

Research

The right kind of after-school programs can pay off for kids

Learning After Hours



to end—and why he joyfully perks up after school.

Time to just be kids

Researchers studying after-school time—also referred to as out-of-school time—have some answers. Richard Halpern, with Chicago's Erickson Institute for Graduate Study in Child Development and author of *Making Play Work*, a 2003 text on after-school programs, says the best programs give kids opportunities to explore and learn, as well as time to “dawdle and daydream.”

After-school programs sponsored by schools and community agencies are well-intentioned, he says, but many simply extend the school day with homework and study sessions. Such programs might satisfy parents and teachers, he admits, but they fail to satisfy kids—especially those who need time to “just be kids.”

In fact, Halpern says, many after-school programs are designed with one objective in mind—raising student achievement. But he questions the wisdom of forcing this “utilitarian mission” on youngsters. He contends that, after a school day filled with formal learning, kids deserve the chance to learn informally—especially through exploratory play of their own choosing.

Other researchers agree. A two-year study by the National Research Council concludes that after-school programs should support and complement classroom learning by emphasizing social, emotional, and physical development.

To do so, NRC researchers say, the programs should provide safe places for kids to interact with friends; give kids trusting, supportive relationships that make them feel accepted and included; allow them to

I “I never smile in school,” a third-grader tells me. “But I smile inside and outside when school is over.”

What happens after school? I'm eager to find out, so I tag along as he hoists his backpack and scoots off to soccer practice. “If you want,” he says later, “I can show you the fort my brother and I are building in our backyard.”

His mix of emotions is contagious, and I find myself feeling sad about his school day and smiling, inside and out, about his boundless enthusiasm for sports practice and playtime. And I find myself wondering why he can't wait for the school day

By Susan Black

assume responsibility by making choices and pursuing challenges; and engage them in activities that develop their personalities and interests as well as their intellect.

A dangerous time to be alone

Only about half of children in kindergarten through eighth grade participated in some form of after-school program in 2001, according to a new report from the National Center for Education Statistics. But they're lucky if the programs they attended are like those Halpern and the NRC recommend.

What happens to kids who aren't in after-school programs? A 2001 report by the U.S. Department of Education estimates that some 8 million school-age children—including 4 million between the ages of 5 and 12—are unsupervised after school.

It's a dangerous time, according to the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention. Alone at home, children are at high risk of injury and poor nutrition. And unsupervised preteens and adolescents are often tempted to try risky behaviors such as experimental drug use and sexual activity.

Those who spend their after-school time on the streets are at even more risk. Fight Crime: Invest in Kids, an organization that includes more than 2,000 law enforcement officials, says 3 to 6 p.m. are the hours when young children and teens are most likely to get into trouble. During these hours, unsupervised kids without constructive activities are more likely to commit crimes, be crime victims, be in or cause car crashes, and smoke, drink, and use drugs.

Violent juvenile crimes—murder, rape, robbery, and aggravated assault—soar during the hours immediately after school, Fight Crime reports. About 5 percent of violent juvenile crimes occur at noon, and 6 percent occur at 9 p.m. At 3 p.m., the crime rate peaks at 13 percent.

Latchkey kids also have their share of trouble, say Jed Schwendiman and Jennifer Fager. Their 1999 study for the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory finds that unsupervised homebound children suffer high degrees of stress.

Older kids who fend for themselves—as well as look after younger brothers and sisters—often feel “lonely, fearful, and worried,” they report.

How do they fill their after-school hours? By watching television. On average, kids spend about 900 hours a year in school and 1,500 hours watching television, Schwendiman and Fager say, noting that many parents, particularly those in low-income households, use TV as a substitute for after-school care.

Worth their weight?

Are after-school programs worth the cost? The federal government seems to think so. In January 2004, Congress authorized nearly \$1 billion for the 21st Century Community Learning Centers Program. CCLC funds currently support after-school programs for some 1.3 million students in 6,800 public schools in 1,587 communities across the country.

A controversial evaluation of the program conducted by Mathematica Corp. questions the program's effectiveness. The study, *When Schools Stay Open Late*, reports “limited influence on academic performance; no influence on numbers of latchkey children and their feelings of safety; and some negative influences on children's behavior.”

In addition, the study shows low levels of student participation, noting that many students attended as few as two out of five after-school sessions per week. On the positive side, researchers noted increased parental involvement at the middle school level and higher numbers of students being cared for by CCLC staff.

The study's findings are widely disputed. For instance, the Washington, D.C.-based Afterschool Alliance says the report is “disappointing” because it relies on only one year of data and highlights negative findings.

Judy Samelson, the alliance's executive director, says factors other than academic gains—such as encouraging students to tackle new challenges, providing community service opportunities, and putting kids in contact with caring adults—should also be taken into consideration.

March 2004 background papers from the alliance challenge Mathematica's

conclusions, noting that other findings from 19 independent evaluations of after-school programs in rural, suburban, and urban settings show that the programs “keep children safe, allay parents' concerns about their children's safety, and help children avoid negative influences.”

Funding after-school programs

In addition to increased federal funding, state, local, and private sources are giving after-school programs a boost.

Twenty-six states plan to fund, or increase current funding, for after-school programs. California, for instance, recently committed \$85 million to its After-School Learning and Safe Neighborhoods Partnership Project, and Kentucky has authorized \$37 million for Extended School Services. In January 2004, New Jersey Gov. James McGreevey announced that a newly created state-sponsored corporation will raise money to “take on the after-school challenge.” Contributions will go toward enrolling 20,000 K-8 students in after-school activities from 3 to 6 p.m.

Foundation funds are a mainstay in New York, where \$90 million—a combination of public and private funds—provides some 50,000 students across the state with after-school academic, arts, and recreation programs. The After-School Corporation, begun in 1998 by philanthropist George Soros, underwrites a sizable portion of this initiative.

In districts that offer after-school programs, more than eight out of 10 school board presidents consider them to be essential or very important, according to a 2003 survey by the National School Boards Association. Finding the funding for these programs is an important role for the board, the survey said.

Some school districts find creative ways to put up money for after-school programs. San Diego's 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. extended school day began in 1998 with \$1.7 million in general funds. Today the district supports extended programs in all of its elementary and middle schools with \$15 million garnered from grants, donations, and other supplemental funding sources. Similarly, San Francisco's Unified School District relies on community partnerships to help fund 72 after-

school programs in 120 schools.

Not by money alone

Money is necessary, of course, but it doesn't ensure high-quality after-school programs.

In fact, Richard Halpern contends, many after-school programs, especially those that serve low-income children, operate under "marginal conditions"—due only in part to a shortage of funds. Most programs, he reports, provide a common mix of activities, including homework help, snacks, free time, arts and crafts, table games, gym or playground time, cultural information, and field trips. In addition, most programs offer tutoring,

reading, and academic activities such as science projects.

But the quality of the programs varies widely, according to Halpern's evaluation of MOST (Making the Most of Out-of-School Time), a foundation-funded program operating in Boston, Chicago, and Seattle. Halpern and his team of investigators rated two-thirds of the programs they observed fair to poor on three quality indicators: facilities, staffing, and funding.

Some programs, they reported, were "too thinly staffed" to adequately attend to children. Others were too schedule-bound, pushing children through a rigid sequence of poorly planned activities. In one program, researchers described staff

treatment of children as "random episodes of discipline mixed in with general warmth and caring."

Sandra Simpkins, a University of Michigan researcher and consultant to Harvard's Family Research Project, agrees that the quality of out-of-school programs can vary dramatically. High-quality programs, she says, promote youth development by providing safe locations; preventing delinquency; teaching important skills, beliefs, and behaviors; and cultivating students' relationships with friends and their adult mentors.

Good after-school programs also help students do better in school, Simpkins says. Those who attend the programs often have higher test scores, complete more homework, attend school more regularly, drop out less frequently, and behave better during the school day.

The National Institute on Out-of-School Time (NIOST), based at Wellesley College, also makes a case for after-school programs, reporting that kids who attend the programs have more positive attitudes toward schoolwork, better work habits, and higher aspirations for college.

But Sam Piha and Beth Miller, in a July 2003 report for NIOST, caution that after-school programs should focus on more than improving achievement. After-school programs, they say, should add to—not substitute for—high-quality teaching and learning during the school day.

Hopes are high for after-school programs, but can they do it all—provide safe havens, compensate for poor parenting and impoverished neighborhoods, get kids up to speed in their school subjects, and more?

Remembering that 8-year-old who bounded off to the sports field, wide-eyed and happy, and considering the research on after-school programs, I'm convinced of two things: Schools should take a lesson from programs that rejuvenate kids and turn them into eager learners, and kids should have time after school to just be kids.

Susan Black, an ASBJ contributing editor, is an education research consultant in Hammondsport, N.Y.

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