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## Childhood Hobbies: Finding the Right Fit

Experts offer suggestions for choosing extracurricular activities for the fall.



Heights students embark on a 30-mile hike along the Appalachian Trail. Experts say children can continue activities like hiking, biking and running into adulthood. Photo courtesy of The Heights

By Marilyn Campbell  
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While many are still basking in the lazy days of summer, Anna Faust is planning her 5-year-old son's after-school activity schedule for the fall. On his agenda: baseball, soccer, gymnastics and tennis lessons.

"My plan is to expose him to as many activities as possible and hope that he chooses one and excels," said Faust. "Sometimes, though I can't tell if he's going along happily because all of his friends are doing it or because he really likes it."

Child development experts say deciding which and how many extracurricular activities are best for children is a dilemma many parents face. Factors such as expense and time can make the process a delicate balancing act.

If a child wants to join a traveling hockey team, how does a parent know if his or her desire to play matches the necessary investment of pricey equipment? Should a parent coax a reluctant child into taking piano lessons hoping to transform an unwilling tot into a musical prodigy? And how much is too much when it comes to hobbies? Local child development experts say the answers vary on a case-by-case basis.

"The key to balancing one's schedule between school work, extracurricular interests, family and friends is reached not so much by seeing these goods as necessarily in competition, but rather in seeing all of the time that we have been given as a great treasure that we have to use in the best possible way," said Michael Moynihan, Upper School Head of The Heights School in Potomac.

Extracurricular activities are an important part of a child's development, and finding the right fit is worth the effort. "They expose children to a variety of experiences and peers. For older children, they are a venue for healthy social interaction as opposed to participating in undesirable behavior," said Rich Leichtweis, PhD, senior director of the Inova Kellar Center in Fairfax, "If kids are on the computer or watching television from the time they get home from school until dinner and then back on again until they go to bed, they are missing critical social opportunities that extra curricular activities can provide."

Assessing a true attraction to an activity versus a passing fancy can be tricky. "Parents should first ask their children what they might be interested in before signing them up, and they should be careful in monitoring how their children continue to feel about participating in these activities," wrote Chantilly resident Maria Londono, a mental health therapist for Fairfax Community Health Care Network in Reston, Falls Church and Alexandria, in an email.

While older children are able to express an opinion about activities, younger children



**Photo courtesy of St. Stephen's & St. Agnes School**

Instructor Matthew Gehlhoff leads student at St. Stephen's & St. Agnes School in an after-school fencing class. "If a parent notices that a child has a gift for piano or soccer, they should encourage it," said Rich Leichtweis, PhD, senior director of the Inova Kellar Center.

might need more guidance. "If a child has a strength or interest we can build on that," said Leichtweis. "If parents notice that a child has a gift for piano or soccer, they should encourage it."

One pitfall, say experts, is following the pack. "Parents get pulled into activities because they think everybody else is doing it. Before you know it, those activities pile up and can be stressful," said McLean resident Michele Garofalo, EdD, assistant chair, Department of Counseling and associate professor of psychology at Marymount University in Arlington.

How does a parent know if a child is overscheduled? "Some kids are OK with a lot of activities," said Leichtweis. "If a child is involved in a lot and they're doing well in school, getting adequate rest and there are no significant disruptions, then it's probably OK. But if there is a change in behavior, their grades slip, they're not getting enough rest and they're in eight different activities, then it is time to make a change."

Experts say there are warning signs that a parent might be pushing a child too hard. "When a child says 'I don't want to go to this activity' or 'I don't like the kids there' or if they are pouting or agitated when it's time to go, those are signals that they need a change," said Garofalo. "If extracurricular activities are fun and kids enjoy them, they can build a child's self-esteem and give them a place to shine, and children need a place to shine."

Parents should also consider the family's overall schedule. "Look at your calendar and think about the benefit versus the cost, time and energy involved in the activity. How much stress will it put on the family?" said Garofalo.

"Parents can set limits and help kids prioritize. We can listen to the kids, but it's our responsibility to set limits. A well-balanced child is a healthy child," said Leichtweis.

Make sure to set aside time for rest. "Children need downtime and a break from organized activity," noted Susan DeLaurentis, director of counseling, St. Stephen's & St. Agnes School in Alexandria. "I think that is important to recognize that if children have been in school all day they've put in a lot."

Finally, experts say encourage activities that children can continue into adulthood like swimming, hiking or running. "With extracurricular activities, what we're doing is setting a foundation for life. It is part of developing well-rounded and balanced community members. We want a child who knows how to work and play," said Leichtweis.