



9 Extracurricular Activities for the Youngest Set

By Sue Douglass Fliess

To schedule, but not over-schedule. That is the dilemma. With a multitude of options in such convenient proximity to our homes, it is nearly impossible *not* to register our preschoolers for some type of enrichment class. How can one resist a class through the Young Chef's Academy, TinyTreks or the Community School of Music and Art? Here is a sampling of what you can expect to find when you query like-minded moms and research this area:

1 Community School of Music and Art (arts4all.org)

Located in Mountain View, the CSMA is a gold mine for art and music classes for kids of all ages. In addition to classes offered at the campus itself, the Arts in Action program offers camps in the summer, which are often a good litmus test for enrolling in an ongoing art or music program during the year.

CSMA's preschool program "is designed to create

Above: Preschoolers can improve their gross motor development and have fun at classes like those offered at The Little Gym.

age-appropriate experiences in art and music for children from 18 months through age 4," says Linda Covello, CSMA art school director. The very youngest children explore through process-oriented classes and progress in their skills and experiences as they are introduced to art and music from around the world. These classes help children develop fine motor skills, listening skills and the basic language of art and music as they build imagination and creative expression.

Unique about these preschool classes is that parents attend the classes and learn the use of art materials and songs along with the children, in order to continue the experience at home.

2 Happy Hollow Park and Zoo (hhpz.org)

While this Bay Area landmark may not offer on-going classes, it is a hot spot for ongoing education and fun. The expansive park and zoo reopened in March, boasting its \$72 million green renovation that includes 12 acres of existing ride areas and Zoo. There are four additional acres that offer several new animal exhibits, veterinary and commissary buildings, an Education Center, Guest Services and Gift Shop, a restaurant, a new parking lot and a pedestrian bridge. Happy Hollow staff also perform puppet shows that are sure to delight. Entrance fee is \$12 for ages 2 - 69 (0-1 is free), or you can become a member.

3 Hiruko Center (hirukocenter.com)

A unique form of martial arts that focuses on healing while teaching the skills of Tae Kwan Do, Hiruko is a holistic wellness model that incorporates integrity, innovation, action and connection. Based in Palo Alto, classes are offered for ages 3 and up.

"The founders and teachers at Hiruko Center in Palo Alto do an amazing job of teaching children of all abilities the

fundamentals of Tae Kwan Do in a safe and nurturing setting that feels like a team," says Stephanie Nelson of Mountain View. "The kids learn about keeping safe and treating others with respect, while focusing your eyes, mind and body, and most importantly, having fun."

4 Juguemos en Español/Let's Play in Spanish (letsplayinspanish.com)

Juguemos en Español, or Let's Play in Spanish, teaches toddlers through kindergarteners the Spanish language in an energetic and effective way. They offer parent participation or drop-off classes in various locations throughout the Bay Area, from Santa Cruz to San Francisco. Founder Suzy

Dorn is a musician who has written numerous catchy songs in Spanish that make learning fun. Instructors are musically-inclined and use puppets. All activities are hands-on.

5 Kidz Love Soccer (kidzlovesoccer.com)

Founded more than 30 years ago, Kidz Love Soccer caters to a wide range of ages, from 2 1/2 to 12-years-old and is the perfect introduction to sports. The program teaches basic soccer skills in a non-competitive environment for the youngest child who just wants to kick the ball around and learn the basics. The program grows gradually competitive as the child's skill level increases. There are many class

times to choose from and camps are offered in the summers. Kidz Love Soccer spans locations from San Jose to Millbrae.

6 The Little Gym (thelittlegym.com)

With locations from Morgan Hill to Millbrae, The Little Gym gives kids the cardiovascular workout they need. It offers a wide range of classes that include karate, gymnastics, dance, sports and cheerleading. Parent-child classes start as young as 4 months old, and there are drop-off classes when kids are ready. In this program, kids are preparing their



The Community School of Music and Art offers classes for children starting at 18 months old.

Quick Tips for Scouting Out Other Activities

■ Check out your local city recreation center for inexpensive classes - a great place to try a sport on for size, or to see if your child is interested in the arts without running out and purchasing a piano.

■ Your local library offers baby and toddler classes, story time, puppet shows and other learning programs.

Because they are typically free, you may need to sign up in advance and quickly.

■ Your local YMCA is a great resource for youth activities. Most YMCAs run parent-baby development classes and offer youth sports, including basketball, karate, swimming, flag football and even skateboarding.



bodies with better balance, gross motor skills and hand-eye coordination, while simultaneously improving listening skills for preschool and kindergarten.

"I love the Little Gym because their philosophy mirrors my own parenting philosophy. Children are natural explorers. Adults can guide them and help keep them safe as they learn and grow. I have tremendous respect for all of the Little Gym teachers," says Beth Leonard of Sunnyvale.

The Little Gym offers birthday parties, parents' nights out and camps. You can sign up for an entire week, or just one day, or even a half-day, during their camp weeks.

7 Music Together (musictogether.com)

Music Together, around since 1987, is a parent (or grown-up) and tot music class that exposes children to and engages them in research-based, developmentally-appropriate musical activities. The price is reasonable and the locations are abundant, and upon enrollment, you receive a CD and a songbook (per semester).

"The two things that I love most about Music Together," says Kristine Lundgren Ortega, the program's director, "are that we're a research-based program and that our program allows for participants to uncover their own genuine relationship with music."

In class, parents are encouraged to find their own authentic musical expressions and the children follow their lead. Classes are 45 minutes for 10 weeks, and offered to a wide age range, so it is often easy to have more than one child in the same class, which spells convenience for Mom or Dad.

8 Tiny Treks (tinytreks.com)

Is your child more interested in picking up sticks and collecting leaves than playing with cars or dolls? Does he or she have more energy than you know how to expend? If you've got the outdoorsy-type, Tiny Treks may be a good fit.

Left: If your child loves the outdoors, a program like Tiny Treks, which explores different venues each week, could be perfect.

Below: Parents and kids play with melody and rhythm in Music Together's developmental offerings.



They offer Mommy and Me classes for 2- and 3-year-olds and they visit a new outdoor location each week of the semester.

"Before the 'No Child Left Inside' Act made it trendy, Tiny Treks has been offering the real deal - a weekly outdoor preschool day with singing, exploring and enjoying the great outdoors," says Patricia Jennings of Los Altos. All three of her children participated. "Come rain or shine, the instructors were always enthusiastic and shared their infectious love for nature in a way preschoolers and their younger siblings could appreciate."

Activities include short hikes, music, art projects and games, kite-flying, meadow play, splashing in creeks and visiting the area's historical farms. It's like an Outward bound for toddlers.

9 Young Chef's Academy (youngchefsacademy.com)

How early should kids start in kitchen? How about 2½-years-old? At Young Chef's Academy, kids can try their hands at measuring, stirring, baking and making food, encouraging a love of cooking at an early age. They'll learn how to prepare foods, be safe in the kitchen, set a table and even plan a menu. Each class runs an hour and costs approximately \$25.

In an area full of some of the country's most brilliant and innovative minds, it is no surprise that the Bay Area has much to offer in the way of classes, activities and opportunities for growth that will strike your child's fancy (and yours!). ■

Sue Douglass Fless is a Mountain View mother of two. Her first children's book, *Shoes for Me*, is set to be published in 2011.