

Coding aged six, yoga at three:

the new after-school clubs

Forget football. Rachel Carlyle meets the mother who thinks children should be building apps and learning business skills in their spare time

Nicolas is 7: he does yoga and taekwondo and has tackled basic computer coding. His 11-year-old sister, Fariba, does a weekly Mandarin class, is studying the Korean martial art Tang Soo Do as well as yoga, piano and netball. She can also write JavaScript. Frankly, it all sounds a bit terrifyingly tiger mother, but the children's mother, the award-winning architect Yasmine Mahmoudieh, insists that they are doing no more after-school activities than most British children. It's just that they are more carefully chosen to foster the skills that today's generation of children will need when they are adults.

There's nothing wrong with football club or cupcake-making, Mahmoudieh says, but what children will really need to know in the rapidly shifting digital economy that awaits them are computer coding, philosophy, entrepreneurship, languages and creative thinking — most of which aren't well served by the national curriculum.

Mahmoudieh is so passionate in her belief that children should be exposed to as many mind-enhancing activities as possible from a young age that she has set aside

her highly successful international design business to set up a website for parents to find high-quality and strategically chosen after-school, weekend and holiday activities. There are already hundreds of events and classes listed on myKidsy.com, most of which are in London. She is in talks with influential collaborators such as Alan O'Donoghue, the children's coding guru and Lorraine Allman, the children's enterprise specialist. She also has the backing of Google, which is hosting some classes.

"Every child needs these skills," Mahmoudieh says, "and they need to discover their passion, to find out what they are good at, preferably before they hit the mid-teenage years and we're suddenly asking them: 'What do you want to do with the rest of your life?' How will they find out if parents don't guide them and show them what's out there to try? It's never too early to start: my son is only 7, but he has already tried very basic computer coding."

She believes all children should learn coding from around 6. When she couldn't find suitable weekly classes she contacted the leading not-for-profit coding group, CoderDojo, and set up her own free classes at Google's Campus London, where she has her office. The first one was two weeks ago and they run for six weeks for 7 to 12-year-olds. The aim is to offer them all over London from next year and then farther afield.

"In the past, children had to learn to read and write, now it's read and code," she says. "It's the language, the literacy, the future. I'm not saying that's good or bad, but technology is so rapidly changing the way we live, everyone needs to know how to code: it's a basic requirement. By teaching children to code you turn them from passive consumers of technology to producers: it's hugely empowering."

Mahmoudieh also hopes to offer classes in entrepreneurship and financial skills to 7 to 15-year-olds early next year, and philosophy will follow later. "Children are natural entrepreneurs from a very early age and we should be encouraging it," she says. "To start with, it makes a vital con-

nection between what you learn at school and why, which is non-existent in the education system. When you teach a child entrepreneurship skills, such as running a lemonade stall: how many lemons to buy, what price to charge, you get 6 and 7-year-olds saying, 'Ah, now I understand why I do maths.' It doesn't necessarily mean they will end up as entrepreneurs but they will have a certain creativity and flexibility of mind and can come up with ideas without being cowed by authority."

It's this ability to think creatively and be flexible — what the educationalist Sir Ken Robinson calls "divergent thinking" — that will be so important in our children's future lives, says Mahmoudieh. "In tests, 98 per cent of kindergarten-age children show amazing creative-thinking abilities, but by age 8 it goes down to 50 per cent and by 13 it's fallen again. Essentially, the school system has killed off their creativity: they're not using their brains to find ingenious solutions to problems, they are people in a box."

"But that's the opposite of how they will need to think in the future: you can't be a specialist in one thing as an adult any more. It's not a case of working through a career, step by step, and reaching a certain age and level of expertise. You have to be ready to adapt to constant change, to think for yourself and take the initiative."

Mahmoudieh, 52, who was born in Hamburg to a German mother and Iranian father, set her own design business in Los Angeles at the age of 26, and later opened offices in Berlin, Hamburg, London and Barcelona. She moved to London from Berlin in 2009 following the break-up of her marriage.

She came up with the idea for myKidsy when she was on holiday in Greece last April and was trying to find a yoga class for Fariba for when they got back to London (yoga is another discipline she believes all children should learn). "It took me hours to find anything, then I phoned somewhere and there was no reply. I e-mailed two places and got no response. It made me think there had to be a better way of



TIMES PHOTOGRAPHER, JON ENOCH
Yasmine Mahmoudieh with Fariba and Nicolas

the site so that it becomes the leading network of children's clubs and classes, first for London then expanding to the rest of the UK and to European cities. There's the traditional cooking and football offered, but also film-making, fencing, coding, pottery, scientific lab work, Mandarin and clay pigeon shooting.

"If all your child's school offers is football and dance, it's tempting to leave it at that. There's nothing wrong with those activities, but there's so much more out there that nobody ever tells us about, and quite a lot of it is free or very cheap — often cheaper than getting childcare after school from someone who doesn't do anything with your child except watch TV."

But what about the danger of over-scheduling children? Research at Columbia University, New York, suggests that affluent children ferried to constant activities were far more likely to be depressed and anxious than other groups. But Mahmoudieh says she is not advocating doing all these activities at the same time. "Do coding for a term, then try fencing for a while, then maybe a language. I don't want them to be over-scheduled and drilled, like the little robots you can meet in China. As a parent, you are showing them the menu and the choices so they can choose. If you don't even show them the menu, they can't choose."

She emphasises that a child should decide on the activities they want to try. "My daughter came to me four years ago and said she wanted to learn Mandarin. I said, 'Fine, let's find somewhere you can do that', but I always say to my children: 'Tell me if you think you are doing too much.'"

"I believe you should always have at least one free day a week — we have two, plus the weekends — although you have to make sure it's a genuine free day. If they are watching TV or playing on the iPad it's not proper free time, it's wasted time."

"People sometimes say to me, 'What about downtime, what about messing about making dens?' But children aren't making dens as I used to as a child. It's a fallacy. Research shows they are watching TV and playing computer games for about 80 per cent of their free time."

"My point is that children don't get educated by themselves or turn themselves into good human beings: it's up to us as parents to teach them."

The new hobbies for kids?

Yoga and meditation
Every child should be taught meditation from the age of 5. It really doesn't have to be much, perhaps just five minutes in the morning where they close their eyes while repeating "love" or "joy" or thinking of a light shining through their body. It teaches them how to be calm and focused and to have inner strength for dealing with the bad things life will throw at them. They should do yoga from 2 or 3: it teaches discipline and gives mental strength.

Find your passion before 15
Children need to be inspired and, if painting and football aren't doing it for them, parents need to find alternatives. How about pottery? Rock climbing? They need to find their passion, what really excites and motivates them, before it's too late. It's not that you're pushing them into things, it's more of a gentle tapping so that the horizon opens for them.

Fencing, not netball
Research shows that if you did a sport in childhood it helps to prevent diseases such as certain cancers later on. The obvious ones are always football and netball, but there are plenty of children who don't like those sports and so end up doing no sport because they didn't know there was anything else out there. My daughter wants to try fencing and my son is keen on cricket, so we're finding classes in those activities now. It's a case of

trying everything until you find a sport that fits.

Be financially savvy from 6
Children are naturally entrepreneurial: they love selling their old toys at car boot sales or making cupcakes to sell to the neighbours. Parents need to foster this spirit by teaching them to be more mindful with their pocket money. You don't want to stop them buying sweets (if you do they will rush out and buy them the moment they can) but you can guide them towards saving for something worthwhile. Introduce them to the concept of swapping services for money by age 5 or 6 and help them to understand how the world functions.

Be a technology producer, not a consumer
Tech experts start coding well before adulthood. It's actually quite simple — it's symbols and commands, and easier than some languages to learn. It's also the sort of thing that its easier to learn at 6 or 7 than at 12 or 13 or in adulthood. Children can start with a simple system such as Scratch, then move up to JavaScript and others. It doesn't mean that they will be developers but it strengthens problem-solving skills and logical thinking and gets them to understand how technology works.

Start a language and music by 5
When I lived in Berlin I took my children to a half-hour English-speaking playgroup from one year old. It was only half an hour a week. From six months they went to Yamaha music classes where they were introduced to rhythm and sounds. Research shows that children exposed to music early on have better language skills, memory and reasoning faculties. **Yasmine Mahmoudieh**

finding out what was on offer. There is so much going on for children but no one knows about it. There's no central place to find out. Sites like Netmums and Mumsnet are OK for babies but not really beyond."

MyKidsy had a soft launch in July and so far has more than 900 listings for after-school classes, plus activities for weekends and holidays. She leads a team of four, and is looking for financial backing to expand

THE TIMES

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- b) See it as a chance to get noticed
- c) Hang around the people most like you
- d) Enjoy the chance to stand out
- e) Not worry, you rarely notice what others wear

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