

How to Find the Perfect Extracurricular Activity for Your Kids



Libraries can be the perfect place for kids to discover what inspires, interests and motivates them outside of the classroom. Learn how you can help guide—not push—them in the right direction
By Jenn Danko

With more schools across the country cutting back on your child's recess time, getting him or her involved in extracurricular and physical fitness activities has never been more important. The questions to ask yourself are: Which activities are right for your child? And where can you get them involved?

Irene Smalls, a children's author and behavioral science specialist, says the public library is the perfect springboard for not only exploring children's interests but also to engage them. This September, she is launching the first ever "Literacise" event in the main branch of the Boston Public Library in Copley Square. Centered on her classic children's book, *Jonathan and His Mommy*, the "Story Steps: A Literacise Experience" event invites children to dance around a mock urban neighborhood. Kids will zigzag, reggae and ballet their way through a life-size maze of storyboards based on her book. The event is not only chock-full of interactive exhibits to touch, push and pull, it also includes reading information for parents about the importance of exercise.

"The best way to get an A is through an exercise a day," says Smalls, who sees the library as the ideal gateway for children to discover their interests. Daily physical activity can spark interest in sport, dance and theater while improving overall well being, she adds.

Body and Mind Benefits

Studies show that school-age children who take at least a 15-minute break during the school day are better behaved and achieve higher academic success. In early education facilities such as Georgia-based Sunbrook Academy, President Jacki Gass educates children and their parents about the importance of music and movement from infancy.

"Extracurricular activities should allow your children to explore their physical, social and creative potential," Gass says. Participating in movement classes with your children when they are infants and toddlers can encourage brain development while group-centered activities help familiarize older children with real-world issues.

Extracurricular activities will ultimately boost self-esteem, help your child find friends with common interests, and improve physical and cognitive skills, she says.

Most importantly, parents should respect the interests and wishes of their children and never force

them into an activity, regardless of age.

“Don’t push your children into something they don’t want to do,” Gass advises. “Any activities should be done with the child’s best interests in mind — if it’s not, [your child] will be resentful and feel stressed. Extracurriculars should not cause stress.”

Explore Interests on Site

Gass explores her students’ creative and physical interests with the help of the Sequoyah Regional Library System in Georgia. Many attend reading days and story time arts and crafts classes, and even scrapbooking classes.

The books kids gravitate toward at the library can also give parents cues about their children’s interests. “If your six-year-old is reading soccer books or your little girl loves the ballerina books, you will get an idea of what activities they may like doing outside of the classroom,” Gass says.

Across the country, public libraries are engaging children’s interests with a variety of programming. At the library, tots to teens can find something that inspires, motivates and celebrates their unique interests. Gass suggests various programs for your children based on their ages and development.

Infants to Age Two

You can get your kids started early on music and movement programs. Consider enrolling in Mommy and Me courses such as singing, tumbling and foreign language.

@ your library: The Eldredge Public Library in Chatham, Massachusetts, invites kids to find their inner Zen through its Itsy Bitsy Yoga course. Pre-crawling infants will experience their first calming and nurturing yoga experience. Infants up to 24 months learn poses just for tots while parents can enjoy some beneficial bonding time with their little ones.

At various branches of the Sequoyah Regional Library System in Georgia, families with children between the ages of 18 months to three years of age can partake in the world of Kindermusik, an early music education course that cultivates a lifelong love for music by developing early literacy and language skills. Of course, kids will have plenty of dancing and singing time, too.

Check with your local library for similar children’s programming.

Ages Three to Six

Expose your child to physical activities such as dance, gymnastics and karate. Encourage them to learn the basics of soccer, T-ball or swimming. Continue guiding them on the path of music and singing, and be sure to throw drama in the mix, as well.

@ your library: The Boston Public Library’s “Litercise” initiative is the perfect vehicle for getting your child active outside of the classroom at an early age. At the Thurmont Regional Library in Thurmont, Maryland, little girls are exercising their imaginations through the Fairytale Ballet sessions. In partnering with the Taneytown Dance Center, preschoolers learn the basic introduction to ballet — right from the community room of the public library.

Check with your local library for similar children’s programming.

Ages Six +

Once they reach six years old, it’s good to start exposing your children to arts and crafts classes, computers and more advanced drama classes.

@ your library: Music fun at the Thurmont Regional Library is hardly reserved for the pretty ballerina set. Boys and girls ages seven and up can play it up at “Get the Beat,” an interactive music class that allows your children to create musical instruments and then play them as a class.

Those who like to craft with their hands can check out Stitches: A Handcraft Group at the Jefferson-

Madison Regional Library in Charlottesville, Virginia. Knitters, bead-ers and stitch-ers from age eight to adults and seniors can learn a variety of craft techniques, explore and expand their creative interests.

Of course not every child is physically or artistically minded. That's why libraries such as the Highland Park Public Library in Highland Park, Illinois, host chess games on Saturday mornings. Players of all ages attend for sessions that run six to eight weeks at a time. Every Saturday between 15 and 25 children come ready to sharpen their strategic thinking skills — and play!

Check with your local library for similar children's programming.