

Afterschool Activities and
Early Child Development

An STS Research Paper
presented to the faculty of the
School of Engineering and Applied Science
University of Virginia

by

Jack Durning
May 8, 2020

On my honor as a University student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments.

Signed: _____

Approved: _____ Date _____
Peter Norton, Department of Engineering and Society

Afterschool Activities and Early Child Development

The most important responsibility entrusted to schools is the safety of their students. But when the school day ends, typically at about 3 p.m., most parents are still at work. Many children require supervision for another two or three hours. Afterschool activities offer structured time in which children may learn or play. They promote healthy development and relationships, improve academic performance and provide children safety.

Though afterschool programs promote the healthy development of young children, in the United States funding for them is generally scarce. Schools, parents, and others often disagree about the attributes of good afterschool programs, and over how scarce funds may best be spent. Afterschool programs are the product of their competing visions.

Review of Research

Afterschool programs can take a variety of forms, such as daycare, academic reinforcement, or athletics (Center for Mental Health 2007). Researchers find diverse values in afterschool programs. To Ward (2020) they offer children needed exercise to release extra energy. Kimball (2020) contends that children thrive in the structure of afterschool activities. Like Ward, he likens afterschool activities to an additional recess, when children can have fun and be ready for homework afterward.

Lamb (2004) contends that for parents, having their children in a safe place during the postschool hours is the most important aspect of afterschool programs. It is very difficult for most parents to manage their children's transportation on top of a full-time job. More than 8 in 10 parents (83 percent) of children in afterschool programs agree that afterschool programs help

working parents keep their jobs (Afterschool Alliance 2014). Durlak and Weissberg (2007) concur that working parents support afterschool programs. Afterschool Alliance (2016) contends that afterschool programs are a critical resource for working families in rural areas. Hollister (2003) attributes increases in federal, state, and local government funding for afterschool programs in 1998 to a movement driven by educators, child development experts, criminal justice experts, health professionals, and parent associations.

The Center for Mental Health (2007) offers the view of school staff on afterschool programs. To their staff, the programs are a job opportunity and a way to serve students and their families. Shumow (2001) finds that principals, teachers, and other educators typically view afterschool activities as necessary supervision for children who would be unsupervised at home during work hours. They generally regard supervision as necessary to healthy development and to safety, especially for children in high-risk circumstances.

The U.S. Census Bureau (2014, 2018) has studied participation in afterschool programs and the benefits associated with it. Carver (2005) showed that afterschool activities are more important to families in poverty—families which are less likely to have an available parent between 3 and 5 p.m. Afterschool Alliance (2016) affirms this point, noting that the demand for afterschool programs in communities of concentrated poverty is much higher (56 percent) than the national average (41 percent). It appears that these programs are even more important to families living in poverty. Project WET (2020) declares: “Our after school programs are essential in breaking the cycle of poverty.” Cosden (2004) cites the U.S. Department of Justice to note that afterschool hours are the peak for juvenile crime and teen drug abuse, which afterschool programs can prevent. Presnell (2009) reports that children who are left unsupervised for four hours or more during a week have been shown to exhibit behavioral, social, and academic

hardships. She argues that these hardships worsen if children spend more hours alone after school at a younger age. Durlak and Weissberg (2007) concur, and note that afterschool activities can improve behavior and diminish noncompliance and aggression.

Medina (2017) contends that afterschool activities promote healthy development and foster life skills through interaction with positive role models. Procare (2017) claims that successful programs promote physical, emotional, and cognitive development. According to the National Education Association (NEA, 2017), afterschool activities promote academic success and improve students' perceptions of school. Durlak and Weissberg (2007) had similar claims to Procare (2017) in that afterschool programs generated greater academic success, improved children's perception of self-worth, and led to most positive feelings and connections towards school. The Center for Mental Health (2007) concurs with Procare (2017): afterschool programs can result in better behavior and greater involvement in school and in learning.

According to DeAngelis (2001), it is hard to define what makes a good afterschool activity; different activities offer different benefits. DeAngelis found that many good programs offer children feedback to children on their activities. According to Durlak and Weissberg (2007), effective programs employ effective skill training in matters of process and content. For process training, activities must follow a sequential training regimen that requires active participation. Content must be clear and directly presented. Such activities, Durlak and Weissberg contend, foster personal and social skills. Kunz et al. (2009) agree: successful programs succeed both in process and in content.

Educators and parents disagree about what form afterschool activities should take. Many parents value activities that may offer their children advantages in college admissions. Shaevitz (2013) notes that participation in extracurricular activities can appeal to college admissions

officers, who favor applicants who have distinguished themselves through extracurricular activities that demonstrate their talents or their aptitude for their chosen field of study. Although Shumow (2001) notes that afterschool activities include both academics and sports, Hollister (2003) observes that some value only academic performance. Others, however, prioritize safety or personal growth.

Afterschool activities are diverse and participation varies by sex and race. Shumow (2001) finds that girls tend to be more involved in academic, artistic, or social activities; boys are more often involved in sports. As children get older, the ratio of white children to African-American children in afterschool programs tends to decline (Shumow 2001).

Demand for afterschool activities often exceeds supply. Shumow (2001) finds that programs in low-income areas are constrained by insufficient funds. The California Afterschool Advocacy Alliance (2018) fights for more funding. Yet with the rising minimum wage, many programs cannot maintain enough employees. Cano (2010) complains of similar problems: more than half of the programs surveyed reported waiting lists to access afterschool programs. Even with this unmet demand, “participation in afterschool programs has consistently increased over the past 10 years, rising by nearly 2 million children in the last five years alone” (Afterschool Alliance 2014).

Despite supply constraints, many children who could attend afterschool programs do not. Terzia et al. (2009) cites insufficient structure in the activities, and family obligations. In many families, the oldest child watches over younger siblings until the parents return home from work. She adds that stigma can also deter children from participating. Some parents consider programs a waste of time unless they have a clear academic benefit. The peers of some children can deter

participation by characterizing students who need tutoring or homework assistance as stupid or bookish.

In afterschool programs, children may value routine or variety. Many children crave flexibility. According to Terzia et al. (2009), children typically want a balance between academics, sports, leisure, and learning. They want to learn practical skills that will be useful to them in the future for their lives and careers. To succeed, programs must also be in convenient locations and offered at convenient times. Terzia et al., (2009) note that some parents will not let their children participate in programs that are in neighborhood they distrust.

Safety

Afterschool activities promote safety in a variety of ways. Children are generally safer under the supervision of their teachers and school staff. Young children should never be left unsupervised. Yet in a study, the U.S. Census Bureau found that only “57 percent of children between 6 and 17 years old participate in at least one after-school extracurricular activity” (2014). Others may be alone at home, exposed to hazards. “Both my husband and I have full-time jobs,” says Ericka Lutz, of Oakland, California, “so we needed to find a safe, fun place for those postschool hours” (Lamb, 2004). Many parents cannot provide the adult supervision right after school that their children require.

Yet many parents cite reasons of safety for keeping their children out of afterschool programs. According to Afterschool Alliance (2014):

The lack of a safe way for their child to get to and come home from an afterschool program was cited as barrier to enrolling their child in a program by 55 percent of African-American parents, 53 percent of Hispanic parents and 54 percent of low-income households, compared to 48 percent of higher-income households and half of Caucasian parents.

Terzia et al. (2009) cite similar misgivings. Many parents want their children to walk straight home. Because afterschool programs are most needed in low-income communities, where schools are more likely to be low-performing (Hollister 2003), suitable settings for programs may be scarce. Community-based programs take place off school grounds and are funded from multiple sources (Kunz et al., 2009). According to Baughn (2014): “In-school programs are often overenrolled or have strict eligibility guidelines. Community programs can be expensive and difficult to get to, and the best ones often have waiting lists as well.” Even with these alternatives, parents still struggle to find the right afterschool program for their children.

For children, afterschool hours can be a dangerous time of day. In a study of juvenile crime spikes, “the U.S. Department of Justice (1999) reported that the peak time for juvenile crime is between 3:00 and 7:00 p.m. on school days, the period after school until parents typically return from work” (Cosden, 2004). Afterschool programs can keep children off the streets and in a safe, supervised area. According to Afterschool Alliance (2024): “In communities across the United States, 11.3 million children are without supervision between the hours of 3 and 6 p.m.” Afterschool activities offer safety, the priority for parents and schools alike, and may prevent drug use and criminality (Medina, 2017). According to Kimball (2020): “once children get into middle school and high school, the hour or two after school is the highest risk time for dangerous behaviors like substance abuse, because it’s the largest chunk of time when children are unmonitored.” These programs also teach kids how to protect themselves. “Last year we learned a whole lot of things to help us keep out of trouble,” said one fifth grader (Hamer, 2018). Programs such as the Boys and Girls Club have bridged the gap between the end of the school day and working adults’ return home, with apparently beneficial effects (Kimball, 2020).

Healthy Child Development

Afterschool activities contribute to the healthy development of a child. According to Procare (2017), “these programs give children the opportunity to develop greater social and cognitive skills among other children and adults. Successful programs promote emotional, linguistic, cognitive, physical, and motor development.” Many of the benefits of good afterschool programs cannot be gained in a typical classroom setting. According to Krehmeyer (2017), “High-quality after-school programs are an important part of education and youth development. They get kids excited about learning.” The Boys and Girls Clubs of America offers afterschool activities through local affiliates, and in particular serve the needs of children in poverty. It claims that those who participate in a club, “Youth (9 to 12) are 40 percent more likely to believe that school work is meaningful” (Boys & Girls Clubs 2020). According to Carver (2005), “Students in kindergarten through eighth grade whose families were below the poverty line spent more hours per week in an after-school care arrangement on average.”

Young children are social creatures; most would prefer to play with their friends after school than go home to an empty house (Cromwell 1999). They need this time to play after their long school day. “They’re going to get loud and rowdy. ... Some of them have been there for 7 hours because they do before school. And now they have to do their best for another 3-4 hours. Even for an adult it can be a lot” (r/Teachers 2019). Children may spend as much as 11 hours at school, more than the traditional work day. Reid (2007) cautions:

I’ve taken an unscientific count of other parents of kindergartners at various schools. Other kids in his class? Tired. Kindergartners at his former private school? Tired! Kindergartners at several other schools in our county? Yes, tired ... and one even had homework the first week! A former kindergarten teacher tells me to expect the exhaustion to last about four or five weeks.

Playing is important to child development, but children are getting fewer opportunities for play during the school day. Davalos (2018) found that time for free play, recess, lunch, and rest has fallen with time: “It’s got a role in human adaptation and development. It is how kids process things—through play. It’s the way they ready themselves for the world.” Play is important to keep children physically active and healthy. According to Afterschool Alliance (2015): “Today, more parents agree that afterschool programs keep kids physically active compared to five years ago.” Afterschool programs give children this time to play.

In afterschool programs, children often develop positive relationships with peers and with responsible adult figures. In a classroom, a teacher may be an authoritarian figure. In afterschool activities, children may interact with their teachers in a less formal setting. According to Medina (2017): “after-school programs can become a time that a child can learn how to interact with others, develop interpersonal skills, and learn how to be respectful toward others. Activities promote practicing good character traits as well as teamwork” (2017). Children typically may talk more with their peers, teaching them interpersonal skills. According to DeAngelis (2001), researchers have hypothesized

an “embedded curriculum”—a holistic, life-oriented teaching approach that went beyond the subject at hand. The teachers weren’t just showing children how to dunk a basketball or act in a play. They were also coaching them on life skills such as good table manners or how to interact with peers—basically, being great mentors.

By serving as role models, coaches and teachers help afterschool activities promote healthy development.

Yet participation in too many afterschool activities may be detrimental to children. Feiler (2013) asks parents consider: “Is the child giggling when you drop them off or pick them up? Or are they solemn and dragging their feet?” Children should be happy to go to their afterschool

activities. Shumow (2001) found that students who participated in 1-3 hours a day of afterschool activities behaved more positively than those who participated in more activities or in none at all. Parents must determine what is too much for their child. Children need some unstructured time; according to Feiler (2013), such time is best spent with family. “The best kind of activity of all is when you do it at home and you are doing it together with your kids” (Lie 2018)

Afterschool programs can generally serve children’s mental health needs better than normal schooling can, and they may reach more children with unidentified mental health needs. Afterschool goals can include mental health promotion through social-emotional development. According to Hedemann et al. (2016): “Anxiety and depressive disorders are highly prevalent in childhood, with rates hovering around 10 percent based on national surveys. ... Prevalence is even higher among ethnic minority youth and youth living in poverty.” Afterschool programs can strengthen the emotional well-being of participants (Kunz et al., 2009).

Another important benefit of afterschool programs is the physical aspect of its teaching. These activities, “provide recreational and physical activities to develop physical skills and constructively channel children's energy pent up after a day sitting in a classroom” (Schwartz 2013). Afterschool programs are an excellent platform for children to learn how to properly exercise and take care of their bodies. “Today, more parents agree that afterschool programs keep kids physically active compared to five years ago” (Afterschool Alliance 2015). It is imperative that children learn how to practice healthy habits and exercise, especially with the amount children affected by childhood obesity. “The prevalence of obesity was 18.5% and affected about 13.7 million children and adolescents” (CDC 2019). These programs are necessary to teach children how to take care of themselves physically. “Health and wellness are a final

outcome of quality programs. This consists of the ability to identify and make healthful choices (e.g., eating habits and physical activity)” (Kunz et al., 2009).

Academic Performance

Afterschool activities have been associated with better academic performance. Well directed and properly paced afterschool activities can promote physical, cognitive, and emotional development (Procare, 2017). Afterschool activities can promote learning through methods not offered during normal school hours. Outdoor games let children learn more actively, while having fun; children may release pent-up energy from the day (Ward, 2020). Active learning is an important method of teaching in afterschool activities. Children can learn by doing. Outdoor games may also serve as an outlet for excess energy, improving attention to homework later. Nevertheless, experts, teachers, parents, and children often disagree about which afterschool activities are best.

To many parents, the best afterschool activities are those that may be advantageous in college admissions. “Extracurricular activities are the major way students can demonstrate how unique they are, possibly more interesting, even ‘better’ than other student applicants, and showcase what they love to do” (Shaevitz 2013). These activities allow students to define themselves in the eyes of universities. What activities they choose to do and their commitment to them is a statement written by their actions alone. DeAngelis (2001) found political pressures favoring academics, which are relatively easy to evaluate through grades. Psychologists, however, typically favor programs that promote healthy emotional development, contending that in the long run they also improve academic results. Either way, according to the U.S. Census Bureau (2018), “children tend to have higher levels of school engagement when involved in one

or more activities, like sports, lessons or clubs.” Afterschool activities tend also to improve children’s school day, thereby improving perceptions of school itself. According to Medina (2017), they can improve “attendance and aspirations for continuing school in the future.”

For children struggling in school, afterschool programs that offer tutoring and homework assistance can be immensely helpful. Almost all children require occasional help with homework. According to Croox (2017), “Kids are not getting the homework help they need with adults absent during the long stretch of time between when school gets out and when parents get home from work.” Even when the parents get home, they may help little. According to Teaching for Change (2016): “Not having after school is really hard on working parents,” who “don’t always have time to help ... with homework.” Parents who have time to help may lack the necessary skills. Afterschool programs can serve this purpose. According to Hollister (2003), many parents attribute academic success to “time on task.” For many, afterschool activities should serve this purpose. They can also bridge academic performance gaps that divide children from higher-income and lower-income families (Schwanenflugel & Knapp 2017). Project WET (2020) claims that “78 percent of the students enrolled in our program improve academically by at least one letter grade in a core subject area.” These programs have a considerable and identifiable impact on the students’ academic performance.

Conclusion

Afterschool activities are a continuation of the school day, but also a departure from it, when children may learn physical skills not taught in the classroom and develop stronger relationships with peers and responsible adults. If children are overloaded with too many

afterschool activities, this can cause stress, which in turn may impair academic performance. In moderation, however, good afterschool activities offer a safe and healthy transition between school and home.

References

- Afterschool Alliance (2016). Afterschool in Communities of Concentrated Poverty, pp. 6-25.
- Afterschool Alliance (2014). America after 3pm: Afterschool Programs in Demand, pp. 4-28.
- Afterschool Alliance (2016). The Growing Importance of Afterschool in Rural Communities, pp. 3-46.
- Afterschool Alliance (2015). Kids on the Move, pp. 4-28.
- Baughn, Sarah (2014, July 30). The After-School Care Crisis. Great Schools. greatschools.org.
- Boys and Girls Clubs of America (2020). Providing Millions of Kids and Teens a Safe Place to Develop Essential Skills, Make Lasting Connections and Have Fun. www.bgca.org.
- California Afterschool Advocacy Alliance (2018). Protect California's Quality After School Programs. Save After School.
- Cano, Alejandro (2010, April 8). Many After-School Programs Are Offered, but More Are Needed, According to Study. *Fontana Herald News*.
- Carver, P.R., & Iruka, I.U. (2006). *National Household Education Surveys Program of 2005*. National Center for Education Statistics.
- CDC (2019, June 24). U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Childhood Obesity Facts.
- Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA (2007). After-School programs and addressing barriers to learning. Los Angeles: UCLA.
- Cosden, M.; Morrison, G.; Gutierrez, L., & Brown, M. (2004). The Effects of Homework Programs and After-School Activities on School Success. *Theory into Practice*, 43(3), 220-26.
- Cromwell, Sharon (1999). "Boom Time for After-School Programs." *Education World*.
- Croox, Susan (2017, Dec 8.). "Why We Need After-School Programs." Starfish Learning Center, Chicago.

- Davalos, Marina (2018, April 26). "Discussion Highlights Importance of Play in Childhood." *Barnstable Patriot*.
- DeAngelis, Tori. What Makes a Good Afterschool Program? (2001). *Monitor on Psychology*. American Psychological Association.
- Durlak, J.A., & Weissberg, R.P. (2007). The impact of after-school programs that promote personal and social skills. Chicago: Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning.
- Feiler, Bruce (2013, Oct. 11). "Overscheduled Children: How Big a Problem?" *New York Times*.
- Hamer, Roger (2018). "Omaha Celebrates After School Programs." WOWT.
- Hedemann, Erin, and Stacey Frazier (2016, Aug. 20). Leveraging After-School Programs to Minimize Risks for Internalizing Symptoms among Urban Youth: Weaving Together Music Education and Social Development. *Administrative Policy and Mental Health* 44, 756-67.
- Hollister, Rob (2003). The Growth in After-School Programs and Their Impact. *Brookings Roundtable on Children*, pp. 1-35.
- Kimball, Harry (2020). Find Balance with After School Activities: Time Management. Child Mind Institute.
- Krehmeyer, Chris (2017, Oct. 30). "Congress Should Keep the Lights on after School." *STLtoday.com*.
- Kunz, Gina, et al. (2008). *Elements of Quality in After-School Programs*. Nebraska Center for Research, 2008.
- Lamb, Sandra E. (2004). After-School Care. *Parents*.
- Lie, Josie (2018). "What Is a Good after School Activity for a 6 Year Old?" Quora. www.quora.com/What-is-a-good-after-school-activity-for-a-6-year-old.
- Medina, Laurie (2017, Aug. 17). After-School Activities Provide Long-Lasting Benefits. *PikMyKid*.
- NEA (2017, Nov. 6). National Education Association. The Value of Extracurricular Activities. NEA Parents' Resources.
- Presnell, Jennifer Lynn (2009). "Effects of After School Programs on Elementary School Students' Language Arts and Mathematics Achievement," 1821.

- Procare (2017, Aug. 17). Ten After-School Program Activities That Promote Early Child Care Development. Procare Software.
- Project WET Foundation (2020). "How I Use Project WET: Empowering Low-Income Kids with Hands-On Water Education."
- "r/Teachers: Please Cut after School Programs Some Slack" (2019) *Reddit*.
- Reid, Brian (2007). "School Is Tiring!" *Washington Post*.
- Schwanenflugel, Paula, and Nancy Flanagan Knapp (2017, May 9). "After-School Programs Do Work!" *Psychology Today*.
- Schwartz, Wendy (2013, Nov. 7). "Qualities of a Good After-School Program." Reading Rockets.
- Shaevitz, Marjorie Hansen (2013, June 11). What College Admissions Offices Look for in Extracurricular Activities. *HuffPost*.
- Shumow, Lee (2001). Academic Effects of After-School Programs. ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education, 2001, pp. 1-7.
- Teaching for Change (2016, Feb. 1). "Parent Advocacy Wins Six New After School Positions." Teaching for Change. www.teachingforchange.org/parents-win-after-school-program.
- Terzian, Mary, et al. (2009). Why Teens Are Not Involved in Out-of-School Time Programs: The Youth Perspective. *Child Trends*, 2009, pp. 1-9.
- U.S. Census Bureau (2014, Dec. 9). Nearly 6 Out of 10 Children Participate in Extracurricular Activities.
- U.S. Census Bureau (2018, Nov. 6). School Engagement Higher for Children in Extracurricular Activities.
- Ward, Kate (2020, Jan. 1). 25 After-School Activities and Games for Every Type of Kid. care.com.