

Time Well Spent: What You Need to Know About Afterschool Programs

Look around your neighborhood these days, and afterschool programming is likely getting a lot of attention. Why is that? It turns out parents can expect their children to make academic gains, improve behavior and relationship skills, and perhaps even find career inspiration from quality afterschool programs. Given these attractive factors—combined with the reality of single-parent or dual-working parent families—it’s no surprise that afterschool programs are gaining in popularity.

But what makes a good afterschool program? Robert Stonehill, Ph.D., chief program officer at Learning Point Associates, a nonprofit education organization, is one of America’s leading experts on the topic. He explains the importance of afterschool programming in terms of exposing kids to opportunities and giving them choices, which in turn leads to improved performance in almost every area of a child’s development.

Dr. Stonehill says that a good afterschool program offers “a rich and varied set of enrichment activities: music, art, community service, science projects, sports, and exercise.” And the enrichment doesn’t stop at the activities. It turns out that the adult interaction gained from these activities also is a huge factor. When kids have a trusted, responsible adult they can relate to, they in turn model better behavior and aptitude for learning—which spills over into the classroom.

The afterschool connection with academic outcomes may seem counterintuitive at first. As Dr. Stonehill asks, “How can playing basketball with an adult and then learning about photography help a child improve his grades in algebra?” He explains that much of the research points to opportunities and exposure. “The more leadership-type initiatives kids have available to them, the more articulate they’re going to be,” he says. The key is to provide opportunities to broaden a child’s perspective and exposure them to as many things as possible that they may not have access to at home or school.

For older kids, the afterschool challenge can be even tougher. Programs such as Citizen Schools in Boston and After School Matters in Chicago can take high school students who need to work after school and match them up with paid internships in corporate sector-type settings. These programs create transitions from school to work and often provide opportunities previously unavailable to the students.

There isn’t a cookie-cutter formula for a good afterschool program. Look for programs where adults listen to and connect with kids. With a strong program, the benefits can really add up: It gives kids a safe, supervised environment where they can get schoolwork done. It exposes them to wide range of enrichment activities, gives them choices about activities they would like to pursue, and most importantly keeps them out of trouble. And parents will see marked improvements in academic outcomes and behaviors as well as increased engagement in leadership and community service-type activities.