

# Research-to-Results <sup>Brief</sup>

Child TRENDS<sup>®</sup>

*...cautions for designers, funders, and practitioners of out-of-school time programs about program practices that don't work.*

Publication #2010-03

January 2010

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

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### **OVERVIEW**

Perhaps one of the fastest ways to improve the quality of out-of-school time programs would be to replace practices that we know do not work with practices that appear to be more effective. In this brief, we highlight lessons from an expanding body of knowledge about specific program practices that should be avoided or minimized in out-of-school time programs to improve their chances of success. In a related brief, we highlight 10 practices to foster.<sup>1</sup>

### **PROGRAM PRACTICES TO AVOID OR MINIMIZE**

**1. Avoid negative approaches based on scaring children.** Some observers have hoped that negative approaches—such as showing young people what it is like to be in jail and enabling them to hear from and speak with prison inmates—can scare them into better behavior. However, a number of rigorous evaluations have assessed such “scared straight” approaches and found that they fail to deter juvenile crime or promote more positive behaviors.<sup>2,3,4,5,6,7,8</sup> In fact, such approaches have been found to have negative impacts. In some settings, youth’s participation in programs incorporating the “scared straight” approach has resulted in significantly higher recidivism rates.<sup>9,10</sup> Evidence indicates that positive approaches that invest in children’s futures are more often effective.<sup>11, 12,13</sup>

**2. Avoid lecturing.** Students spend a considerable portion of their school day listening to lectures, and they are not eager to sit through lectures during their after-school hours. Moreover, evaluation studies indicate that didactic lectures may increase knowledge, but they do not change behavior.<sup>14</sup> Research indicates that children and youth may benefit from a variety of learning strategies. These strategies can include: 1) interactive projects and group work; 2) activity options; 3) opportunities that enable young people to pace their own activities, and 4) experiential learning, in which young people have the opportunity to apply what they learn and then reflect on it<sup>15,16</sup>

**3. Avoid just focusing on “squelching” bad behaviors.** As important as it is to reduce substance use, violence, teen childbearing, and school dropout, it is not sufficient for programs to concentrate only on problems that may threaten young people’s development. In the words of Karen Pittman, “Problem free is not fully prepared.”<sup>17</sup> Moreover, a program that focuses on the negative may be likely to encounter problems with recruitment, attendance, and retention. Children and youth, as well as families and community members, are not looking for an ongoing recitation of their problems and failings. In fact, such a negative focus can contribute to children’s lower self-esteem and poorer school adjustment.<sup>18,19,20</sup> Children and youth seek support, encouragement, praise, and assistance in achieving their positive

goals.<sup>21,22,23</sup> Research finds that helping children and youth to develop well and achieve positive personal goals is more likely to reduce negative behaviors than are programs that simply highlight and focus on squelching bad behaviors.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, evaluations are finding that positive youth development approaches can prevent problem behaviors<sup>25,26</sup>

**4. Avoid putting children with serious behavioral problems all together.** A review of studies indicates that forming groups of delinquent or problem children is not an effective strategy for changing behavior.<sup>27</sup> Children in such groupings can encourage undesirable behavior among one another through negative peer pressure.<sup>28,29,30,31,32</sup> Additionally, separating children with serious behavioral problems into homogeneous groups can draw attention to their behavior before their peers and trigger the continuance of undesirable behavior by the children with the behavioral problems.<sup>33,34,35,36</sup> Rather than grouping children homogeneously, studies find that heterogeneous groupings can provide models of positive social behaviors for children with serious behavioral problems, resulting in decreases in their behavioral problems and increases in their academic achievement and peer acceptance.<sup>37,38,39</sup>

**5. Avoid ridiculing program participants.** Developing a positive identity is a challenging task for children and adolescents in a competitive and demanding economy and educational system. Whether from their peers or from out-of-school time staff, ridicule, criticism, and demeaning comments or treatment (especially when they occur frequently or in public) can undermine children's sense of self-worth.<sup>40,41,42,43</sup> Negative staff-child interactions can undermine children's social competency, empathy, and ability to negotiate conflicts and cooperate with others.<sup>44</sup> Providing young people with constructive suggestions and positive reinforcement, on the other hand, has been found to increase positive outcomes<sup>45,46</sup> This is not to say that it is appropriate to gloss over problems or ignore misbehavior, but rather to highlight the value of constructive comments that identify better behaviors, rather than responding with ridicule and criticism. As one provider commented in a Child Trends Roundtable,<sup>47</sup> "Catch them doing good."

**6. Avoid "100 kids, 1 adult, and a basketball" program formats.** These words of a Roundtable participant describe an all-too-common format for after-school programs.<sup>48</sup> In such cases, the number of adults and the resources available clearly are far too low to assure safety and to avoid fights.<sup>49,50</sup> Beyond these considerations, such programs cannot foster the activities or the positive and ongoing relationships that are essential to positive development for children and adolescents.<sup>51,52</sup> In addition, children who are depressed or who are being bullied may be overlooked in programs when there are few adults.<sup>53</sup> Also, it is unlikely that a sole adult in charge of such a program will stay on the job for very long, given the difficulty of managing a large number of children alone, so staff turnover becomes another issue.<sup>54</sup>

**7. Avoid implementing a program without a clear theory of change.** It is common for programs to spring up to meet a need and to grow in response to evolving challenges and/or in response to funding opportunities. Reflecting this pattern, many programs lack a clear and coherent mission. Alternatively, they may have a clear goal (for example, preventing school dropout), but they may lack an appropriate set of activities directed at achieving that goal. It can be helpful in numerous ways to invest a few hours in developing a theory of change or logic model that lays out the long-term goals and the inputs, outputs, and the intermediate goals that are expected to lead to the long-term goals.<sup>55,56</sup> For example, taking this step can help to ensure that all staff members know and share a common mission, that promises made to funders are reasonable and achievable, and that the activities and services that are offered are aligned with the goals.

**8. Avoid implementing only part of a program.** It is common for programs to pluck out one element of an effective program model and implement it. Studies find that the more closely programs adhere to an

evidence-based program<sup>a,57</sup> curriculum or model, the more effective a program is likely to be in achieving desired outcomes.<sup>58,59,60,61</sup> In difficult economic times, it is particularly enticing to remove expensive program elements or shorten program duration or frequency. Unfortunately, such dilutions may undermine the effectiveness of the whole program. For example, while the Teen Outreach Program could be implemented without service learning, the use of service learning is a core component that is critical to the success of the program.<sup>62</sup> Program directors should note, however, that some evidence-based programs are designed with stand-alone components that can be used in conjunction with an existing program model.<sup>63,64</sup>

**9. Avoid or reduce staff turnover.** Given the importance of relationships between staff and children or youth and the cost of recruiting, training, and coaching staff members, high turnover can undermine program effectiveness.<sup>65,66</sup> Steps that may reduce turnover include providing opportunities for staff members to express their views on decisions and directions, giving them chances to grow as individuals, and being generous with praise and positive feedback when warranted.<sup>67</sup>

**10. Avoid assuming that “We know what to do; we just need to do it.”** It is difficult to change behavior, even among children. A lot has been learned about approaches that don’t work (for example, that “scaring kids straight” doesn’t work and that lectures don’t change behavior), as well as about effective approaches (such as those that build strong, positive relationships).<sup>68,69,70,71,72,73,74</sup> More specifically, we have learned that the critical aspects of continuous program improvement include strengthening program components, enhancing implementation quality, improving staff training, sequencing age-appropriate programs over time, and monitoring outcomes. Moreover, we have learned that being evidence-based and data-driven can help programs become more effective over time. However, impacts are often small and short-lived. There is much still to be learned and partnerships between practitioners and researchers can add to our list of practices to avoid and practices to foster.

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

- 1: Avoid negative approaches based on scaring children.**
- 2: Avoid lecturing.**
- 3: Avoid just focusing on “squelching” bad behaviors.**
- 4: Avoid putting children with serious behavioral problems all together.**
- 5: Avoid ridiculing program participants.**
- 6: Avoid “100 kids, 1 adult, and a basketball” program formats.**
- 7: Avoid implementing a program without a clear theory of change.**
- 8: Avoid implementing only part of a program.**
- 9: Avoid staff turnover.**
- 10: Avoid assuming that “We know what to do; we just need to do it.”**

#### **CONCLUSION**

There is an expanding amount of credible information about both ineffective and effective approaches to promoting positive out-of-school time program outcomes. As program practitioners consider implementing evidence-based practices, program administrators, staff, and other stakeholders must keep in mind that it is difficult to change behavior overnight, even among children.<sup>75,76</sup> Programs should, thus, be prepared to examine their programs and drop negative practices, substituting positive practices instead.<sup>77, 78,79</sup>

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<sup>a</sup> Random assignment experiments provide the strongest evidence of a program’s impact. However, some researchers suggest that, to be deemed effective and highly rigorous, programs not only must be experimentally evaluated, but that evaluations also must be *replicated* and show evidence of *sustained* impacts.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors would like to thank Suzanne Le Menestrel, Ph.D., for her careful review of and helpful comments on this brief.

Editor: Harriet J. Scarupa

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SUPPORTED BY: The Atlantic Philanthropies

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