

Do extracurricular activities always give children a head start? Research says maybe not

November 15 2023, by Xiaoyan Jin and Jiawei Xu



Researchers say the impact of extracurricular activities on young children depends on several factors. Credit: Pixabay

In China, there is an old saying, "Don't let your children lose on the

starting line." It highlights parents' desire to jumpstart their child's early development. Especially in recent years, parents have become increasingly anxious about their children's education, making it a trend to encourage children to participate in extracurricular activities from an early age. But is participating in extracurricular classes always advantageous for young children?

Recently, [a study](#) published in the *Journal of School Psychology* found that extracurricular activities don't always improve a child's skills or behavior.

The study was led by Dr. Lixin Ren, an associate professor in the Academy of Future Education at Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University, China. She says, "Children's ability to manage and regulate their behavior, and their attitude to learning, can affect the outcome of extracurricular activities. And the outcome depends on the range of activities, as well as the intensity—how often and for how long they take part."

Dr. Ren says, "I observed that many parents invest a significant amount of their family's [financial resources](#) in extracurricular activities for preschool children. Therefore, I wanted to use [scientific research](#) to explore the role of these activities in [child development](#) and whether they are truly needed for [young children](#)."

Focusing on behavior

A child's mathematical ability is often a major concern for Chinese parents. Dr. Ren's study looked at how extracurricular activities affected [math skills](#) in 317 [preschool children](#) in Shanghai, China, between the ages of three and six.

The team found that the impact of extracurricular activities on children

was dependent on several factors, particularly their behavioral regulation abilities and approaches to learning.

Dr. Ren explains, "Essential behavioral regulation skills include focusing and maintaining attention on tasks, following instructions, tuning out irrelevant information, and inhibiting inappropriate actions. Approaches to learning describe a child's initiative, persistence, curiosity, and motivation in learning situations.

"We found that for children with poor behavioral regulation or less positive approaches to learning, actively participating in a wide range of activities can improve their early mathematical skills.

"This may be because children with poorer self-regulation skills require structured, organized, and managed learning environments. However, for children with good behavioral regulation or positive approaches to learning, the effects of extracurricular activities are not significant," continues Dr. Ren.

She further elaborates, "In terms of the intensity of extracurricular activities, for children with poor self-regulation skills, participating in extracurricular activities for long hours each day is detrimental to their development of mathematical ability."

"Even for children with good self-regulation skills, positive effects gradually turn into negative influences after reaching a certain peak level of participation. In this study, the threshold was 9.08 hours a week. However, this threshold cannot be used as a definitive cut-off, as more studies are needed to understand if this is representative of the whole population."

It is worth noting that the study also found that extracurricular activities have a limited positive impact on children's Chinese word reading and

vocabulary comprehension. Dr. Ren says, "This may be due to the different cognitive resources required for mathematics and language, with mathematics requiring more formal teaching settings and intensity, while language comprehension occurs more in informal interpersonal communication."

Offering alternatives

Dr. Ren hopes that parents will not overly rely on the impact of extracurricular activities and avoid excessive anxiety over their children's development. She provided some suggestions for parents.

"If you find that your child has poor self-regulation skills, you could let them try a larger variety of extracurricular activities to find their interests," she says. "You can also engage in more family-inclusive educational activities to increase interaction with your children."

She also notes, "The relationship between children's engagement in educational activities and academic readiness varies depending on their self-regulation and approaches to learning. Therefore, instructors of [extracurricular activities](#) should use developmentally appropriate methods to provide educational activities for young children, such as creating interactive and responsive environments and allowing flexibility in adjusting the curriculum.

"The designers of educational activities need to consider the individual characteristics of each child to ensure that every child benefits from participation," says Dr. Ren.

Although current research mainly focuses on extracurricular educational activities, the findings from this study also have important implications for schools.

Dr. Ren says, "In China, many early childhood education activities are provided by commercial organizations, which adds to the cost and travel time for families.

"Most children in China are overscheduled nowadays. Perhaps [children](#) should be allowed more free time instead of having to attend more structured activities."

More information: Lixin Ren et al, Behavioral regulation and approaches to learning: Moderators of the association between extracurricular involvement and academic readiness, *Journal of School Psychology* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jsp.2023.101250](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsp.2023.101250)

Provided by Xi'an jiaotong-Liverpool University

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