

The Benefits of Extra-Curricular Activities

At a recent Parent Night one of the speakers talked about how important it is to participate in school activities beyond the regular school day (particularly at the secondary level). I want to share some of the reasoning that educators and researchers provide for this kind of statement, particularly in relation to gifted students.

Helen Keller once said, “Life is either a daring adventure or nothing.” Extra-curricular activities (clubs, athletics, enrichment teams, arts, service organizations, camps, etc.) provide adventure and the opportunity to make more of one’s learning—and ultimately, life. In the words of Carol Fertig’s *Raising a Gifted Child: A Parenting Success Handbook*, a good extra-curricular or enrichment program, “offers exposure to opportunities beyond the traditional curriculum and shows young people the possibilities of life.”

Extra-curriculars can be as important as, or even richer than, the learning that happens in the traditional classroom environment. For many gifted kids who are forced to slow down to the pace of their peers during the school day, extra-curriculars provide the meat of their education.

While it is extremely important to avoid over-scheduling our gifted kids (something that happens easily because of their interests) and to allow them to “just be kids” through plenty of unstructured down time, these programs can afford a number of important benefits. Below are some categories of benefit.

Positive relationships with adults who serve as mentors and role models

Characteristically, gifted students relate well to adults and seek their friendship and attention. During the school day such attention-seeking may be construed (by teachers or by peers) as a negative trait, but the more relaxed atmosphere of an extra-curricular activity combined with an adult who leads a group in the child’s interest, allows the opportunity for gifted kids to receive guidance and conversation with good adult role models and may even provide a mentor for the child.

Positive relationships with peers

Many, though certainly not all, gifted kids struggle with the development of appropriate social skills and/or relationships within their peer group. Most extra-curriculars provide opportunities for kids to get to know one another better and to develop skills such as teamwork, communication, and collaboration. Just being a member of a team can provide desired feelings of belonging and bonding for kids.

Stress relief

Stress is common—in fact, prevalent—among gifted kids. As long as a child has chosen the extra-curricular activity for herself, continues to enjoy it throughout the season, and does not use the activity as another means for proving perfectionism (see our December 2011 TIPS assignment on Perfectionism on the Wiki-space at <http://northerncoloradogtparents.wikispaces.com/>), there are significant health benefits associated with the activity due to the stress relief it provides.

Athletics can provide both the benefit of stress relief and the benefit of exercise, something that many students don’t have scheduled into the school day at the secondary level, where recess is not as lengthy, frequent, or active, and physical education may not be on a child’s schedule for a particular semester.

Opening horizons and developing talents

It is common for gifted kids to get stuck in ruts or to define themselves narrowly based on competencies they have already mastered. For some kids the school day is made up of repetitions of proving this same level of mastery while other kids work to catch up to their level. An extra-curricular activity can allow a child who has always defined himself as a reader to move that skill in a new direction through speech and debate offered by becoming a member of the forensics team. The child who has always seen herself as the “math nerd” can discover a new identity on the basketball team. Maybe a child has always had an interest in theater, but has never had time to take a class because his schedule has been full of academics. Serving as a stage-hand or trying out for a part in the school play gives him an opportunity to discover if this is truly an area of interest and talent he’d like to pursue further and refine.

Other kids want to take their knowledge and abilities to a deeper level. A child who is gifted in science may be rewarded and challenged by participating on a robotics team. Another student who has a love for language and is a visual learner may enjoy the challenge that comes from participating in the spelling team or joining the yearbook staff.

School spirit and bonding (if the extracurricular is part of the school)

When students participate in an activities sponsored by their school, the connections they form are not just with other people on their team or in their group. They also form positive associations with the school itself.

According to *What Teens Need to Succeed: Proven, Practical Ways to Shape Your Own Future* by Peter Benson, Judy Galbraith, and Pamela Espeland: “Good things happen—and bad things don’t—when students bond to their schools. Research shows that students who care about school are . . .

- . . . more likely to achieve in school
- . . . more likely to care about their communities
- . . . less likely to get involved with alcohol and other drugs
- . . . less likely to get involved in gangs
- . . . less likely to develop violent behavior
- . . . less likely to drop out.”

Certainly there are other benefits of participation, when an extra-curricular schedule is carefully balanced and monitored to ensure that unstructured downtime and family time are also part of the student’s daily experience. The following resources may be of help when assisting a gifted child’s extra-curricular and educational options. All are available for check-out from the TSD Gifted and Talented Resource and Enrichment Center Library.

- *Being Smart about Gifted Children: A Guidebook for Parents and Educators*, by Dona Matthews and Joanne Foster
- *Raising a Gifted Child: A Parenting Success Handbook*, by Carol Fertig
- *The Teenagers’ Guide to School Outside the Box*, by Rebecca Greene
- *Too Old for This, Too Young for That! Your Survival Guide for the Middle-School Years*, by Harriet Mosatche and Karen Unger.
- *What’s a Parent to Do?* Edited by Mark DeLong and Webb Howell
- *What Teens Need to Succeed: Proven, Practical Ways to Shape Your Own Future*, by Peter Benson, Judy Galbraith, and Pamela Espeland