

Questions and Answers

About Afterschool Programming for Today's Parents

A session with Dr. Robert Stonehill of Learning Point Associates

For today's working parents, filling the hours after school with enriching experiences for their children has become increasingly important. Quality afterschool programs bring untold benefits to a child—both academic and otherwise. Robert Stonehill, Ph.D., chief program officer at Learning Point Associates, is a nationally recognized expert on afterschool programming. He is the former director of the 21st Century Community Learning Centers program in the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Elementary and Secondary Education. He explains what makes a good afterschool program, how afterschool programs have evolved to meet the needs of younger and older children, and what parents can expect from their children as a result of participating in one.

Q: Why has afterschool programming become such a hot topic lately?

A: There are a number of factors. It brings parents and voters together on an issue that they both find appealing. For voters, it keeps kids safe and off the streets. For parents, it helps kids succeed academically and eases their worries while they are still at work during the afternoon.

This issue gains support because it's a win-win situation for very small, incremental costs. Many afterschool programs can take advantage of empty buildings on school campuses and use them after the school day is done. After all, there are gymnasiums, science labs, and music rooms that they can take advantage of. Why lock the door on these facilities, when they can use them and give kids continued access to the structures that can help them find success?

It's a strong case to be made—more than 90 percent of voters polled nationwide recently came out in favor of afterschool programming. This support cuts across political affiliation, demographics, age ranges, and ethnicities.

Q: Why are parents so in tune to afterschool right now?

A: All parents, especially working parents, feel better about their children's safety and security when they are involved in good afterschool programs. Often, they need something to bridge the gap between 3 p.m. when school is out and 6 p.m. when they come home from work.

Q: So what would an ideal afterschool program look like?

A: Well, it would have extensive partnerships with experts in the community. It would directly support kids in an individualized way. It would effectively help kids succeed in school, and it would have as broad a base as possible for activities.

Choice would be a key component. Kids love choice and the more choices you can provide for them—drama, choir, band, sports, photography—the more engagement and participation you'll

see. It would incorporate in the program interesting people from the community who relate well with kids: the scientists, artists, and businesspeople.

The bottom line is that a strong sense of community helps support afterschool programs, but there's no magic equation to guarantee an excellent outcome. It's a range of activities, undertaken with specific needs in mind.

High-quality afterschool programs can help kids become better students, better learners, and better overall citizens for our country's future.

Q: How do afterschool programs help improve academics?

A: When you help kids after school, you also help improve their performance during the school day on academic subjects. The research points to opportunities and exposure.

There was a study done in 2005 [Birmingham, Pechman, Russell, and Mielke] that showed afterschool programs could help kids improve their achievement test scores, particularly in mathematics. Programs can offer kids a broad range of activities, build life skills, create strong relationships with adult staff, and help them to know and respect boundaries.

Basically, the more leadership-type initiatives kids have available to them, the more articulate they're going to be. And when they have adults who can engage them on interesting topics in a safe environment, kids learn and model good behaviors.

Q: So afterschool programming helps address both academic and nonacademic endeavors?

A: Yes. Afterschool programs promote all-around high-functioning kids. Another 2005 study [Vandell et al.] studied elementary school students who attend high-quality afterschool programs. In this study, both the kids and their teachers reported that they felt they functioned higher than their peers for both academic *and* nonacademic behaviors.

Q: Nonacademic behaviors are great, but what about the academic basics—the core curriculum requirements?

A: Good news on that front, too. Afterschool programs help promote greater student achievement for mathematics and reading, too. Interestingly, what we've found is that the best afterschool programs work together *with* the schools. In fact, test scores improve significantly when afterschool programs connect to and communicate with the students' schools—*especially* if they incorporate a student's grades and test results into programming. We've seen anywhere from a 29 to 46 percent increase in mathematics skills and a 25 to 69 percent increase in reading and language arts. These numbers come from a study we recently completed of afterschool programs in South Carolina.

Q: So it sounds like afterschool programs develop well-rounded, well-adjusted kids. Are there special requirements of adult staff, such as certification?

A: Absolutely—on the well-rounded, well-adjusted kids part. Academic achievements are the tip of the iceberg with afterschool programming. A 2007 study by Durlak and Weissberg found that strong programs that promoted social and personal skills to kids—and then watched for evidence of understanding—showed all-around improvements in every area: behavior, attitude, and academic aptitude. The only exception was school attendance. The key finding here is for afterschool programs to be SAFE: Sequenced, Active, Focused, and Explicit.

Afterschool programs typically have a mix of teachers and staff who are not part of a regular school day. There's no big push for afterschool certification, the way there is for teachers. Really, the primary screening need is for security and safety. The main thing is to find community members who can engage with young people. If you can find scientists, painters, or photographers in the community, they can really help broaden a kid's perspective and expose them to many, many things that they may not have access to at home or at school.

Q: We've been talking about elementary-age kids. Are there also afterschool programs for high school kids?

A: This is an area where programs have really been evolving. We're gaining a better developed sense of how to serve different ages. Younger kids are easier—safety is one of the primary factors for parents, and general programs will appeal to most kids. For high school kids, it's a much more negotiated experience. You have to have interesting and relevant content to present that really meets that teen-ager's needs. For kids in low-income areas, this means a paying job through apprenticeships, job-training, internships, and the like.

Q: Are there places where afterschool programs for older kids have taken off?

A: Chicago has a program called After School Matters, championed by the mayor's wife, Maggie Daley. Thousands of high school kids in Chicago are awarded paid internships so they can learn while they earn money after school.

Boston has a program called Citizen Schools, which links to corporate sectors—banks, law firms, and investment houses—to help create a smooth transition from school to internship experiences. There are many more around the country—New York and Los Angeles also have programs that come to mind.

I expect that in the next few years, more of the federal funding is going to be aimed at afterschool programs for older kids.

Q: What kind of benefits can you expect for your child?

A: In a high-quality program, your child will be in a safe, supervised environment, will get her or his schoolwork done, will get a nutritious snack, will participate in enrichment activities, music

or sports, and will stay out of trouble. As a result, you can expect to see academic improvements, behavioral improvements, and engagement in leadership and community service-type activities.

Of course, afterschool program benefits extend to many parents as well. For parents who may not speak English fluently, an afterschool program can help engage them in the educational process. Family literacy projects and language instruction can help parents understand the value of an education—especially for someone who has not valued, or had access to, education for their own life.

Research Study Information

The Impact of After-School Programs That Promote Personal and Social Skills, by Joseph Durlak and Roger Weissberg. Published in 2007 by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning in Chicago. Available online at <http://www.casel.org/downloads/ASP-Full.pdf>

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The Study of Promising After-School Programs: Examination of Intermediate Outcomes in Year 2, by Deborah Vandell, Elizabeth Reisner, Bradford Brown, Kimberly Dadisman, Kim Pierce, Dale Lee, and Ellen Pechman. Published in 2005 by the Wisconsin Center for Education Research in Madison, Wisconsin. Available online at http://www.wcer.wisc.edu/childcare/pdf/pp/year2_executive_summary_and_brief_report.pdf