



The Impact of After-School Programs That Promote Personal and Social Skills

Executive Summary

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Evidence is mounting that where and how youth spend their time outside of normal school hours has important implications for their development. On the negative side, estimates suggest that more than 7 million children in the United States are without adult supervision for some period of time after school. This unsupervised time puts youth at risk for such negative outcomes as academic and behavioral problems, drug use and other types of risky behavior (Weisman & Gottfredson, 2001). On the positive side, young people benefit when they spend time engaged in structured pursuits that offer opportunities for positive interactions with adults and peers, encourage them to contribute and take initiative, and contain challenging and engaging tasks that help them develop and apply new skills and personal talents (American Youth Policy Forum, 2006; Carnegie Corporation, 1992; Larson & Verma, 1999; National Research Council & Institute of Medicine, 2002).

As a result, there has been increasing interest in after-school programs (ASPs) that can provide youth with a safe and supportive adult-supervised environment and offer them various growth-enhancing opportunities, including activities and experiences that promote academic, personal, social and recreational development. There is strong public support for after-school programs, particularly from working parents who cannot be with their children immediately after school. Funding from state, private and federal sources has supported existing ASPs and created new offerings in many communities. The federal government invested \$3.6 billion in after-school programs in 2002 (<http://www.financeprojectinfo.org/Publications/FundingGuide2003.pdf>).

What is known about the impact of after-school programs? Previous reviews have concentrated on the academic benefits of programs that offer tutoring or other forms of academic assistance to youth, and the results have been mixed. One review of 35 studies reported that the test scores of low-income, at-risk youth improved significantly in both reading and mathematics after they participated in after-school programs (Lauer et al., 2006). Academic outcomes for other youth, however, have been inconsistent (Kane, 2003; Scott-Little, Hamann & Jurs, 2002; Vandell et al., 2004; Zief, Lauver & Maynard, 2004). As a result, authors have stressed the need for careful evaluations of the effectiveness of different programs and the factors associated with positive outcomes, along with realistic expectations about the academic gains that can be achieved (Bodilly & Beckett, 2005; Granger & Kane, 2004; Vandell et al., 2004, 2005).

However, the personal and social benefits of after-school programs have been somewhat overlooked, at least in terms of formal evaluation. Many acknowledge that after-school programs can improve young people's personal and social development, and findings from some individual studies have been positive (e.g., Harvard Family Research Project, 2003). But no review has been done to evaluate systematically the impact of after-school programs that attempt to enhance youths' personal and social skills, identify the nature and magnitude of the outcomes of such programs, and describe the features that characterize

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effective programs. These are the goals of the current review.

All the programs in the current review were selected because their overall mission included promoting young people's personal and social development. Many programs offer a mix of activities, but the current review concentrates on those aspects of each program that are devoted to developing youths' personal and social skills.

There is extensive evidence from a wide range of promotion, prevention and treatment interventions that youth can be taught personal and social skills (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2003; Commission on Positive Youth Development, 2005; L'Abate & Milan, 1985; Greenberg et al., 2003). Moreover, theory and research about skills training of children and adolescents indicate that learning is more likely to occur when evidence-based training approaches are used (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2003; Durlak, 1997, 2003; Elias et al., 1997; National Research Council & Institute of Medicine, 2002; Payton et al. 2000; Weissberg & Greenberg, 1998). Effective approaches to skills development are sequential, active, focused and explicit. Knowing this, we hypothesized that programs that used all four approaches to promote youths' personal and social skills would be more successful than those that did not, and we developed a method to capture the application of these evidence-based approaches. (The rationale and coding methodology for these variables are described in the full report.)

We expected that youth would benefit in multiple ways from effective programming, so we examined outcomes in three general areas: feelings and attitudes, indicators of behavioral adjustment, and school performance. Our objective was to answer two research questions:

1. What types of outcomes can we expect from after-school programs that attempt to foster young people's personal and social skills?
2. Can we identify program characteristics that are associated with better results?

Method

We only considered after-school programs that attempted to promote personal and social skills. The personal and social skills targeted in these programs could include one or more skills in such areas as problem-solving, conflict resolution, self-control, leadership, responsible decision-making, and enhancement of self-efficacy and self-esteem. We defined after-school programs as interventions that were offered to children between the ages of 5 and 18, operated during at least part of the school year (i.e., September to June) and occurred outside of normal school hours, which are typically 8 a.m. to 2:30 p.m., Monday through Friday. To be included, reports had to have a control group, present sufficient information for analysis and appear by Dec. 31, 2005.

A careful and systematic search for published and unpublished studies netted a set of reports that provided information on 73 programs. We conducted a meta-analysis to evaluate the magnitude of effects obtained from each program. This summary focuses on the major findings. The technical aspects of the analyses are contained in the full report.



Results

The two most important findings were:

1. **Youth who participate in after-school programs improve significantly in three major areas: feelings and attitudes, indicators of behavioral adjustment, and school performance.** More specifically, after-school programs succeeded in improving youths' feelings of self-confidence and self-esteem, school bonding (positive feelings and attitudes toward school), positive social behaviors, school grades and achievement test scores. They also reduced problem behaviors (e.g., aggression, noncompliance and conduct problems) and drug use. In sum, after-school programs produced multiple benefits that pertain to youths' personal, social and academic life.
2. **It was possible to identify effective programs: Programs that used evidence-based skill training approaches were consistently successful in producing multiple benefits for youth, while those that did not use such procedures were not successful in any outcome area.**

Evidence-Based Training Approaches:

Drawing on theory and research about skills training, we applied two criteria related to the training process and two criteria related to program content to identify programs that used evidence-based training approaches to promote personal and social skills. The two criteria related to process were the presence of a sequenced set of activities to achieve skill objectives (sequenced), and the use of active forms of learning (active). The two criteria related to content were the presence of at least one program component focused on developing personal or social skills (focus), and the targeting of specific personal or social skills (explicit).

Thirty-nine programs met all four of the above criteria, while 27 programs did not. When we compared the outcomes from the two sets of programs, a clear pattern emerged: The former programs yielded significant positive results on all seven of the outcome categories mentioned above (improved feelings of self-confidence and self-esteem, school bonding, positive social behaviors, school grades and achievement test scores, together with reduced problem behaviors and drug use), while the latter did not produce positive results for any category. When it comes to enhancing personal and social skills, effective programs are SAFE—sequenced, active, focused and explicit.

Discussion

There are at least three reasons why our findings should be deemed credible.

1. We searched the literature carefully and systematically for relevant reports, and assembled a representative and unbiased sample of published and unpublished evaluations. (Indeed, many of the reports were scrutinized for the first time for our review.) We evaluated a large number of after-school programs (n=73). Sixty percent of the evaluated reports appeared after 2000. As a result, this review presents an up-to-date perspective on a rapidly growing body of research literature.
2. We only considered reports that included control groups.

Youth who participate in after-school programs improve significantly in three major areas: feelings and attitudes, indicators of behavioral adjustment, and school performance.



On the basis of these results, we strongly recommend that after-school programs seeking to promote personal and social skills use the evidence-based approaches described in this report.

3. To substantiate the findings regarding the characteristics of effective programs, in our analyses we controlled for the possible influence of several methodological features found in the reports.

Current data offer clear empirical support for the conclusion that well-run ASPs can produce a variety of positive benefits for participating youth. More specifically, there is significant improvement in youths' feelings and attitudes (i.e., their self-perceptions and bonding to school), their behavioral adjustment (i.e., increases in positive social behaviors and decreases in problem behaviors and drug use), and in their school grades and level of academic achievement.

We confirmed that effective programs employed skill-development activities that were sequential, active, focused and explicit. It is important to stress that only those programs that followed these four evidence-based training approaches in their program components devoted to skill development produced significant changes in any outcomes. In other words, it is the combination of both training process (i.e., sequential and active) and program content (i.e., focused and explicit) that leads to positive results.

On the basis of these results, we strongly recommend that after-school programs seeking to promote personal and social skills use the evidence-based approaches described in this report. (Others have mentioned the importance one or more of these features in after-school programs as well: see Larson & Verma, 1999; Miller, 2003; National Research Council & Institute of Medicine, 2002). Not only can participants benefit in multiple ways if these components are included, but success is unlikely if they are missing. To improve youths' personal and social skills, programs must devote sufficient time to skill enhancement, be explicit about what they wish to achieve, use activities that are coordinated and sequenced to achieve their purpose, and require active involvement on the part of participants.



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