

Quality Matters in Afterschool Programs

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EXTENSION

Center for Youth Development

Key Features of Quality Programs

The National Research Council convened experts in research, policy and practice to examine effective community youth development programs. They identify these key features as essential to quality programs:¹

- Physical and psychological safety
- Appropriate structure
- Supportive relationships
- Opportunities to belong
- Positive social norms
- Support for self-efficacy and a sense youth matter
- Opportunities for skill building
- Integration of family, school and community efforts

These features work together and reinforce each other. Programs with more features are likely to provide better support for young people's positive development. The quality of a program, along these dimensions or a similar set of indicators, is critical to achieving positive outcomes for children and youth .

High-Quality Afterschool Programs have Strong Effects

A recent study by Deborah Lowe Vandell has found that regular participation in high-quality afterschool programs is linked to positive outcomes for children and youth. In order to be considered high-quality, the afterschool programs studied offered evidence of supportive relationships, supervision, appropriate structure, and a wide range of opportunities that included academic, recreation, arts and other enrichment activities.² Youth who participated regularly in these high-quality programs were compared to those of similar backgrounds but who did not participate. The results showed significantly greater effects for regular participants when compared to their low supervision counterparts.

Effect size (d) is a measure of the strength of a relationship between two variables—the larger the number the stronger the effect. For these high-quality afterschool programs the positive effects on regular participants were impressive by any standard.

- Gains in math scores ranged from $d = .52$ to $d = .73$
- Gains in work habits ranged from $d = .20$ to $d = .33$

Putting these statistics into perspective, Vandell compares

these effect sizes to other popular studies. For example, the effect size of:

- Aspirin on heart disease ($d = .03$)
- Class size reductions on math achievement ($d = .23$)
- School-based substance abuse prevention programs on drug and alcohol use ($d = .09$)

It should be noted that effect sizes likely vary as program quality varies. When researchers study the full range of activities in which youth in a community participate, the effects of high quality programs combine with the smaller or even negative effects of lower quality programs — resulting in smaller average effects. Indeed, quality does matter in assuring effective programs with impact.

Engagement Also Matters

Vandell's study shows the positive effects of high participation and retention in quality afterschool programs. It also reveals that inconsistent participation in an unstructured program of extra-curricular activities combined with low supervision after school posed developmental risks for children and youth. Research shows that getting youth engaged—engaged in their own learning and in contributing to the community - leads to higher participation and retention rates in afterschool programs. Afterschool programs, unlike K-12 education, is not mandated. Instead, high quality afterschool programs are designed to attract youth, provide a sense of belonging, develop a sense of mastery, and focus on positive relationships and enough structure and a sense of safety to make them positive places where youth voice and choice is encouraged.

Bottom Line

Youth who participate in high-quality afterschool programs, either alone or in combination with other enrichment programs, have positive outcomes. This is especially true when compared to youth who sporadically participate or are unsupervised and supported during the non-school hours. Increasing the impact of afterschool programs means increasing program quality and youth engagement.

1 Eccles, J., & Gootman, J.A.. (Eds.). (2002). Community programs to promote youth development. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

2 Vandell, Deborah Lowe, Ph.D., Study of Promising Afterschool Programs, 2007.