Finding the right afterschool program for your family

Afterschool Alliance

Afterschool programs expand learning opportunities for young people of all ages. Afterschool is a creative, fun space that engages kids in hands-on activities, helps them explore new interests, and learn exciting new things. Quality programs are tailored to meet students' different academic, physical, and social-emotional needs. Here's a guide to help you pick the right program for your kids.

Children (5-10) have high energy and creativity, are eager to learn and please, enjoy small groups, respond to simple rules and limits, are beginning to reason, and emphasize fairness. Programs that help them grow and develop their new skills are best. They should offer a wide variety of activities and choices with a set routine. Consider programs that offer:

Opportunities to:

- ask questions about science and technology and think about how they can find the answer
- read aloud, silently, and to talk about books and ideas
- apply arithmetic problems in real-world ways
- try experiences from diverse cultures
- play imaginatively

Activities that involve:

- frequent individual interaction with adults
- games with simple rules
- quiet areas as well as noisy areas
- outside experiences
- clear responsibilities like clean-up
- school day lessons about family and community
- matching, sorting, and ordering
- exposure to professionals and experts from various fields, such as scientists and engineers
- small experiments with everyday products
- nature walks and talks
- physical play without emphasizing competition
- music, dance, and drama

Pre-teens and teens (10-14) have high energy, seek independence but also need praise and approval, identify strongly with peers, want a voice in decisions, like to achieve and be seen as competent, think beyond immediate experience, and often feel awkward and embarrassed in some situations. Programs that help them navigate these years of change and offer a wide variety of choice are ideal. Consider programs that offer:

Opportunities to:

- interact in large and small groups as well as individual recognition
- serve others
- engage in decision making and leadership
- apply school day lessons through performances and projects
- explore subjects in depth
- meet a diverse group of professionals and be exposed to college and career paths
- work on homework with adult and peer help when needed

Activities that involve:

- a connection to real-world experience
- experiences that explore ethics and values with respected adults
- physical activity
- project-based learning in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) to apply concepts learned during the school day
- physical play without emphasizing competition
- games that allow youth to practice basic skills such as checkers, chess, puzzles, and word games
- a wide range of reading with discussion of the ideas found in the books
- experiences built on a wide diversity of cultures and ethnic groups
- music, dance, and drama

Teenagers (14-18) have highly developed motor skills, think abstractly and recognize the diversity of ideas, learn by doing, are more influenced by peers than parents, need and demand more freedom and privacy yet still need praise and adult recognition, are concerned about body and appearance, and often mask their true feelings. Programs that support and engage youth during these years with substantial choice and mentorship can set them up for success. Consider programs that offer:

Opportunities to:

- explore a variety of career paths and college firsthand through meeting a diverse group of professionals
- serve others and contribute to their community
- earn or recover school credit and/or catch up or move ahead with academic interests
- interact in large and small groups as well as gain individual recognition
- exercise decision making and leadership
- participate in research experiences and internships with mentors in industry or at universities
- explore subjects in depth
- discuss and address physical risk, including smoking, drugs, drinking, and sexual activity
- show competence in a public setting
- express feelings through projects and activities
- work on school day projects and papers with library and internet support
- speak with adults one-on-one
- gain specific help in skill areas that are causing problems

Activities that involve:

- real world work experience, ideally with academic credit
- experiences that emphasize reasoning and problem solving in subjects such as art, science, and mathematics
- physical activity
- discussions of diverse ideas and opinions with adults and peers, and exploration of ethics and values