

## After-School Activities Not Only Fun, But Therapeutic

By Jennifer Wake



Tracy and Elizabeth, Xenophon

When seeking a rewarding after-school activity for your child, some parents look for sports they know. Other parents look for ways the activity will remedy a child's shortcomings.

But when your child has a sensory processing disorder (SPD) – which effects a child's ability to properly process sensory information and is common in children with ADHD or autism – Orinda occupational therapist Kristine Hubner-Levin, OTR/L says making sure that

the activity promotes large muscle movement while not being overly competitive is key. Programs with these characteristics can be the difference between a beneficial activity and an overtaxing one.

Recent research has shown that ADD and ADHD effects 10 to 20 percent of the school-age population, while the Centers for Disease Control states the prevalence of autism to be one in every 150 children nationwide.

According to Hubner-Levin, many kids with ADHD or autism have poor motor planning, which affects the ability to interact successfully with their physical environment – to plan, organize, and carry out a sequence of unfamiliar actions. In short: to do what one needs and wants to do. Difficulty in this area can result in children looking clumsy.

Large muscle activities like martial arts, gymnastics or swimming can help with self-regulation. “Kids with ADHD really benefit from activities and sports that provide heavy input to muscles and joints. They are better able to do homework and are in a little calmer place. The worst thing for a student with SPD is to be penalized away from recess,” said Hubner-Levin.

Although there has been an increase in understanding and support of ADHD, autism, and SPD in local schools, some teachers continue to

pull recess time away from students as a form of discipline when they misbehave. “They need big muscle activity throughout the day so they can better listen and learn in class,” Hubner-Levin said.

Fortunately, the Lamorinda area is replete with activities that bolster the proprioceptive system, which helps the body regulate itself. With our culture increasingly doing less hard labor, big muscle after-school activities offer children with SPD a stress-free way to use their bodies to help process sensory input from varying sources and thus improve self-regulation, strength, body-awareness and motor planning.

One sport that takes advantage of the area's outdoor beauty and gives children a chance to work on their non-verbal skills is horseback riding.

For the past 15 years Xenophon Therapeutic Riding Center in Orinda has offered children with varying disabilities individual lessons suited to their unique abilities. “A lot of our children don't have much control in their lives,” said Xenophon executive director and founder Judy Lazarus. “When the kids are on a horse, they have some control of this large animal; they tell it when to go, when to stop. It makes them feel they are in control and gives them a sense of power that they may not get elsewhere.”

“Horseback riding offers heavy proprioceptive input, enhancing balance, motor planning and students can bond with the horse,” Hubner-Levin said. But Hubner-Levin especially values martial arts for kids with ADHD and autism. “It teaches them healthful respect and you only compete with yourself. It fosters respecting one another while enhancing focusing abilities and coordination.”

But, she warns, it must be with the right teacher at the right level.

“You need to be sure the activity is not overly competitive and that the child is placed in an appropriate setting so the child doesn't feel frustrated, but rather can increase his self-confidence,” she said.

Lamorinda Martial Arts in Orinda and the Karate & Fitness Place in Moraga both cater to students of a variety of ages and skill levels. For parents seeking a more therapeutic experience, they can enroll their children in programs like Quest Camp in Alamo, Kids in Motion Gymnastics on Piedmont Avenue in Oakland, or the year-round Special Skater Program at the Oakland Ice Center.

The bottom line, however, is that therapeutic after-school activities don't have to be expensive or complicated. “Take a nature walk, go to the park, go outside where you're breathing the fresh air,” Hubner-Levin said. “Ride your scooter or bike, go to Lafayette Reservoir, play or climb the rock wall, throw a Frisbee on the grass, or simply walk your dog. Turn off the TV and video games – just for a little while – and get out there.”

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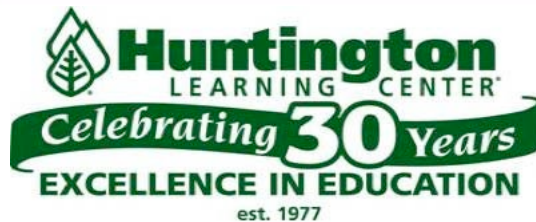
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