Supporting Social and Emotional Development Through Quality Afterschool Programs

Research to Practice in the **Afterschool and Expanded Learning Field**

American Institutes for Research (AIR) is pleased to release this first brief in our series *Beyond the Bell: Research to Practice in the Afterschool and Expanded Learning Field*. A core mission of the Afterschool and Expanded Learning team at AIR is to be both consumers and producers of rigorous research and to share with the field what we learn. It is essential that research findings reach the practitioners who can make use of them to inform their program improvement efforts. In that spirit, we are releasing a series of research to practice briefs designed to make research on the afterschool and expanded learning field accessible and easy to understand. Practitioners help young people grow and learn every day. Researchers study this work to understand how it helps youth, families, and communities. These briefs are designed to connect the dots so that we can learn from one another.

This first brief in our series focuses on how afterschool programs contribute to the development of social and emotional competencies in young people. In practice, we see how high-quality programs can help participants learn, grow, and develop. But what does the research say? How can we prove it? We chose to focus our first brief on this important topic because there has been a growing recognition that afterschool programs can and do facilitate the social and emotional development of young people. Despite the recent attention this topic has received, efforts to define and measure social and emotional competencies in afterschool settings are still emerging. This brief provides an overview of work done to date both in afterschool and school-based settings to define social and emotional learning, shares recent research on how afterschool programs contribute to the development of these competencies, and, finally, offers some next step recommendations to both practitioners and researchers.

Measuring and Defining Social and Emotional Skills

During the past 20 years, the afterschool field has been held accountable in varying ways—first, on our ability to provide safe places for young people to spend time while their parents work; then, on our success in helping to improve participants' academic achievement as a supplement to the school day.[1] Today, measuring success in afterschool programs is more nuanced and has been influenced by an increased recognition that the social and emotional competencies youth develop while in afterschool programs are also critical to their success in school and life.[2] The heightened focus on social and emotional skills is also growing in formal education settings, and, as a result, researchers across the country and around the globe are grappling with how to measure social and emotional competencies in a world that prizes easily quantifiable indicators.[3] The challenge for the afterschool field is that social and emotional competencies are not universally agreed upon, and their measurement is both complicated and controversial. In many ways, practitioners trying to identify how their program improves young people's

social and emotional competence suffer from an embarrassment of riches. That is, there are myriad definitions for social and emotional competencies as well as a growing number of researchers developing tools to measure them. In some cases, the varying frameworks present the same social and emotional competencies in different ways, and, in other cases, they are overlapping or not at all the same. In the end, practitioners are left to determine which framework best matches their interventions and programs. In an effort to help clarify the language confusion, we have highlighted some of the most prevalent frameworks here. In the callout boxes, we present practical examples of how afterschool programs are using the specified framework and resources to learn more.

Social and Emotional Learning Competencies

Social and emotional learning competencies are defined as the cognitive, affective, and behavioral competencies necessary for a young person to be successful in school, work, and life. The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL),[4] an organization focusing on the implementation of strategies to improve social and emotional competencies, has developed a framework that identifies five competency clusters as critical for young people's success. These competency clusters are:

- **Self-awareness**—the ability to understand one's emotions and how they influence behavior
- **Self-management**—the ability to calm one's self down when upset, to set goals and work toward them, and to manage and control emotions
- **Social awareness**—the ability to recognize what is appropriate in certain settings and empathize with others
- **Responsible decision making**—the ability to make decisions that take into account social standards, consequences, and context
- **Relationship skills**—the ability to communicate well, to listen and respond appropriately, and to negotiate conflict

CASEL and other advocates for social and emotional learning contend that these competencies can be taught either through explicit stand-alone curricula (e.g., Second Step, PATHS) or through school- and classroomwide interventions that integrate social and emotional learning strategies into every aspect of the school day (e.g., Responsive Classroom, Caring School Community).[5] Afterschool settings can incorporate social and emotional learning into programs in much the same way—either through explicit curricula or in the ways we organized and set norms for our groups.

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Noncognitive Skills/Factors

Another umbrella term that is used to describe a wide variety of skills is *noncognitive factors*. Originally coined by economist James Heckman,[6] researchers at The University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research (CCSR) brought this thinking to educational contexts when they released a [literature review](#)[7] focused on how noncognitive factors contribute to academic success.[8] They deliberately chose the word *factors* to make the distinction that it is not only skills but also attitudes, behaviors, and strategies that young people need to improve their academic success. CCSR's report breaks noncognitive factors into five key areas, many of which are included in one or more of the other frameworks listed here: (1) academic behaviors, (2) academic perseverance, (3) academic mind-sets, (4) learning strategies, and (5) social skills. Since releasing the literature review, CCSR has developed a survey for schools that measures the noncognitive factors described in their report. Afterschool programs often support noncognitive factors through programming that is explicitly aligned with school-day learning and targets the improvement of competencies that influence school-related behaviors.

21st Century Skills

Another term often used in the afterschool field is *21st century skills*. These skills are defined by the [National Research Council](#)[9] and the [Partnership for 21st Century Learning (P21)](#)[10] as those needed for young people to be successful in work, life, and citizenship. P21 has developed a [framework](#) for 21st century skills that breaks them into four overarching categories:

- **Content knowledge and 21st century themes**—knowledge of specific academic content areas as well as knowledge of interdisciplinary issues such as global and environmental awareness, ethics, and civic literacy. This set of skills, along with the information, media, and technology skills, sets this framework apart from the others.

- **Life and career skills**—the ability to be adaptable, take on leadership roles, show initiative, develop social skills, and be productive.

- **Learning and innovation skills**—communication, critical thinking, creativity, and collaboration.

- **Information, media, and technology skills**—again, these skills set this framework apart from the others by emphasizing computer and media literacy.

HOW can afterschool programs address noncognitive factors?

In a recent guide, Public Profit offers 16 strategies to promote noncognitive skills in youth development programs.

HOW do afterschool programs work to improve 21st century skills?

Boston After School and Beyond has developed its own version of the 21st century skills framework. Called the ACT (for Achieve, Connect, Thrive) Skills Framework, it highlights the skills young people need to be successful across every aspect of their lives. See the framework at http://bostonbeyond.org/initiatives/act_framework/.

Afterschool programs that focus on the development of these skills are often some of the more comprehensive and holistic programs that focus on arts, sports, academics, life skills, and career development.

Mind-Sets

During the past two to three years, there has been an increasing focus on a subset of social and emotional competencies that are related to academic achievement. These competencies, supported by the research of Carol Dweck[11] and Angela Duckworth,[12] focus on the *mind-sets* of youth and how changes in mind-sets can influence improvement in academic achievement. In particular, these competencies include:

- **Grit**—the ability to sustain interest in and persist toward long-term goals
- **Self-control**—the ability to regulate behaviors and emotions
- **Growth mind-set**—the belief that ability can change and comes from hard work and persistence

Similar to noncognitive skills, afterschool programs focused more explicitly on alignment with the school day and academic support are often the most likely to target the development of grit, self-control, and mind-set.

This list is not exhaustive. In fact, many other terms are used, including *character*, *soft skills*, and *life skills*. Other institutions, from National Public Radio[13] to Every Hour Counts[14] to the Asia Society,[15] have also presented ways to sort through this complex lexicon and find ways to define and categorize the various competencies that are increasingly being recognized as critical for youth success in school and life. Our goal here was to define some of the most commonly used terms in the afterschool field and highlight the need to break down the language barrier that is limiting the field's ability to describe the skills, attitudes, and behaviors being addressed in afterschool and expanded learning programs.

Do Afterschool Programs Contribute to Social and Emotional Development?

The short answer is yes, they do, for youth who participate regularly in high-quality programs.[16] The caveat is that evidence is somewhat limited. Relatively few studies have rigorously examined the impact of afterschool programs on the social and emotional competencies outlined in the frameworks presented earlier. In the early 2000s, a handful of studies explored the connection between participation in out-of-school-time activities and improved social competencies. These studies found that

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consistent participation led to improvements in peer relationships, sense of self-worth, altruism, and prosocial behavior and decreased problem behavior. These studies looked at traditional school-based afterschool extracurricular activities such as clubs, sports, tutoring, and honor society.[17] Although promising, these studies were limited in their scope and the types of programs they studied. Then in 2007, Durlak and Weissberg released their seminal meta-analysis that examined the connection between developing personal and social skills in afterschool settings and a range of outcomes, including academic achievement. They found that afterschool programs employing what they dubbed the S.A.F.E. features (for sequenced, active, focused, and explicit) had significant benefits for youth on a wide range of outcomes, including:

- Feelings of self-confidence and self-esteem
- School bonding (positive feelings and attitudes toward school)
- Positive social behaviors

Since that report, only a handful of researchers have explored the connection between participation in high-quality afterschool programs and social and emotional outcomes. In particular, researchers at the School of Education at the University of California at Irvine have conducted several studies showing that **high levels of participation in programs are associated with improved social and behavioral outcomes, including gains in peer-to-peer social skills, prosocial behavior, engagement, intrinsic motivation, concentrated effort, and positive states of mind**.[18] Similarly, researchers from the Youth Development Research Project at the University of Illinois have done extensive work to examine the process of how youth develop social and emotional skills in youth programs. Through this work, they have found that **youth report building skills in motivation and effort from participating in youth programs**—in particular, youth voluntarily engage in challenging work in youth programs, are committed to completing the work, and therefore put in the effort and make the connection between hard work and results. Youth then learn these behaviors and can engage in strategic thinking and persistent behavior outside the youth program.[19]

However, all of the aforementioned studies have shown that changes in social and emotional skills and competencies do not happen with just any program or at any level of participation. Rather, **quality of programming** and **level of participation** are two key factors that matter for producing outcomes for youth. In programs that were high quality, young people were more likely to see positive outcomes.[20] Likewise, youth who participated at high levels were more likely to experience changes than those who participated at low levels.[21]

WHAT do S.A.F.E. programs look like?

- **Sequenced**—program employs a sequenced set of activities to achieve skill objectives.

- **Active**—program uses active forms of learning.

- **Focused**—program has at least one component focused on developing personal or social skills.

- **Explicit**—program targets specific personal or social skills.

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Evaluations of individual programs or program models have also found connections between participation and development of social and emotional competencies. For example, the longitudinal 4-H Study of Positive Youth Development found that young people who participated in 4-H over time were two times more likely to be civically engaged and four times more likely to be active in their communities than those who did not participate.[22] Likewise, a study of the AfterZone system in Providence, Rhode Island, found that youth who participated in the program demonstrated a better ability to interact with their peers than nonparticipants.[23] The study also found that youth who were highly engaged in programming had greater social and emotional benefits than those who did not feel engaged. Specifically, participants who felt a stronger sense of belonging in the program, felt more connected to the adults in the program, and found the program fun thought more about their future, had better social skills, and demonstrated more positive behavior than their less engaged peers.

Where Does the Practice Community Go From Here?

There is indeed evidence that afterschool programs have had an impact on developing participants' social and emotional competencies. However, in this brief we outline research that has an important commonality; **high-quality programs** and **regular and high youth participation** are critical conditions for skill building. The research clearly points to several key features of afterschool programs that contribute to improved social and emotional outcomes. Given these key features, afterschool programs may want to engage in some or all of the following:

▪ Provide professional development for staff on how to make program activities S.A.F.E. (i.e., sequenced, active, focused, and explicit).

▪ Participate in existing quality improvement activities, or advocate for additional funding related to quality improvement—and then use that funding to create strong quality assessment and improvement practices.

▪ Conduct regular youth satisfaction surveys to gauge how engaged youth feel in the program. If engagement is low, implement strategies to foster a sense of belonging and fun in the program.

▪ Bolster youth participation (research has shown that duration, particularly for elementary age youth, needs to be between 30–40 days per year[24]) by identifying what youth like and do not like about the program and making changes to match their needs and interests.

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- Identify which skills, of the many listed in the frameworks earlier, the program targets. Make choices. Think about program activities. Decide on what few key social and emotional competencies the program truly targets and measure those—not the universe of social and emotional skills that exist. This is not an easy step, but it will hopefully get easier as more researchers develop and disseminate tools to measure social and emotional competencies.

Where Does the Research Community Go From Here?

Everyone is talking about social and emotional competencies, but not enough people are studying their development in afterschool programs in a rigorous way so that we can know which kinds of programs and practices are most effective. Given that, we see three key next steps for the research community to move the field forward:

1. **Collect new, current evidence.** The limited number of recent studies focused explicitly on how afterschool programs improve social and emotional skills suggest a need for a follow-up to the Durlak and Weissberg study that measures impact over the past decade. Although Vandell and others have begun this next generation of research, not enough has been done to examine the impact the wide variety of innovative programs are having on social and emotional skills over the decade since that meta-analysis was first released. In those intervening years, afterschool funders and individual programs have invested huge amounts of funding and time into quality improvement activities.[25] Given evidence linking quality to outcomes, the time has come to conduct a new generation of research that examines how potentially higher quality programs are contributing to social and emotional competencies.

2. **Improve the tools for measuring competencies.** There is also a need for stronger validated measures of social and emotional skills and clear guidance on how to use them. Surveys used in formal education settings to measure social and emotional outcomes are not necessarily suitable to afterschool settings. Formal and informal educators and facilitators differ in their methods of instruction and implementation, intended outcomes, and definition of social and emotional development. So, although several tools are available for use in school-based settings, very few exist that are explicitly designed and are appropriate for use in afterschool settings. A recent compendium, *From Soft Skills to Hard Data*, canvassed the field and identified 10 rigorously validated tools

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that measure social and emotional outcomes.[26] Of those 10, only four are free and available for programs to use. All have limited to moderate evidence of validity and mixed evidence of reliability, and only a handful have been tested in afterschool settings.

3. **Help afterschool programs better use the data they collect.** Afterschool programs use the handful of existing surveys to collect information about their participants, often not knowing exactly how to implement them or what to do with the data once they collect them. The field would benefit from a follow-up guide to *From Soft Skills to Hard Data* that outlines what programs should do once they have selected a measure—how to identify the skills the program actually targets and select an appropriate measure, accurately collect data on those skills, and report out on the data in a clear and responsible way.

If researchers can take these three steps as practitioners are simultaneously engaging in professional development, better identifying their targeted competencies, and growing quality improvement practices, the field will emerge in a stronger place in another decade to report on progress in supporting the development of social and emotional competencies in afterschool programs.

Acknowledgments

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Today's afterschool and expanded learning programs provide enriching activities that support academic, social, emotional, artistic, and physical growth. Research shows that these programs work best when they are high quality and evidence based. *Beyond the Bell: A Toolkit for Creating Effective Afterschool and Expanded Learning Programs* (4th Edition) takes the guesswork out of designing, implementing, and evaluating your program by translating the latest research into accessible information and tools. Whether you are a program leader or staff member, whether you are new to the field of afterschool and expanded learning or a seasoned veteran, whether you want to fine-tune a successful program or design a new one from the ground up—*Beyond the Bell* can help you provide enriching programming that supports youth development.

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