of school, and greater likelihood of attending and staying in college.

Music Instruction

In experiments exploring the link between music and intelligence, researchers Frances Rauscher and her colleagues at the University of California, Irvine, found that music training—either singing or keyboard lessons—can enhance spatial reasoning. Rauscher defines spatial reasoning as the brain’s ability to perceive the visual world accurately, to form mental images of physical objects, and to recognize variations of objects (Rauscher, 1995). Spatial reasoning, Rauscher says, is important to success in a variety of academic subjects such as math, the sciences, and engineering. Rauscher and her colleagues found that the spatial reasoning performance of 19 preschool children who received 8 months of music lessons—either singing or keyboard lessons—far exceeded that of a comparable group of preschool children who did not receive music lessons.

In “The Case for Music in the Schools,” Miller and Coen (1994) report on research conducted by the late physician and biologist Lewis Thomas that found that 66% of music majors who applied to medical school were admitted, the highest percentage of any group.

Musician and composer Wynton Marsalis (1995) discusses the important lessons children derive from music instruction and particularly from the time spent

practicing. Regular, focused, and effective practice, Marsalis says, helps children to set goals, to concentrate, to learn from their mistakes, and to develop discipline that will help children in other areas of life.

How Should Parents Respond?

Much has been written about the benefits of various extracurricular activities for children. Should parents sign their children up for as many activities as early as possible? Not necessarily. In thinking about the many valuable experiences available to children, balance and moderation are important. Parents need to ask themselves at least two questions when scheduling extracurricular activities for their children: What is my child missing when his or her life is structured in this way? and Who am I doing this for—myself or my child?

Lilian Katz (1987, 1999) reminds parents and educators that children need ample time to explore in greater depth what they already know and are familiar with. When children engage in a *wide variety* of activities, they can acquire breadth of experience, knowledge, and skills, but there may be a trade-off in terms of *depth* of experience, knowledge, and skills.

In “What’s Wrong with Our Children?,” Ann Colin Herbst (1999) says that children need to have room to breathe. When children are overscheduled, they are more likely to feel overwhelmed. A noisy, overstimulating environment, Herbst says, leads children not to pay attention to anything and also makes them feel they have to compete for their parents’ time.

Andree Aelion Brooks (1990) interviewed 80 psychiatrists, psychologists, educators, and counselors, along with 60 parents and nearly 100 children, for her book *Children of Fast-Track Parents*. She observes that parents’ best efforts to prepare their children for a successful life by exposing them to enriching experiences as soon as possible may have unintended negative consequences for their children. There is a potential for stress disorders among those

youngsters who are not emotionally and intellectually able to function well under such pressure, Brooks says.

Diane Ehrensaft (1997) shares similar observations from her work with families as a developmental and clinical psychologist in her recent book *Spoiling Childhood: How Well Meaning Parents Are Giving Children Too Much—But Not What They Need*. Parents may want to regularly check their response to the question “Who am I doing this for, me or my child?” Scales grossly tipped in either direction can be a wake-up call to adjust the kind and quantity of activities to achieve a better balance between child and parent. Parents should be given full license to fantasize a limitless potential for their child, Ehrensaft says, but they must be careful not to lose their grip on reality and aggrandize their child for their own glory.

Time that parents put aside just for their child, says Ehrensaft, is often filled with whirlwind activities designed to bring pleasure to the child. Ehrensaft encourages parents to recognize the benefit to themselves and to their child of “nothing” time—time filled with the everyday rhythms in which child and adult learn to share a space comfortably—some of it when a parent is preoccupied and some when a child would be best left alone. For many families, these moments are scarce indeed.

For More Information

Children's time [Online]. (No date). Available: <http://www.isr.umich.edu/src/child-development/printime.html> [1999, October 11].

De Houwer, Annick. (1999). *Two or more languages in early childhood*. ERIC Digest. Washington, DC: ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics. Available: <http://www.cal.org/ericcll/digest/earlychild.html> [1999, October 11].

Fiedler, Margaret, & Zupan, Mary Anne. (No date). *Piano keyboard experience and spatial reasoning development of the kindergarten student: Results*

of 1996-1997 kindergarten keyboarding project [Online]. Available: <http://kmis.kmsd.edu/me/keyboar.htm> [1999, October 11].

Hill, Melinda. (1997). *Hurry up! It's time to go!* Fact Sheet [Online]. Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Cooperative Extension Service. Available: <http://npin.org/library/1998/n00038/n00038.html> [1999, October 11].

Holmes, Steven A. (1998, November 11). Children study longer and play less, a report says. *New York Times on the Web* [Online]. Available: <http://www.nabe.org/press/reprints/981111b.htm> [1999, October 11].

Mahoney, Joseph L., & Cairns, Robert B. (1997). Do extracurricular activities protect against early school dropout? *Developmental Psychology*, 33(2), 241-53. (ERIC Journal No. EJ 543 394)

Malley, Cathy. (1996). *The children: Are they suffering from stress?* [Online]. National Network for Child Care, University of Connecticut Cooperative Extension Service. Available: <http://www.lib.uconn.edu/CANR/ces/child/newsarticles/SAC533.html> [1999, October 11].

National Association for Music Education. Information for Educators, the Press, and the Public [Online]. Available: <http://www.menc.org/information/advocate/prpage.html> [1999, October 11].

National Endowment for the Arts. (No date). *Dance and your child* [Online]. Available: <http://npin.org/library/pre1998/n00228/n00228.html> [2000, April 4].

National Endowment for the Arts. (No date). *The theater and children* [Online]. Available: <http://npin.org/library/pre1998/n00220/n00220.html> [2000, April 4].

National Endowment for the Arts. (No date). *Your child and the visual arts* [Online]. Available: <http://npin.org/library/pre1998/n00224/n00224.html> [2000, April 4].

Sports lift self-esteem in young athletes. (1996). *Parent News* [Online], 2(9). Available: <http://>

npin.org/pnews/pnew996/pnew996k.html [1999, October 11].

Sources

American Psychological Association. (1996). *Sports lift esteem in young athletes* [Online]. Available: <http://helping.apa.org/family/prepare.html> [1999, October 11].

Brooks, Andree Aelion. (1990). Educating the children of fast-track parents. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 71(8), 612-615. (ERIC Journal No. EJ 405 156)

College Entrance Examination Board. (1992). *College-bound seniors. 1992 Profile of SAT and achievement test takers*. National Report. New York: College Entrance Examination Board. (ERIC Document No. ED 351 352)

Ehrensaft, Diane. (1997). *Spoiling childhood: How well-meaning parents are giving children too much—but not what they need*. New York: Guilford Publications. (ERIC Document No. ED 413 111)

Herbst, Ann Colin. (1999, September). What's wrong with our children? *Parents*, pp. 108-115.

Implementation of Title IX appears to protect girls from risky sexual behavior [Interview with Sumru Erkut]. (1999, Spring). *WCW Research Report*, pp. 10-11.

Katz, Lilian G. (1987). *Busy, busy bees!* [Online]. Available: <http://npin.org/library/pre1998/n00191/n00191.html> [2000, April 4].

Katz, Lilian G. (1999). *Another look at what young children should be learning*. ERIC Digest. Champaign, IL: ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education. (ERIC/EECE Document No. PS 027 712). Available: <http://ericece.org/pubs/digests/1999/katzle99.html> [1999, October 11].

Marcos, Kathleen. (1997). *Why, how, and when should my child learn a second language?* Parent Brochure. Washington, DC: ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics. (ERIC Document No. ED 402 794)

Marsalis, Wynton. (1995). We all need time in the woodshed. *Our Children*, 21(2), 28-29. (ERIC Journal No. EJ 523 853)

Martin, Julia. (1999, September). The lowdown on lessons. *Working Mother*, pp. 38-42.

Miller, Allan, & Coen, Dorita. (1994). The case for music in the schools. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 75(6), 459-461. (ERIC Journal No. EJ 477 563)

Rauscher, Frances. (1995). Does music make you smarter? *PTA Today*, 20(5), 8-9. (ERIC Journal No. EJ 509 229)

Sports and school success. Research notes. (1999, May 5). *Education Week*, p. 29.

Weiler, Jeanne. (1998). *The athletic experience of ethnically diverse girls*. ERIC Digest. New York: ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education. (ERIC Document No. ED 416 268). Available: <http://eric-web.tc.columbia.edu/digests/dig131.html> [1999, October 11].

Source of This Document

Patten, Peggy. (1999). Extracurricular Activities in Children's Lives. *Parent News* [Online], 5(6). Available: <http://npin.org/pnews/1999/pnew1199/int1199c.html>