

Junior School

Nurturing Young Minds: *The holistic role of co-curricular activities*

For a number of years now, a Cranbrook Junior School student's school day no longer starts at 8.30am and finishes at 3.15pm. From before 7am until after 4.30pm every school day, the Junior School welcomes students onto campus to participate in a variety of compulsory and optional co-curricular groups that broaden and enhance their school learning experience. With our underpinning value of 'honouring each student's individuality', these activities can be a powerful way for students to explore interests outside of the usual school curriculum and make connections with others who share similar interests.



COMPULSORY CO-CURRICULAR ACTIVITIES begin in Year 3 for all our students who engage in sport across the school year. Weekly training for basketball, soccer, cricket, rugby, water polo, sailing, multisport or tennis takes place before or after the normal school, depending on the season. These sessions supplement the in-school sports training that occurs each Friday afternoon after lunch and the weekly Physical Education and Fundamental Movement classes taught across P-Year 6. With specialised coaches, as well as staff managers, these sessions allow in depth time for the teaching and repeated practice of key skills and techniques essential for each sport. Importantly, these activities also instil a sense of discipline and time management. Children learn from an early age the importance of regular practice and maintaining a routine, which are valuable habits for a balanced and organised life.

From Year 2 on, opportunities to audition for musical groups are provided. On top of a comprehensive weekly P-Y6 classroom Music programme, which from Kindergarten includes a fortnightly year level choir lesson and compulsory string, or brass and woodwind instrumental lessons in Years 2 and 3, there are ensembles for almost every instrument and level. These groups allow students the thrill and challenge of learning to perform in a group: for example, guitar and string ensembles, auditioned choirs, bands and orchestra.

Students in the Junior School have fortnightly drama lessons with our Drama Specialist Teacher, as part of their normal school offering. In Year 5, all students are invited to audition for the annual Junior School play which is performed in late Term 3. A large percentage of the cohort will form part of the

cast or crew, adding a commitment of up to two additional rehearsal afternoons after school each week, as well as several weekend rehearsals, over two terms. Although a big commitment for the students involved, it is one that brings wonderful opportunities to form a different sort of team or ensemble, and the experience can be the start of a passion for dramatic performance and engagement that is carried into the students' Senior School years. These activities play a vital role in supporting emotional development. They offer an outlet for self-expression and creativity, allowing children to explore their emotions in a safe manner.

The skills acquired in ensemble performances, be they musical or dramatic, like those honed playing team sport, are transferrable to so many other life situations: the capacity to work as a team for a united purpose; the ability to listen to and respond to colleagues to make better long term decisions; the skill of working collaboratively to improve overall performance of the group; and the ability to lose or fail - and know how to come back and start again - are just a few soft skills that are being practised every week by every student taking part in these training sessions. You can learn about soft skills, but it is the regular usage of them in real situations that makes them part of who you are.

Engaging in group activities, whether it be a team sport or a drama production, cultivates teamwork, cooperation, and leadership skills. These experiences teach children to communicate effectively, resolve conflicts, and collaborate towards common goals.

In addition to these weekly opportunities, and the provision of before and after school care available from 7am until 6pm each day of the school term, Cranbrook also hosts between 45 - 50 optional co-curricular activities for students between Years 1-6, resulting in hundreds of students engaging in one or two of these groups every week. The activities change every term to allow a student the chance to try something new without a lengthy commitment.

The range is enormous and includes options to learn or enhance a sporting skill (cross country, cricket, sailing, rugby, football, basketball, multisport, tennis or martial arts), or pursue other interests, for example, coding, LegoTechnic, robotics, debating, French, speech and drama, dance, drawing, ceramics, printing, or chess. The Cranbrook Swim School also offers swimming lessons and squad sessions for all levels. New optional activities are considered every year, with an eye to provide variety and things of interest for all students.

It is important for balanced, healthy development to allow children unstructured or free play time regularly, but involvement in one or two of these optional co-curricular activities weekly can bring some wonderful benefits too.

By broadening the usual school curriculum and allowing more time to engage in an area of

keen interest, these activities can help fuel a passion for life, deepen key skills or build confidence in an area where a student might feel less capable. All of these can enhance a student's overall development more broadly.

For students newer to the school, involvement in optional co-curricular sessions can help expand friendship opportunities and groupings, which are so important for a child as they start to become part of the school community and feel at home in the environment.

Optional co-curricular experiences can also provide the chance for a child to try something new. If this is not a natural area of strength for a student, these sessions can be a safe and supportive way to help a child develop greater confidence when approaching change or challenge. Building the skills to be able to be brave in such contexts helps students to grow and develop genuine resilience.

Furthermore, facing challenges and setbacks in these activities builds resilience. Whether it's losing a game, facing a difficult piece of music, or dealing with a failed experiment, children learn to persevere and bounce back from disappointments. This resilience is a vital life skill that will serve them well beyond their school years.

Regular engagement in optional co-curricular activities often brings children into contact with students in different year levels or outside of their usual friendship groups. Interest in the activity is the link and so children can find others who share their passion. As students get older, connection with others through shared interests can be significant emotionally and socially. Engagement in constructive and positive co-curricular experiences often helps them find a supportive tribe. Making a genuine connection with others over a shared passion is something that research has repeatedly shown to be vital for our children as they move towards puberty and the teenage years.

By participating in a variety of different activities over their time in the Junior School, students can come to learn more about themselves, foster their own personal passions, explore new interests, harness skills about how to work alongside others and develop the capacity to appreciate differences, as well as similarities, between people. Balancing time for free play with some structured co-curricular activities can allow our children to make the most of all things on offer and assist in developing the soft skills they will need as they grow up into useful and positive members of society. ■

