

# FT Weekend

Saturday June 26/Sunday June 27 2004

## Why I want my five-year-old to learn the cello

If social commentators are to be believed, affluent parents are hot housing their children to a damaging degree, says Anna Blundy. Six months isn't early enough to get them started on gymnastic and music classes. Mothers stand in desperate tears outside exclusive toddler activity groups to which they failed to subscribe in time.

The effect on the children is, we are told, catastrophic. With so much parental pressure, the poor mites are not allowed to flourish as human beings in their own right.

Of course, any parent who actually looks after her or his children will tell you that this point of view is ludicrous beyond belief. Parents do not sign their children up for endless extra-curricular activities because they want to make them more successful barristers, merchant bankers or concert pianists in later life. They are not stopping their children playing in order to fill their brains with information designed to make them more effective competitors.

No, anyone who has ever watched babies or toddlers at a Gymboree class will observe that the little poppets are, quite plainly, having fun. The reason that Early Ear classes on New York's Upper East Side are so difficult for aspiring parents to squeeze their child into is that they are fantastic. Not from the point of view of producing a genius, but from a sheer, unadulterated fun-that-is-not-available-at-home point of view. Every week the children sit in a circle and sing songs. An instrument is produced and a musician plays a tune on it before all the boys and girls get to have a go. There are bubbles, stickers and a sweet. The idea that parents should somehow be vilified for wanting their child to participate in this frenzy of pleasantness is seriously odd.

For those not in the know, Gymboree classes do not involve sitting behind a desk being taught Latin grammar with flogging as an incentive to excellence. They involve children rolling around on soft furniture, playing with balls, bursting bubbles, clapping and occasionally jumping up and down under a multi-coloured parachute.

Extra-curricular activities ensure that your child has fun every now and then. Anyone with toddlers knows that the day can go very very slowly. Frankly, a parent at home needs all the help they can get. For only a truly saintly (psychotic?) parent would sit at home providing the kind of

amusements that clubs and classes provide. "Right. Let's get out all the enormous brightly coloured cubes of foam now and sing 'Everybody Up and Let's Go Under'," you might decide, just before you unpack the shopping and cook supper. I don't think so.

Going to ballet or gymnastics, swimming or music is fun. After school my five-year-old son does ballet, cycling club, physical theatre club, art club, two cello lessons (actually one of those is at 8am on Wednesday morning) and a Royal Academy musicality class on Saturdays. There is plenty of time for playgrounds and hurtling around pretending to be Spiderman too, but without all the activities his life would consist of going to school and sloping around with mum. Neither of us would be too impressed by that.



Musical geniuses in the making?