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Supporting Social and Emotional Development

Through Quality Afterschool Programs

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

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This first brief in American Institutes for Research's (AIR's) series *Beyond the Bell: Research to Action in the Afterschool and Expanded Learning Field* focuses on how afterschool programs contribute to the development of social and emotional competencies in 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 (SEL), shares recent research on how afterschool contributes to the development of these competencies, and, finally, offers some next-step recommendations to both practitioners and researchers.

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.[1] The caveat is that evidence is somewhat limited. Relatively few studies have rigorously examined the impact of afterschool programs on social and emotional competencies. 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 (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, and positive social behaviors.

Since that report, only a handful of researchers have explored the connection between participation in afterschool programs and social and emotional outcomes. Those few studies have shown that participation in programs is associated with improved social and behavioral outcomes, including gains in peer-to-peer social skills, prosocial behavior, engagement, intrinsic motivation and effort, and positive states of mind.[2]

All of these studies have shown that quality of programming and level of participation matter for producing outcomes for youth. In programs that were high quality, young people were more likely to see positive outcomes.[3] Likewise, youth who participated at high levels were more likely to experience changes than those who participated at low levels.[4]

Where Do Practitioners and Researchers Go From Here?

The research clearly points to several key features of afterschool programs that contribute to improved social and emotional outcomes. Given those, we recommend that practitioners engage in the following:

- Provide professional development for staff on how to make program activities S.A.F.E.

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- 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 by identifying what youth like and do not like about the program and making changes to match their needs and interests.

- Identify which skills 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.

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 study that measures impact over the past decade, with a particular focus on how 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. 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.

3. **Help afterschool programs better use the data they collect.** The field would benefit from a guide 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.

Scan the code at the left to access the full brief, its accompanying planning tool, and related resources.

http://www.air.org/resource/supporting-social-and-emotional-development-through-quality-afterschool-programs

Notes

[1] Durlak, J. A., Weissberg, R. P., & Pachan, M. (2010). A meta-analysis of after-school programs that seek to promote personal and social skills in children and adolescents. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 45*, 294–309; Pierce, K. M., Auger, A., & Vandell, D. L. (2013, April). *Narrowing the achievement gap: Consistency and intensity of structured activities during elementary school*. Paper presented at the Society for Research in Child Development Biennial Meeting, Seattle, WA; Vandell, D. L., Reisner, E. R., & Pierce, K. M. (2007). *Outcomes linked to high quality afterschool programs: Longitudinal findings from the study of promising afterschool programs*. Report to the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, Flint, MI.

[2] Pierce et al., 2013; Vandell et al., 2007; Larson, R. W., & Angus, R. M. (2011). Adolescents' development of skills for agency in youth programs: Learning to think strategically. *Child Development, 82*, 277–294.

[3] Shernoff, D. (2010). Engagement in after-school programs as a predictor of social competence and academic performance. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 45*(3-4), 325-337.

[4] Pierce et al., 2013.

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