

# Brief Research-to-Results

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## **PRACTICES TO FOSTER IN OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME PROGRAMS**

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### **OVERVIEW**

Efforts to improve outcomes for children and youth in out-of-school time programs can benefit from implementing proven practices from the field. In this brief, we draw from research, as well as a series of Roundtables<sup>1</sup> with practitioners and youth, to identify 10 practices that can foster positive outcomes for participants in out-of-school time programs. In a related brief, we highlight negative practices to avoid.<sup>2</sup>

### **PROGRAM PRACTICES TO FOSTER**

**1. Foster positive and sustained relationships with caring adults.** Research finds that relationships with caring adults play a key role in determining the level of participation and engagement a young person will have in a program, a finding that was also reflected in comments made by youth and practitioners in recent Roundtables organized by Child Trends. Relationships with caring adults will also affect how receptive and responsive young people may be to a program and whether positive changes occur in their lives as a result of their involvement in it.<sup>3,4,5</sup> While good facilities and activities are desirable, relationships remain the most critical aspects of effective programs.

**2. Foster an organizational culture that focuses on the *whole child*.** The heightened focus on academic achievement in recent years has resulted in a tendency to downplay the importance of social and emotional development and even the importance of health and exercise. As vital as academic achievement is, positive development means more than just high test scores and grades. Indeed, good physical and mental health, as well as positive social and emotional development, contributes to improved academic achievement. Moreover, research indicates that effective programs can support better social and emotional development, as well as better behavior.<sup>6,7,8</sup>

**3. Foster engaging and varied activities.** Research indicates that children and youth learn better with a variety of activity options, learning strategies (including interactive projects and group work), and opportunities to pace their own activities.<sup>9,10</sup> Young people have reported high levels of interest and enjoyment when participating in diverse out-of-school time activities, such as sports and arts enrichment (such as dance, drama, visual arts, and music).<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, research finds that when children and youth are engaged and select their own activities, they have higher self-esteem, fewer behavioral problems, and an increased likelihood of participating in program activities.<sup>12,13, 14,15,16</sup>

**4. Foster opportunities for children and youth to have input into programs.** One of the top reasons that youth give for not participating in out-of-school time programs is a lack of interest in the program

activities being offered.<sup>17</sup> Obtaining ideas from participants can provide useful input and also involve participants in governance. It is easy for programs to resort to “one-size-fits-all” activities managed by adults. However, such an approach is not as conducive to the positive development of children and youth of varying ages.<sup>18,19,20,21, 22</sup>

**5. Foster age-appropriate volunteer opportunities for children and youth to contribute.** An accumulating body of research indicates that volunteering fosters positive development among children and youth.<sup>23,24,25</sup> In addition, evaluations have found that service-learning approaches can enhance school success and reduce the risk of teen pregnancy.<sup>26,27</sup> Neighborhoods, organizations, parks, and schools have many needs, and there are many ways that teens and even younger children can help meet those needs.<sup>28</sup> Such an approach can be “two for the price of one” because volunteering helps both program participants and their community, and may support a strong connection between youth and their communities.

**6. Foster engaged and involved parents and families.** Getting parents and other family members involved in out-of-school time programs has proven challenging to programs, but finding ways to keep parents informed and engaged warrants the effort.<sup>29</sup> Family involvement in out-of-school time programs is a component of high-performing programs, and is associated with higher levels of youth participation and improved program quality.<sup>30</sup> Out-of-school time programs have found the following strategies helpful in involving parents and families in program activities:

- Build rapport with families by offering positive feedback related to their child’s program participation;<sup>31</sup>
- Sponsor family activities where children can share what they have learned;<sup>32</sup>
- Offer activities for parents such as volunteer opportunities and computer or parenting classes;<sup>33</sup> and
- Involve parents in program decision making.<sup>34</sup>

**7. Foster a program environment that has staff “buy in” for data and evaluation.** In an era of accountability and evidence-based programs, it is critical for organizations to become both producers and users of data for their out-of-school time programs. Input from frontline staff can be helpful in designing and implementing a data system or an evaluation,<sup>35</sup> and support from staff members can make a data system or an evaluation more efficient and accurate. Moreover, staff members may be more likely to act on the findings from an evaluation if they have been consulted and their voices heard. Similarly, an organization may be more likely to develop and sustain a commitment to ongoing data collection and analysis if staff members at all levels understand, support, and value the role of research and data in helping to meet the organizational mission.<sup>36</sup>

**8. Foster culturally appropriate programs.** While translating materials into another language can be helpful, it is not sufficient to make a program culturally sensitive.<sup>37</sup> Instead, it is often necessary to adapt the program for the population being served. This effort involves identifying the core components of a program and being sure to retain them, while adapting other program elements in ways that are more acceptable and attractive to the children and families in the target population. To achieve this goal, programs can:<sup>38</sup>

- Acknowledge differences and affirm a commitment to diversity;
- Encourage intercultural ties by providing opportunities for diverse program participants to collaborate on service projects or activities;
- Include program leaders, volunteers, and staff members from diverse backgrounds; and
- Incorporate traditional elements from multiple cultures by including activities, celebrations, books, games, and posters that reflect diverse experiences.

**9. Foster varied and engaging approaches to staff training.** Effectively trained staff members can positively influence the attainment of program goals, staff-participant interactions, and the work environment.<sup>39</sup> As with children and youth, adults may acquire knowledge from lectures, but knowledge alone often does not necessarily change their behavior.<sup>40,41,42</sup> Studies find that staff training that combines instruction with opportunities to practice new strategies is more effective in producing lasting behavioral changes.<sup>43,44,45</sup> Other studies find that, in addition to presenting background information on program components, effective staff training includes a blend of components:

- Introducing and demonstrating to staff the important aspects of new skills. Such an introduction may occur live or via video.<sup>46</sup>
- Providing staff opportunities to practice new skills or role play, receive feedback, and reflect.<sup>47</sup>
- Offering ongoing support and follow-up training. Staff members are most likely to integrate their training into their everyday practice when they are given regular opportunities to implement newly learned skills and to receive feedback through staff coaching, mentoring, or supervision.<sup>48</sup>

**10. Foster the treatment of children and youth as individuals.** The needs of children differ substantially, and this is true even for children in the same community or from the same family.<sup>49</sup> One of the strengths of out-of-school time programs is that they can personalize relationships and activities to meet the developmental stage, personality, strengths, needs, and stress experienced by each participant. Research suggests that children and youth benefit from participating in activities that are tailored to their age, interests, and stage of development.<sup>50,51, 52</sup>

#### **TEN OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME PROGRAM PRACTICES TO FOSTER**

- 1: Positive and sustained relationships with caring adults.**
- 2: An organizational culture that focuses on the *whole child*.**
- 3: Engaging and varied activities.**
- 4: Opportunities for children and youth to have input into programs.**
- 5: Age-appropriate volunteer opportunities in which children and youth can participate.**
- 6: Engaged and involved parents and families.**
- 7: A program environment that has staff “buy in” for data and evaluation.**
- 8: Culturally appropriate programs.**
- 9: Varied and engaging approaches to staff training.**
- 10: Treatment of children and youth as individuals.**

#### **CONCLUSION**

A lot has been learned about effective approaches to realizing intended out-of-school time program outcomes. As program practitioners consider fostering evidence-based practices, program administrators, staff, and stakeholders must keep in mind that it is difficult to change behavior overnight, even among children.<sup>53,54</sup> Thus, programs should be prepared to place an ongoing focus on eliminating negative practices and fostering positive practices.<sup>55, 56,57</sup>

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