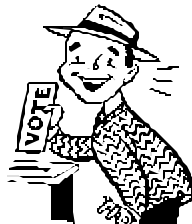


PRACTICE AND PROGRAMMING ISSUES: After-School Programs for Children

Many families throughout the United States rely heavily on organized after-school programs to provide care for school-aged children. Such programs meet a variety of needs, including providing for adult supervision during after-school hours, fostering healthy development of children, creating alternatives to risky behavior, and shielding children from the increased risk of victimization that comes with time spent in unsupervised environments.¹ However, estimates indicate that in some urban areas, only 20 percent of those children in need of after-school programs will have the opportunity for participation.²

Moreover, there is a growing conviction among the public that after-school programs can play a role in preventing problem-behaviors among children, as well as promoting healthy development and fostering increased academic achievement. Hence, investment in after-school programs is one issue that enjoys widespread bipartisan agreement. In 1998, a poll by the Mott Foundation found that 80 percent of those surveyed would be willing to add \$10 to their taxes per year to provide \$1000 per child for quality after-school care. Of the bipartisan voters surveyed, 92 percent said there should be an organized place for kids to go every day, 99 percent favored providing after school programs to children between 3:00 P.M. and 6:00 P.M., and 82 percent said that such programs were needed in their communities.⁴

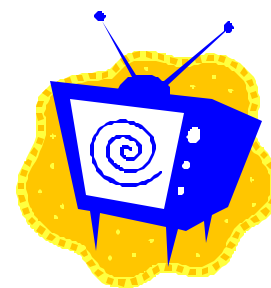


The Problem: Children Left at Home Unsupervised

In the United States, in 69 percent of married couples with children between the ages of 6 and 17, both parents work outside the home. Reports indicate that approximately 7–8 million children (and as many as 15 million) were left unsupervised on a regular basis.³ Of third graders, 43 percent are at times without supervision.⁴ As welfare reform moves a greater number of welfare recipients into the workplace, these numbers will most certainly increase.

Public school meets for only 6 hours per day, leaving up to 25 unsupervised hours per week between the time that children get home from school and parents who work full-time come home from work.

Unsupervised children show a much greater risk of behavior problems, including antisocial behavior, delinquency, and failing in school.³ Research demonstrates that most delinquent behavior occurs in the after-school hours from 2:00 P.M.–8:00 P.M.^{3,4} Children may also not be spending their time in the most productive ways. In 1997, children aged 6–8 spent an average of only 22 minutes per weekday studying, while averaging almost 3 hours per day watching television. Seventeen percent of the children surveyed watched more than 5 hours of television per day.³



Benefits to Participation in After-school Programs

Practice within after-school programs has gotten ahead of science, and there is a need for robust research on the effectiveness of after-school programming. For example, there are no published randomized trials of after-school programs' effectiveness and few well-conducted quasi-experimental trails.⁵ Some research has suggested that children in after-school programs were found to have better grades overall; improved performance and interest in math, reading, and other subjects; better school attendance; more engagement in school activities; reduced drop-out rates; and higher quality homework performance.⁶ However, the research methods used to collect this information are limited at best. In addition, selection bias was not controlled for in these studies. Beyond academic outcomes, children in after-school programs were



found to develop new skills and interests; show healthier social adjustment, including increased self-confidence and conflict-resolution skills; and greater cooperation with adults and peers.⁷ These children show a decrease in risky behaviors and have fewer discipline problems and a smaller chance of victimization.⁸ They also display higher aspirations for the future.⁴ Yet these findings are plagued with methodological problems that limited their ability to be generalized. Clearly more quality research is needed to identify



effective after-school programs.

Funding

The 21st Century Community Learning Centers Program, administered through the U.S. Department of Education, received \$1 million in fiscal 1997, \$40 million in 1998, \$200 million in 1999, and \$450 million in 2000. In 2002, the No Child Left Behind Act passed. Within section B, \$1 billion dollars was appropriated to fund the 21st CCLC Program, and approximately \$325 million will be available for new grants. The administration for these grants has moved from the federal government to the state governments. Funding also comes from foundations granting to agencies and the private sector.

Recently, however, 21st Century Community Learning Centers Program received a proposed cut in funding from \$1 billion to \$600 million for the upcoming fiscal year. The cut was brought on by the mixed findings of an evaluation of 21st Century Community Learning Centers Program conducted by researchers at Mathematica Policy Research Incorporated.⁹ In the evaluation, researchers found that the 21st Century Community Learning Centers Program had a positive impact on where and with whom students spend some of their after-school time and had increased parental involvement. However, the study also found that the Programs had limited influence on academic performance.⁹ This potential shift in funding from the federal government and the current down turn in the economy could signal difficulties in future funding for after-school programs.

Best Practices for K–3 After-School Programs

Literature suggests that most effective programs include the following characteristics.

Goal Setting and Strong Management. Programs must be clear about their intended goals and communicate these goals effectively. These goals influence allocation of funding, activity choice,

program structure, and staffing. They also allow for clear communication of what the program offers to the community. A strong organizational structure must be maintained, and programs should be managed with these goals in mind at all times. Effective management also allows for program sustainability in the face of fluctuating funding resources and the meeting of legal requirements.

Quality After-School Staffing. Relationships with caring adults are a central feature in high-quality programs. The program administrator must play an active role in recruiting high-quality staff and make efforts to retain such staff by meeting their needs, providing such services as professional development programs and adequate compensation. It is important to maintain a low child to staff ratio, particularly with more complex tasks. Typically, numbers should not exceed 1:15, with 1:10 being more ideal.¹² Research has also shown that staff members with higher levels of education were more likely to use positive behavior management strategies.¹²



Attention to Safety and Nutrition. Programs must be both physically and psychologically safe. There should be adequate available space for a variety of activities, and group size should not exceed 30.¹¹ Programs should be accessible for all children who wish to participate, and attention must be paid to safety as it relates to transportation issues. Safe transit should be facilitated through the use of escorts and crossing guards. Psychological safety is related to positive interactions among peers and adult staff. A nutritious snack or meals should be provided when appropriate.



Effective Collaborations. Effective programs draw on all resources within the community and involve effective collaborations with community-based organizations, schools, juvenile justice systems, law enforcement agencies, and youth serving organizations. This enables the resources of the community to be used most effectively. It is important that after-school program staff be willing to work with other community organizations and aware of what resources are available. Communication across organizations is vital.

Strong Familial Involvement. High-quality programs involve parents and youth in program planning and provide concrete ways for families to interact with

children. They also attend to the needs of working parents. This includes consideration of affordability and transportation, as well as the possibility of providing parental services.

Enriching Learning Opportunities. Best practices include providing engaging opportunities to grow and learn. This includes a focus on academic learning and youth development, the learning of new skills, and the exploration of new interests. Research shows that an enriching curriculum accommodates individual needs through direct and indirect instruction and promotes learning in a variety of methods to accommodate diverse learning styles.¹² Such a curriculum also includes opportunities to develop competence in different domains through activities such as art, reading for pleasure, leadership development, and participation in community activities. Activities that allow for children of different ages to interact also facilitate enriched learning. Research found that when programs offered a wide variety of activities and employed more flexible programming, staff-child interactions were more positive.⁴



Meeting Developmental Needs. Considering what types of programs will meet both the educational and developmental needs of the target age group is important. Children in kindergarten and first grade need close adult supervision and often need adult assistance to resolve conflict. They are often more interested in the process than the final outcome of activities. They enjoy tactile activities, and often learn best and master tasks through their play. They also respond best to immediate gratification. By second and third grades, children are becoming more independent and enjoy interacting with peers. They should be offered more choices and encouraged to complete tasks independently. They have a more outcome- and achievement-oriented perspective and are more likely to attempt and enjoy complex tasks.

Linkages Between School and After-school. High quality programs form partnerships with schools in order to provide continuity of learning. Time should be allotted for children's day school staff and after-school staff to plan how to most effectively meet the needs of individual children. Learning should also be coordinated with the regular school day, and links between the school and the after-school curriculum should be maintained.



Strategies to most effectively coordinate the use of facilities and resources overall need to be explored and tested.

Diversity is Acknowledged and Appreciated. Active efforts must be made for programs to be inclusive of and appealing to all cultures within a given community. Activities must be planned that celebrate the various cultures represented within the program. Cross-cultural skills and awareness must be also be facilitated. Staff must be culturally competent, be aware of the elements of diversity, and understand the importance of emphasizing diversity issues. In addition, efforts must be made to include children with special needs.

Evaluation, Program Effectiveness, Program Goals. Programs should be regularly evaluated, using self-assessment and outside assessment tools and methods. Evaluations should utilize multiple measures of success that come from multiple sources (i.e., parents, teachers, and staff). Evaluations should also be linked to the goals of the program by creating an evaluation process that is focused on the goals of the program. These goals can be evaluated over time, and a course can be set for continuous improvement. In addition, formalized evaluation would begin creating the foundation for comparison across programs. One possibility is that programs applying for funding after their initial funding period has expired may be required to provide evidence of evaluation efforts as part of the reapplication process. It has also been suggested that larger programs utilize outside evaluation services in order to create an unbiased assessment.¹²

Conclusion

The convergences of a variety of interests in the after-school care area make it a critical time for policy makers to design programs that will meet the needs of children, families, and communities that they intend to serve. Given the widespread attention focused on these issues, it is important to build a system of high-quality after-school programs that will sustain, improve, and endure through social change.

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