



# Ask BYFS

October 2006

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**Parent Question:** *What do you think is a reasonable amount of after school organized activities (i.e. karate, swimming, soccer) for a first or second grader? Could you give parameters in terms of time or number of activities?*

**BYFS Answer:** Children benefit greatly from structured activities outside of school - as your astute question suggests. These activities are shown to improve academic performance; offer skills like social-emotional, physical, and artistic; and give opportunities for supervision that might not otherwise occur. On the other hand, research is also finding that children need down-time and unstructured activities - just like adults! For safety reasons, each generation of children from the 1950's onward has unfortunately had less and less opportunities for unstructured play, once a hallmark of childhood. Therefore, it is important to maintain a good balance between structure and non-structure at any age. Too many structured activities crowd out a child's ability to have imaginative play - a developmental requirement. So, while one could not recommend a certain time limit or activity limit based purely on age, it would be important to think about your child's overall schedule and whether it is a balanced one as you make your decisions.

Another important thing to think about are the skills being taught in these activities and whether or not your child may be overwhelmed by learning too many things all at the same time - especially if they are all similar (e.g. flute, violin, guitar or karate, softball, and football). Since most skills may be brand new to a 6 or 7 year old and it takes focus to learn new things, scheduling the learning of a brand new skill each day of the week may not allow your child to learn any skill to his or her satisfaction. This will undermine the self-esteem building that is intentioned, not allow for the child to feel success and may only lead to frustration.

Finally, talk with your child about what he or she would like to be doing - especially if they have already been involved in a few after school activities. An activity will not be fun if your child abhors it, but if they are given choices in what their passions may be, the success in that activity will be all the better. That is not to say that you shouldn't encourage your child to try new things, but ultimately your child is learning about themselves and having an outlet to discuss it with you helps them to learn self-reflection little by little. One experienced parent suggests three activities maximum and selecting two activities with them and one for them, thereby encouraging them to do something they might not choose for themselves and that you know will benefit them for life.

Your child can also tell you when enough is enough and how much they are able to handle each week. Let them know you want them to learn new skills and have a balanced schedule and your willingness to partner with them in creating this schedule will add another facet of learning and dimension to your relationship with each other.

For a resource, you might try reading **The Pressured Child : Helping Your Child Find Success in School and Life** by Michael Thompson or **The Hurried Child** by David Elkind.

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The BYFS is here to support and nurture the social, emotional, and developmental needs of children, adults, and families in Bedford. Email your questions to [sueb@town.bedford.ma.us](mailto:sueb@town.bedford.ma.us) and the Bedford Youth and Family Services team (BYFS) will choose one to answer next month. Your name and email will remain confidential.

Be sure to visit the BYFS website at <http://www.town.bedford.ma.us/youth/youthindex.html>.

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