

Working Title: 27 After-School Programs Specifically Designed To Enrich Your Child!
No Thank You.

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Since entering Kindergarten this fall, my five-year-old daughter has received informational flyers about 27 after-school programs. While the content of these programs varies — STEM, Mediterranean Cooking, Pickleball, Modular Origami! — each comes with the same promise: enrichment.

For \$150, my daughter can be enriched by learning from a former UCLA All-American how to spike a volleyball. For \$175, she can be enriched by learning from a NASA scientist how to build a space satellite. And for \$200, she can be enriched by learning from a world-renowned Japanese artist how to fold an origami paper crane worthy of the Sadako statue in Hiroshima Peace Park.

Browsing through these enrichment opportunities, I can't help but reflect upon how *unenriched* my childhood was. The only after-school program I participated in was gym hockey, and this wasn't until sixth grade. Gym hockey was coached by a man named John Sparrow, who was low on praise but high on cross-checking (and possibly marijuana). The enrichment came when we lost the championship game, 2-1, to our rival elementary school. After, Coach Sparrow had this to say: "There is a lot of losing in life. May as well get used to it."

To be clear, I'm not dissing modern after-school programs. They are staffed by dedicated professionals and volunteers who expose children to the wonders and joys of science and cinematography and sports. Further, they give working parents the peace of mind that comes with knowing their children have safe, nurturing environments to go to after school.

What I'm skeptical about is society's relentless push for more and more organized activities for its youngest children. Whereas children in previous decades enjoyed vast amounts of unsupervised down time, today's young people seem to exist on a steady diet of regimented, adult-driven activities. Even Kindergarten, which was once a play-based institution, has become highly academic and structured, with reading groups and learning stations and nightly homework. My daughter is enjoying school this year, but at the end of the day she is toasted. She's had eight full hours of enrichment, and by 3:00 she wants nothing more than to get home and chill out.

Still, it's difficult for me to not register Ellie for at least one of these enrichment programs. We're new to the neighborhood, and many of her classmates are participating in them. By keeping her on the sideline, perhaps I am denying my daughter the chance to develop and grow new friendships? Or the chance to fulfill her potential as an artist? Or the chance at a coveted college athletic scholarship? Possibly. But as I contemplate Tremendous Tennis (offered on Tuesdays and Thursdays and taught by a former Wimbledon doubles player!), I realize that a fear of missing out — or FOMO — doesn't justify loading my daughter up with more instruction, expertise, organization, and enrichment. At this stage of her development, I want her to experience less of all four.

Instead, I'm desperately trying to gift my daughter a childhood that is as unregimented as possible. So I pick Ellie up from school, and we go home. She grabs a cookie, and then settles onto the couch for an episode or four of My Little Pony. Because she loves

My Little Pony. And she needs some alone time. And her brain needs to cool down. And when My Little Pony is over, she may play *SORRY!* against her menagerie of stuffed animals; or make her 117th Christmas list written in purple highlighter scribble scabble; or engage with her older sister in a fiercely absurd version of backyard ‘tennis’ that includes badminton rackets with broken strings, a volleyball, multiple arguments, and the potential for minor injuries and major tantrums. When all of this is over, it’s time for another cookie and a walk to the park, where we might bash tennis balls around with mini golf clubs, or pretend to be Pinkie Pie and Applejack on a top-secret mission to Canterlot. And so on and so on, until it’s time for dinner, a bath, and bed.

After-school enrichment programs may well be in Ellie’s future. However, I see the unstructured time my young daughter now enjoys as her opportunity for true enrichment. It’s her chance to relax, be imaginative, build forts, solve problems, create increasingly inane knock-knock jokes, and argue with and compete against her sister. Most important, it’s Ellie’s chance to be bored, and then figure out how to get unbored. For my money, there is no better enrichment than that.