

Providing an Essential Service

An Overview of Afterschool Program Support of Children's Social-Emotional, Behavioral, and Physical Health During Middle Childhood



Background

Middle childhood (defined here as children aged 6 to 12) coincides with some of the biggest changes in children's lives. The transition to elementary school involves changes in relationships with peers and adults, new expectations for and greater demands on behavior, increased awareness of gender-specific social norms, and more complex cognitive functioning. Learning how to make responsible decisions, recognize and manage emotions, make and keep friends, and resolve problems with others are critical developmental tasks during this period.

These social-emotional and behavioral skills predict short- and long-term positive outcomes across many life domains and may serve as lifelong protective factors to buffer children against exposure to risk factors.¹ Habits important to physical health are also developing during this time. Exposure to healthy foods in childhood can help children develop healthy food preferences and overcome food aversions. Likewise, opportunities for engaging in physical activities can influence later behaviors and foster habits related to healthy and active living.²

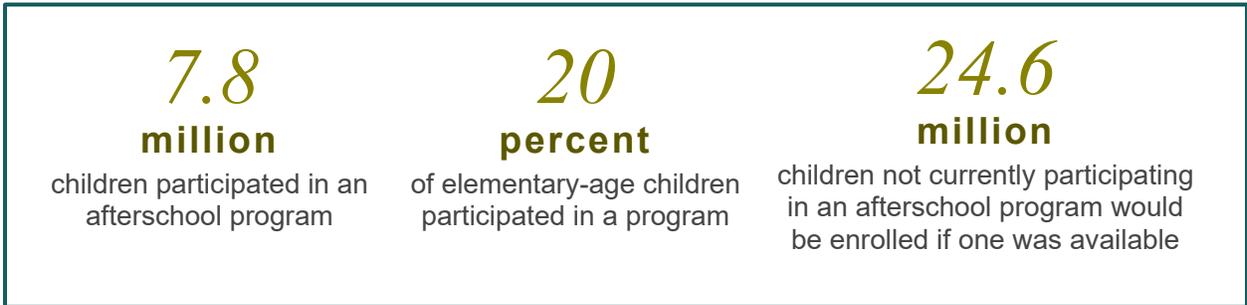
The traditional school day with competing demands on teacher time and priority on academic achievement together reduce classroom opportunities to explicitly promote nonacademic skills related to children's socio-emotional, behavioral, and physical health and wellness. Programming provided in afterschool settings offers a unique and invaluable opportunity to fill gaps from the school day and provide children with some of the competencies needed to perform well in and out of school.

Benefits of participation in afterschool programs. A rich body of literature shows that afterschool programs can help children, especially from low-income families, improve their reading and math grades, class participation, and motivation to learn.^{3 4 5} Studies suggest participation in afterschool

programs may also benefit children’s social-emotional and behavioral health (SEBH) through routines and activities designed to support social skills and positive peer relationships.⁶ Physical activity in afterschool programs promotes healthy lifestyle choices that can have immediate health benefits, prevent obesity in adolescence and adulthood, and improve social-emotional development—although these benefits may impact boys and girls differently.^{7 8 9} Evidence also shows afterschool programs are a work support, with one survey finding more than eight in ten parents indicating their children’s participation in afterschool programming makes it easier to both keep their jobs and miss work less often.¹⁰

Families/children served by afterschool programs and unmet need.^{11 12} Children from higher income families constitute the majority of afterschool participants (66 percent), while 34 percent of children from low-income families participate in these programs. Recent survey findings indicate increasing unmet need for children from low-income families and a drop in participation among these families due to issues of cost and access. Participation by low-income families fell from 4.6 million in 2014 to 2.7 million in 2020. Children from higher income families constitute the majority of afterschool participants (66 percent), while 34 percent of children from low-income families participate in these programs. Unmet need has grown from 19.4 million children who would enroll in a program if one were available, to 24.6 million children in 2020. Forty percent of afterschool participants are children of color, and unmet need is highest among children from Black and Latinx families.

In 2014, boys and girls participate in afterschool programs in roughly equivalent rates (51 versus 49 percent). Most afterschool programs include both boys and girls. Recently, however, programs explicitly targeting girls have grown in popularity. For example, Girls on the Run, a program promoting healthy lifestyles for girls through running and games, includes 200 local organizations in all 50 states and serves over 185,000 girls annually. Similarly, Girls in the Game operates 48 afterschool programs in four cities and serves over 1,200 girls each year with health education and leadership development activities. These two programs and others work to build confidence and independence and promote health and fitness in girls.



Source: Afterschool Alliance. (2020). *America after 3PM: Demand Grows Opportunity Shrinks*

Federal funding for afterschool programs. Several federal programs support children and families in afterschool programs. Funding from the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) serves over 513,000 school-aged children each month¹. Thirty-nine percent of the childcare slots provided by the HHS' CCDF support before- and after-school services for school-aged children. This represents an investment of nearly \$2 billion per year. Other HHS funding sources for elementary school children include Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) and Social Services Block Grant (SSBG). The Department of Education's 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) support enriching academic opportunities in afterschool programs.

Types of afterschool programs and activities offered. Afterschool programs vary widely on several dimensions including the types of organizations that operate programs, number of children served, and activities offered. Large organizations, such as public and private schools, community coalitions, the YMCA/YWCA, and Boys and Girls Clubs, run programs in cities and towns across the nation. Smaller groups, such as not-for-profit and faith-based organizations, may operate one or two afterschool sites.

Programs provide a safe, adult-supervised environment and may offer—

- Mentorship
- Healthy snacks or meals
- Academic enrichment in the form of time to complete homework and activities that promote learning
- Opportunities for physical activity
- Community service and civic engagement
- Fun and engaging activities with peers
- Activities that promote social-emotional development including self-esteem, leadership skills, and positive relationships with adults and peers.

Study Overview

Rationale. Given the significant federal investment and the large number of elementary-age children participating in afterschool programs, as well as the potential benefits of participation for children's social-emotional, behavioral, and physical health more information is needed on—

¹ All estimates in this paragraph were developed from [FY 2017 CCDF administrative data](#).

1. The extent to which evidence-based tools or interventions are implemented in afterschool programming
2. Promising practices for administering, improving, and sustaining these interventions at the local level
3. How afterschool programs can better address the needs of both girls and boys

Identifying interventions and practices that improve children's social-emotional, behavioral, and physical health may also be helpful to policymakers and program administrators working to allocate resources targeting the large number of underserved children.

Literature review. A literature review was conducted to determine: 1) which afterschool programs report positive outcomes in social-emotional, behavioral, or physical health during middle childhood; 2) what evidence is there for differential impacts by gender; 3) which program, participant, and family characteristics are associated with afterschool programs that report positive outcomes in social-emotional, behavioral, or physical health; and 4) which routines, content, and activities are included in programs reporting positive outcomes.

Methods. Project findings are based on the literature review and case studies of five afterschool program sites serving economically disadvantaged families in diverse geographic regions. Interviews and observations were conducted to understand whether these programs explicitly promote social-emotional, behavioral, and physical health and use evidence-based tools and interventions to promote healthy development, address gender in programming, collaborate with other human service organizations, and coordinate with schools to better support children and the needs of working families.

Site selection for five study sites. Of particular interest for inclusion were programs that received funding from HHS through block grants to the states and were administered either through grants or contracts from the state to childcare providers or through vouchers to providers to support eligible families. Only programs predominantly serving (but not limited to) elementary-age children (6 to 12 years) from low-income families were considered. Programs also needed to offer activities designed to promote the social-emotional, behavioral, or physical health of children.

Programs meeting the above criteria were drawn from publicly available databases, expert consultant nominations, and peer nominations. The five selected sites (see Table 1) varied in size, organizational structure, geographic location, and program offerings.

Table 1. Characteristics of Five Study Sites

Type of organization	Children served	Program funding sources	Geographic location	Social-emotional learning components	Physical health components
City-wide, nonprofit organization	40 K-5th grade children	Federal/state, foundations, private donors, parent fees	Large, northeastern city	Social skills taught through modeling, interactions with staff	Physical fitness activities
City-wide, nonprofit organization	35 K-8th grade children	Federal/state, foundations, private donors	Large, eastern city	Curriculum targeting social skills, behavior management	Physical fitness activities
Community, nonprofit organization	25 K-5th grade children	Federal/state, foundations, private donors, parent fees	Small, rural northeastern town	“Whole Child” approach including social skills, character development, focus	Martial arts
Large, national organization	20 K-5th grade children	Federal/state, parent fees, county, parent organization	Large, southeastern city	Daily worksheets developed by parent organization	Sports and games
Large, national organization	130 K-12th grade children	Federal/state, grants, parent fees, parent organization	Large, midwestern city	Variety of social-emotional learning programs for children of different ages	Sports and games including basketball, volleyball

Interviews. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with frontline providers, site supervisors, and program administrators. Interview guides addressed each of the research questions across the three respondents at each site. The research team developed, refined, and tested the discussion guides to ensure questions were in plain language, relevant to the afterschool programs, and directly related to the central research questions.

Observations of program activities. As part of the site visits, the two-person teams conducted structured observations of afterschool program content, activities, and interactions. Observations were guided by the Promising Practices Rating System (PPRS).¹³ The PPRS is used by observers to make quantitative ratings of eight quality indicator domains empirically linked to social, behavioral, and cognitive outcomes. For example, observers rate the quality of interactions between staff and students along a continuum from warm, supportive, and engaging to negative, critical, and disrespectful.

The research team observed four to six activities at each site. Team members reached consensus on numeric scores for each quality domain and described each activity, including type (e.g., sport, game), space (e.g., classroom, gymnasium, outside field, playground), number of staff and students participating, equipment or materials used, and the knowledge or skill areas targeted by the activity.

PPRS Observational Domains

- Supportive relations with adults
- Supportive relations with peers
- Student engagement in activities
- Opportunities for cognitive growth
- Mastery orientation
- Appropriate program structure
- Setting chaos
- Staff overcontrol

Observations of boys and girls. Site visit

teams also observed the extent to which program activities and participation looked similar or different for boys and girls, with particular attention to quality of interactions with peers and staff and level of interest and engagement, especially related to vigorous physical activities.

Key Findings

Key findings from the literature review, interviews, and observations at the five sites are articulated in the set of policy briefs resulting from this project. These are described below.

Afterschool Program Support of Children’s Social-Emotional and Behavioral Health

- Staff view children’s social skills and self-confidence as important program goals.
- Staff-child and peer relationships are viewed as central in helping children develop social skills, understand and regulate their emotions, and build self-confidence.

- Overall, only one program uses an evidence-informed curriculum, though a few programs provide formal training to staff on how to promote social-emotional and behavioral health. More training is needed to appropriately address child trauma and secondary trauma in staff.
- Program observations revealed positive peer and staff-child interactions and children engaged in afterschool program activities and content.

Promoting the Physical Health of Boys and Girls: Examples from Five Afterschool Programs

- All programs identified physical activity as an important goal.
- Programs used a variety of strategies to encourage physical health including targeted activities, a wide range of activities to appeal to children’s interests, and healthy snacks and nutritional education.
- Staff encouraged boys and girls to participate in activities they enjoy, regardless of gender expectations. This was especially true for encouraging girls to participate in sports or physical activities.
- Programs did not include sufficiently vigorous physical activities to meet the recommended standards.
- Staff frequently mentioned the importance of treating boys and girls equally, both in terms of programming around physical activities and in their interactions with them.

Gender Informed Programming: Examples of Current Practices at Five Afterschool Programs

- Programs endorse a “gender blind” approach, providing the same activities to boys and girls.
- A majority of staff at programs are female. Only one program observed had a balance of male and female staff.
- During site visits, staff commented some parents expressed gender-cultural norms. In some instances, gender influenced how staff interacted with or how they considered themselves models for children.

Sources, Use, and Adequacy of Funding for Five Afterschool Programs

- Afterschool programs received funding from multiple sources to provide program services.
- In-kind support from school districts and volunteers was often crucial to support program operations.
- Program administrators reported spending considerable time fundraising and being anxious about maintaining funding levels.

- Staff describe their funding as adequate to provide current programming, but all noted a need for additional funding to expand programming to better meet the needs of school-aged children and improve staff training.

Overall Implications for Policy and Practice

Afterschool programs have the potential to support the social-emotional, behavioral, and physical health of children aged 6 to 12. This kind of support can be offered by intentionally leveraging common afterschool routines and activities; emphasizing positive and supporting relationships with peers and adults; and through the use of evidence-based program models, curricula, and interventions designed to produce positive outcomes in these developmental domains. There is also a need to recognize that successfully engaging children may require a gender-informed approach that considers the unique needs, interests, and abilities of both boys and girls. Future research should be focused on the conditions and resources necessary to implement successful afterschool programs that draw on evidence-based practices on a wider scale.

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