

Keeping the little'uns busy!



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Undoubtedly, within the driving distance from your home you will discover enough activities to keep the average child occupied for almost every waking minute. However, their availability does not mean that we should automatically seek to buy into all of them. What do we need to consider, then, when making choices on behalf of our pre-school children?

• **Compulsory provision**

In England the compulsory school starting age is five, but the Government is ensuring that the Early Years Foundation Stage curriculum now influences all pre-school provision. Our early years system is among the most formalised in Europe and in direct contrast to most other countries where the starting age for compulsory education is six or seven.

Through supported play, young children explore, develop and use their curiosity and imagination to practice skills, build up ideas and concepts, think creatively and imaginatively and communicate with others as they investigate and solve problems. However, a recent report found that young children were not receiving the play-based education they are supposed to, because teachers feel pressured to prioritise achievements in numeracy, literacy and familiarity with 'proper school' routines. The advent of the foundation stage for three to five year olds seems to be creating an even earlier start to formal schooling.

Most 'experts' say it is not good to start formal education too early. Perhaps there is a link with the recent Unicef report which suggested British children were bottom of the table of happiness and well-being?

Now, parents must also take account of the benefits and costs of participating in the wealth of enrichment opportunities made available to their pre-school children by out-of-school recreational classes.

• **Do out-of-school activities make a difference?**

Certainly, schools which open late and offer out-of-hours clubs and activities are good for improving children's self-confidence. Extended school programmes appear to improve test results and increase parental involvement. American research calls for more opportunities for children to participate in sports, music and the arts, recognising that such participation is associated with very positive outcomes. Certainly, generations of children in this country have thrived on activities provided,

for example, by Cubs and Brownies. On the other hand, the press now reports parents enrolling their children in too many activities, or putting too much pressure on them to do well! We hear of the problems caused by "pushy parents", some of whom are reported to be driving up to 250 miles a week simply to ferry their offspring around a multitude of recreational classes! Strangely though, when a survey asked if they thought that children did too many out of school activities, 60% of parents who responded said 'Yes'!

So it is difficult for us to know where to strike the balance. We know that most children benefit from experiencing a range of activities. We know that children are involved in formal school systems earlier than in most other countries. We know that the school system is perhaps tilting its balance too far away from young children's need for structured play activities. We don't want to be guilty of pushing our young children into unsuitable activities, yet we do want them to benefit from some of the opportunities on offer. So where do we start to make sense of it all?

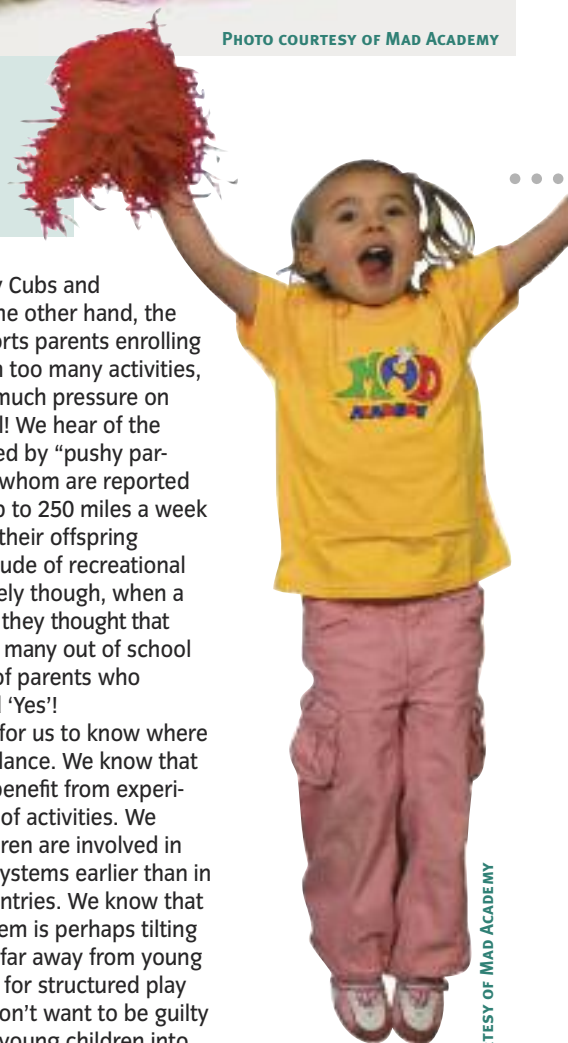


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BY MIKE STEVENSON

• Are they good for pre-school children?

If children are to grow up as happy, balanced and participating people, they need love, time and attention from the adults in their lives. Human history tells us the best body for providing that care is the family. We also want to be models our children imitate in everything they do and learn. But what if you feel that your child is a natural dancer and you are more of a footballer, your child is a Mozart in waiting and you can hardly sing Happy Birthday without making a mess of it? Possibly we can't be the most competent models for everything our children will learn!



So perhaps the answer is to introduce our pre-schoolers, very gently and gradually to the wider world of activity classes, run by experts, but carefully selected and monitored by us. Then, as they grow and become more capable, to allow that contact slowly to increase as we and they feel it appropriate to take on more.

• Making a choice:

First, be sure that you really feel that your child might be ready to benefit from recreational classes. Then, choose a class which will do one of the following

- extend and enrich an existing talent or skill shown by your child,
- reinforce and support an aspect in which the child needs extra attention;
- provide aspects that are missing from the rest of the child's experience, (eg large groups for an only child)

Choose a class which provides a range of activities and experiences.

Above all, make sure that your child enjoys the activities, and wants to participate.

Then attend a 'taster session' to satisfy yourself that those in charge:

- Observe and recognise the different personalities and developmental stages of the children they work with.
- Encourage the children to speak to each other, their parents, and the teachers about what they are doing.
- Recognise and celebrate individual differences and diversity.
- Encourage children to observe, question and extend what they experience.
- Challenge children to think, rather than train them to conform.
- Engage children in challenging activities rather than time-filling ones.
- Help children to make informed choices.
- Foster healthy attitudes to issues like diet, exercise, sleep etc.
- Respect parental wishes and encourage their involvement.
- Encourage co-operation and equality among the groups they work with.
- Encourage respect for others and the natural and made environments. **M&D**



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