**Extracurricular Activities**

Bored? Looking for a new challenge?

You can watch basketball, baseball, track, gymnastics, tennis, aerobics, volleyball, and weight lifting on ESPN, or you can get out and enjoy them by joining your school team. Not into team sports? There's French club, the debating team, chess club, student government, radio, newspaper, yearbook, environmental club, 4-H, drama, choir, photography, Students Against Destructive Decisions, jazz band, Business Professionals of America, computer club, and more.

So many choices can seem overwhelming, but getting involved in new activities with new people is a fun way to challenge yourself. Here are some basics and benefits of getting involved.

**Benefits of Extracurricular Activities**

So what's in it for you? You get to explore your physical, creative, social, political, and career interests with like-minded people. You'll find friends: Trying something different may bring you in contact with people you didn't know who share your interests and curiosity.

You can get involved with groups as a way to get support from other students with your background, such as Latino or Jewish clubs. A club or group also can be a great way to meet people who are different from you. Lots of youth programs bring people together with those who are different as a way to break down the barriers between people. Mark, a senior who lives in Washington, DC, discovered this when he volunteered for a group that uses baseball as a way to bring special-education kids and kids with disabilities together with regular kids.

Participating in extracurricular activities helps you in other ways, too: It looks good on college and job applications and shows admissions officers and employers you're well-rounded and responsible. Specific activities help with specific goals — if you want to teach language or get a bilingual job, being the president of the Spanish club shows the depth of your commitment.

The most basic reason for joining a club or team is that it gives you something better to do than staring at the wall, wandering the hall, or napping all afternoon. People who are involved and engaged are less likely to become addicted to bad habits, like smoking or drinking.

**Finding the Right Activity for You**

Review the activities your school offers and listen to other students' experiences to find an activity that meets your needs. Think about your interests, abilities, and time — is your sister tired of playing chess with you? Do you wish you had more computer time? Are you tired of shooting hoops alone? Are you looking to meet friends or get support? Do you need to increase the appeal of your college application? Don't limit yourself to the familiar — try something new.

Think about different roles within groups that you might want to try — president, captain, participant, leader, support person. Each role is important. Being president teaches you leadership and management skills, but involves more responsibility; being a member gives you structure and is less stressful. You can also lend your skills in areas that are needed, such as using your financial skills to be the treasurer.

**How to Get Involved**

At the beginning of the school year, teachers and principals often have a list of activities to join or make announcements — for example, your history teacher may be the debating team advisor. Look on school bulletin boards and in the school newspaper. Ask friends what they like. Join right away or wait to see how your schedule will be and join later.

Ask questions of the activity advisor before you join. Some things to ask include:

* **Age.** You may have to be a certain age or in a certain grade to join an activity.
* **Fees.** Do you have to pay to join? How much? Are there fees for outings, uniforms, costumes, or other expenses? You may be required to help raise money.
* **Physical.** If you're joining a team, you may need to take a physical. Talking with your family doctor may help you decide whether a team is a good choice for you.
* **Grades.** Many groups require a minimum GPA to join.
* **Time.** If you're involved in competitive sports, you need to have the time to practice and compete. There's also the time it takes to get ready emotionally for a game, and the time you spend getting pizza with the team after games. Team members are often responsible for setting up for a game or helping in other ways. Clubs can meet as infrequently as once every other week, but some teams have practice every day after school and meets on the weekend.

Each school is unique with its own array of offerings, but if you don't find what you want, try a community center or volunteer for a local nonprofit organization or business. Also consider organizations like Youth in Action, a group for teens who want to participate in service projects.

**Too Much of a Good Thing?**

It's easy to join one too many exciting activities. Ask as many questions as possible **before** you join. Sit down with your school schedule, work schedule, and other activities and try to map out what's realistic. Are you taking a class this semester that requires extra studying time? Do you need to focus on grades? Does your bus only come once an hour by the time practice is over instead of every 15 minutes? Will you have time to eat, sleep, and relax? Everyone needs downtime. If an activity adds lots of stress to your life, it's not for you.

Once you've joined an activity, if you feel stressed out, reconsider. It's important to keep a balance between schoolwork, extracurricular activities, a job, social life, and your health. If you join a club and need to quit for any reason, talk with the advisor or coach. Be direct and polite and explain your situation and feelings. Sometimes it's just not the right match for you or it's too time-consuming. Perhaps you can participate in a less time-consuming way or rejoin later. You won't be helping yourself or the group if you frantically do homework during a competition or fall asleep during practice. Saying "no" can be the most mature and responsible thing to do.

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