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After the Bell Rings

Finding the perfect afterschool program is a challenge for parents. Expert advice helps them make the right choices. By Megan Fazekas

August 01, 2006 - For many local families, the need for child care doesn't end when their child goes off to school. School hours rarely, if ever, coincide with business hours. Every day working parents all over the Triangle struggle to accommodate school schedules. The lucky ones enjoy flexibility at work that allows them to pick up their children or meet them at home when the school day ends. For the not-so-lucky ones — and their employers — quality afterschool programs are a must.

Afterschool programs are good for parents and children.

"The primary benefit of parents having their child in an afterschool program is not having to worry about "What could happen while I'm at work and she's home alone?" says Polly Allegra, a school-age specialist at Child Care Services Association (CCSA), a nonprofit ensuring affordable, accessible, high quality child care for all families in the Triangle. "They don't have to worry about strangers coming into the house," Allegra says, "or if she is doing her homework and eating right. With a quality afterschool program, all of their worries should be gone."

There are countless other benefits to putting children in afterschool care. And not just for the parents. Children benefit from quality programs that offer homework assistance, nutritious snacks, organized activities, time for socialization and plenty of physical activity.

Keeping children active after school is just as important as academic time. Ephesus Elementary School's afterschool program, a five-star state licensed program in Chapel Hill, offers a variety of different activities from which the children can choose.

"Kids like gym games the most, such as kick ball and dodge ball," reports Jamie Harrison, the afterschool site director at Ephesus. "They also really like cooking activities and art projects, and the older kids like to socialize, especially the girls."

A balanced curriculum is best.

There are many options for and benefits of school age-care. In addition to being located at schools and child care centers, programs can be at recreation centers, churches, family child care homes and youth organizations. School-age programs may or may not be licensed by the state and may be accredited by the National Afterschool Association (www.naaweb.org).

It is important to find an afterschool program that offers equal amounts of fun, planned activities and academic time. Ephesus seems to have struck just such a balance. "We're not academically based, but it is a benefit that we are located in a school," says Harrison. "We have tutors and teachers

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who sometimes come in to help children with their homework."

It's also important for parents to find a program that matches their family values. According to Robin Sarine, director at The Clubhouse @ Bright Horizons, a five-star center in Cary, the curriculum and care providers at the center stress the same morals and values that the children are learning in school and at home. "Children need to be in a place that will challenge them to have social relationships with others and get them off the computer. It is important for children to be involved with caring adults while having fun," she says.

Visit potential programs before making a final choice.

The best way to determine if a program has found an appropriate balance between social activities and academics is through first-hand experience and thorough research. School-age specialists recommend the following series of steps for parents to take to find the right program:

Visit the program during the hours schoolchildren are present. Don't schedule an appointment; just drop in. Ask staff members about teacher education and experience and about the child/teacher ratios. There should be a low ratio of students to teachers. Ask about transportation from the school to the program, if applicable. Look for positive interactions between the staff and children. Watch for proper hand washing, and make sure staff members are certified in CPR and First Aid.

Review the daily schedule and lesson plans, both of which should be posted for parents. Be sure the program offers activities that interest the child. Observe the space to make sure it's clean and that there are age appropriate materials. Ask about the educational credentials of staff to be sure they have the foundation of knowledge they need to work with school-age children. Also look for programs that actively involve parents and welcome their participation.

The final thing to consider is whether or not the program meets your family's scheduling needs. Linda Chappel, the executive director for Community Education at Durham Public Schools, encourages parents to examine their work and home routines before selecting an afterschool program. "We tell parents to think about how scheduled their child's life is and to pick a program based on those needs," she says. "Parents often have to pick programs based on convenience. If they do that, we encourage them to stay as involved as possible."

Don't let cost scare you away.

Typical fees for licensed afterschool programs range between \$150 to more than \$300 a month. Financial assistance is available through Wake County Human Services, Durham's Alliance for Child Care Access (DACCA), Orange County Department of Social Services and CCSA, although long waiting lists are often a problem. Some programs also offer their own scholarships for families. If you need help paying, you should always ask the program you are interested in for assistance.

"I get help from DACCA," says Sonia Locke, a single mother of two in Durham. "If I had to pay the whole thing out of pocket, then it would be very expensive. Now, I only pay \$200 a month."

Some programs cater to non-traditional schedules.

School-age programs are also offered for track-out and year round schools, teacher work days and summer camps. The Clubhouse @ Bright Horizons is one example. The center works with the parents of children with all kinds of school schedules. And although there are only 135 spaces available in the center, creative scheduling that takes into account all of the variations in local school schedules allows the center to accommodate more than 800 children a year.

With a little guidance from the experts, parents can navigate the waters of afterschool child care to find just the right program. In the end, your search will be well worth the time and effort. Because the right match makes all the difference to you, your employer and, most importantly, your child.

Megan Fazekas is a communications associate with Child Care Services Association.

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
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