

# Summer months good time to offer children more involved activities

By Erika Konowalow

During the school year, after-school program time may be split among homework help, arts and crafts and physical fitness activities. In the summer, programming ideas often include themes that allow for longer, more involved activities.

Consider using the next two months of the summer to offer activities with which children might not be familiar. Depending on the activity, the duration could be an hour each day for a week or once a week for a month. Upon completion of the trial period, talk with the children to see if they would be receptive to continuing the activity in the fall.

The late Rich Scofield, editor of *Summer Program Tips, Strategies & Activities*, encouraged after-school staff members to include children in the planning process. "Their investment and interest in any project is important to the project's success. Ask for their ideas, opinions, concerns involving themes, trips, activities. They initially may need adult-contributed choices and ideas to spark their own creativity."

Tracey Spence, director at Ferncliff Daycare in Toronto, Ontario, started offering karate a few years ago during the summer. The idea, which stemmed from interest by the children, was first offered once a week all summer. Because karate builds upon what has been taught and adds to it, the format changed to a one-week program that met for several hours each day.

"It was a good way to harness some of the energy that requires feet to leave the floor," Spence said of the karate classes.

Her program, which includes 56 children ages 6 to 12, allows for children to choose to take part in various activities. The karate sessions were a big draw and appealed to the majority of the children, she said, with an equal number of boys and girls.

Spence credited the karate classes with helping children learn inner discipline as well as providing a good workout.

At Darimar Martial Arts in Gahanna, Ohio, children enrolled in the summer program engage in traditional activities, such as board games, swimming, bowling and archery, as well as learning Tae Kwon Do and Korean.

Cynthia Jang, general manager, said the instructors use a lot of Korean when teaching Tae Kwon Do, so it makes sense for the children to get an understanding of the language.

"We teach it in fun ways," Jang said. "They learn from singing, moving and having very light conversations."

Introducing a language is an activity that might be good to undertake in the summer. Rocio Quispe-Agnoli, an associate professor of Hispanic studies at Michigan State University, said the younger that one is introduced to a foreign language, the better.



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Use the summer months as an opportunity for the children and youth in your program to dive into new activities.

"Children are sponges. Their ability to learn a foreign language is far higher than an adult."

Quispe-Agnoli said learning a language helps a person think in a different way.

"Since you become more open and tolerant to diversity in the world, it trains your brain to be more flexible." And as children get older, a continued study of a language can help them professionally, too, she said.

Quispe-Agnoli encourages formal training, but said the key to any language course is constancy. A course could be offered every day or three times a week, she said, but it must be continued each week.

Paul Young, author of *Principal Matters — 101 Tips for Creating Collaborative Relationships Between After-School Programs and School Leaders*, suggests that after-school programs invite volunteers to teach a second language to the children and to incorporate cultural information.

"Wonderful partnerships will develop that will support your mission. Children will experience a learning opportunity they might not receive elsewhere. They will learn to understand other people and understand their world from an enlightened perspective," Young writes.

Another important factor in learning a language is the support of the parents, Quispe-Agnoli said. If possible, provide lesson sheets that the children can share with their parents to encourage practice of the language at home.

"The parent doesn't need to become fluent," Quispe-Agnoli said. But the parents' recognition of the value of a second language will resonate with the child.

Another activity that works well when programs have larger blocks of time is cooking. Michelle Stern, a former high school science teacher, started What's Cooking, a cooking program for children, in 2004. The San Rafael, Calif., company provides cooking activities in schools and for after-school programs.

Stern's focus, in addition to teaching cooking basics, is to teach healthful eating and life skills that are a part of learning to cook. The classes offer educational and emotional benefits, she said.

From an educational standpoint, children learn language acquisition — "learning to follow written and verbal directions" — cause and effect, science investigation and expectation, math and "an edible outcome, which is an added bonus," Stern said.

The emotional benefits Stern cited are an improvement in self-esteem and confidence as children learn to use a tool or master a technique; learn to cooperate and share with other children; and boost their creativity as "they can play with food in a good way."

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Rochelle Gretchman-Dibley, recreation supervisor for San Rafael Community Services, said the cooking program has been so well received during the school year that they have to turn applicants away. During the half-day summer camp, up to 20 children, ages 6 to 12, take part in the program.

Gretchman-Dibley said Stern and her staff use ingredients with which the children may be unfamiliar, such as a persimmon, but present the cooking information in such a way that they are very accepting of cooking with and eating new foods.

"They're more involved in the process, so they're more likely to try something new," Gretchman-Dibley said.

Stern, who also provides training as a consultant to teachers and after-school professionals, said a kitchen isn't necessary to offer a cooking component.

"If a kitchen is unavailable, a room with a sink and hot water is the next best thing. It is amazing what can be taught with an electric skillet, blender, Cuisinart or rice cooker," Stern said.

In fact, many activities can be modified to meet an after-school setting. The United States Tennis Association introduced QuickStart Tennis in 2008. The program teaches the sport using

tennis equipment modified for young children.

Linda Mann, managing director for community outreach and advocacy for USTA Eastern, said tennis provides players with friendship, fitness and fun and that it's considered a "sport for a lifetime."

Playing tennis helps develop strategy and analytical skills and offers high cardio benefits, Mann said.

Harold Holcomb of Bay City, Mich., has coached tennis for nearly 30 years. He credits tennis with helping people strengthen their ability to adapt to change, work well with others, develop a strong work ethic and be creative.

"I compare it to life in many ways," Holcomb said. "The skills are very important, of course, but the development of self-confidence, character and decision-making skills are some of the most obvious traits observed."

Mann said the greatest strength is tennis' social and networking aspect. "It's a universal sport," Mann said. "The rules are the same here and in a foreign country."

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Even if your summer school program doesn't have tennis courts, don't let that stop you from offering tennis to the children. Susan Mann with the United States Tennis Association Eastern said a court can be created in any area and the court size can be modified.

### Tips from peers and pros

- Tracey Spence of Ferncliff Daycare recommends checking with companies whose business might be slow during the summer and be willing to offer summer school programs a discount on services. This summer, as part of her program's pirate theme week, the group is getting to visit a tall ship. The regular rate is \$45 per person, but she was able to negotiate a reduced rate for 100 children for a morning tour.
- The United States Tennis Association has resources available for programs interested in offering tennis. Go to [www.usta.com](http://www.usta.com), click on the "Find a Section" dropdown map in the upper right and click on your state. Linda Mann with USTA Eastern said programs that sign up as an organization member can receive instruction and equipment in return for the \$35 yearly fee.
- Promote healthful eating habits through cooking activities, even if your program doesn't have a kitchen. Michelle Stern of What's Cooking ([www.whatscooking.info](http://www.whatscooking.info)) said numerous dishes can be made without heat or electricity, such as spring rolls, salads and sandwiches.
- Paul Young, author of *Principal Matters*, recommends the use of volunteers. They can be recruited "from high schools, colleges, businesses, civic and community service groups, government agencies, faith-based organizations, senior citizen centers, assisted-living facilities, nursing homes and parent and family sources."