



Research Corner: *The Critical Ingredient in Afterschool Programs*

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Caring relationships in after-school settings

Although not fully appreciated, after-school settings provide wonderful opportunities for the formation of informal mentoring relationships. Faced with fewer curricular demands than teachers, the staff who work in after-school programs have unique opportunities to engage in the sorts of informal conversations and activities that give rise to close bonds with youth. Similarly, working parents, who are often stretched to their limits by job and family, rarely have the luxury of spending hours of quality "downtime" with their children each afternoon. In fact, there is growing consensus that caring youth-staff relationships may be a key determinant of both retention and success in after-school programming. In this month's Research Corner, I will review the literature as it pertains to youth-staff relationships in after-school settings.

Youth-staff relationships

- For several hours each day, millions of children in this country are talking to, playing with, learning from and generally in the care of the adults in their after-school programs. Over time, these relationships can grow and deepen into caring connections that positively influence children's well-being.
- Since many of the adults who work in the programs are relatively young and are from the same communities that they serve, they are well positioned to connect with adolescents and to offer credible advice and guidance.
- Beyond offering emotional support, the adults who work in community programs are often prepared to provide tutoring, educational guidance, advice about the college application process, athletic coaching and instruction and job search assistance.
- Relationships with staff in after-school settings may even offer certain advantages over more formalized volunteer mentors. Compared with mentoring programs, after-school programs serve a larger proportion of our nation's youth—and youth tend to see after-school staff with greater regularity.

Research support

Although parents and practitioners have long recognized the potential benefits of student-staff relationships, few researchers have considered the importance or impact of these ties. An exception is a study by Hirsch et al. (2000) that analyzed youth's relationships with adult staff in several Boys & Girls Clubs.

- Club staff were found to offer a distinct form of support, falling somewhere between the caring and love received from extended family members and the more specific, targeted skills received from school teachers.
- Although teachers tended to provide instruction solely concerning academic skills, relationships with club staff members tended to involve mentoring that focused on a combination of skills and life lessons.
- The skills that staff taught included academics—they were the only group out of the three groups of non-parental adults studied to provide help with homework—but also extended to sports, health behavior, and the arts.
- Staff provided a wide range of life lessons, including conflict resolution, the avoidance of drugs and pregnancy, the development of more positive body image and the need to maintain lofty career goals and aspirations for the future.

These findings are complemented by other studies of community-based youth programs. For example, Gambone and Arbretton (1997) found that social support from adult staff was a major force motivating youth to participate in after-school programs.

- Staff were better able to provide this support, in part, because of a high staff-youth ratio, a high level of staff stability and time in the schedule for informal staff-youth interactions.
- Staff provided opportunities for youth who tended not to have access to adults through social networks or mentoring programs.

That caring relationships play a central role in after-school programs was further supported by a multi-method, intensive analysis of 10 programs participating in the Extended-Service Schools (ESS) Initiative.

- The researchers observed that staff relationships were an important indicator of program quality and that staff greatly influenced the social and intellectual climate of the setting.
- As the authors reflected, "Staff practices and behaviors are the critical ingredient. Staff in high-quality activities set up physically and emotionally safe environments in which they heighten and sustain the youth's interest, making the activity challenging, as well as promoting learning and self-discovery in multiple areas (academic, social, personal)."

Reflections

After-school settings are interpersonal in nature, and the quality of the relationships that are forged can directly influence youth's attendance decisions and the benefits that they derive from such programming. The likelihood of forging strong ties is conditioned by a number of factors, such as:

- Frequency of attendance;
- Staff ratios and turnover; and
- Program characteristics.

Unfortunately, school and community-based after-school programs are often structured in ways that diminish the potential for caring adult-staff relationships. Programs, particularly those for low-income youth, tend to be poorly funded and, since no uniform standards or regulations apply to after-school programs across the country, there are wide variations in ratios and staff

qualifications. These organizational limitations constrain youth's experiences in predictable ways.

- Although a wide variety of activities and more flexible programming tend to give rise to more positive staff-child interactions, programs often lack sufficient resources to achieve these goals.
- Many offer few extracurricular sports and activities and are often funded only to address academic progress, or specific risks and problems.
- Although fewer students per staff give rise to warmer, more sensitive and supportive interactions, ratios in many programs hover around 25:1.
- Although relationship continuity predicts closeness and outcome, low salaries, a lack of professional certification and limited hours contribute to staff turnover rates as high as 40 percent and prolonged staffing vacancies.

Recommendations

In addition to expanding the range of activities, and working to attract, certify and retain qualified staff, after-school, programs should consider creative ways to enhance staff retention.

- In corporate curricula, such as "Bring Yourself to Work" (<http://www.bringyourselftowork.com/>) into staff training. Such curricula are designed to train after-school staff in how to build relationships.
- Take advantage of MENTOR's Web site, which is filled with excellent resources and materials, as well as best practices/models and databases for after-school programs. These resources can help programs to enhance the relationship component of their settings.
- Tap pools of volunteers from the community who can provide additional support. For example, some programs have recognized the enormous volunteer potential that exists among retired adults. Retired adults often have more time to devote to this pursuit and are ideally positioned to provide the level of personal attention, academic tutoring and emotional support that many youth need. Inclusion of community volunteers, such as retired adults, could be an important adjunct to after-school programming.
- Hire school teachers and aides to increase continuity and retention in after-school programs.
- Consider having after-school staff work in children's classrooms during part of the regular school day. This option both extends employee hours and provides continuity of care and learning in children's lives.
 - Gil Noam has described a program in which after-school staff serve as specially trained "prevention practitioners" who bring supports into the school and after-school classrooms rather than pulling children out of classrooms for services.
- Pay greater attention to the conditions that give rise to close staff-youth relationships. In addition to the above recommendations, studies of successful mentoring relationships offer additional insights.
 - For example, Herrera, Sipe, & McClanahan (2000) examined the predictors of mentoring relationship quality. The strongest contributing factor to all measures of relationship quality was the extent to which the youth and mentors engaged in fun activities.
 - Grossman and Rhodes (2002) noted the beneficial effects of longer-lasting youth-adult ties, and Grossman and Johnson (1998) found benefits among pairs

- who interacted more frequently and in which adults sought the input of youth and took a more open, less judgmental stance with them.
- In addition, Hendrey, Rogers, Glendinning, & Coleman (1992) found that the adult's capacity to refrain from harsh judgment, effectively cope with difficulties and express optimism and confidence made important contributions to mentoring relationships.

Relationships with staff may also play different roles, depending on youth's ages. Older youth may be more focused on the vocational skill-building and role-modeling aspects of after-school programs. Preteens and early teens, around 10-14 years of age, seem more responsive to adult influence. Older adolescents prefer when adults are available, but more on the sidelines. Indeed, Grossman et al. (2002) observed that it is most effective to offer teens programs with flexible open-door policies and opportunities for leadership and loosely guided autonomy.

Bottom Line

After-school programs are prime settings for the formation of close, enduring ties with caring adults. The quality of the relationships that are forged can directly influence youth's attendance decisions and the developmental benefits they derive. Programs should more effectively capitalize on this potential for caring youth-staff relationships, making them an intentional centerpiece of youth programming, rather than an unexpected by-product. Programs in which youth feel respected and cared for, and in which relationships endure for a reasonably long period of time, are more likely to foster strong ties. Moreover, there is inherent value in offering both academic and non-academic activities as a means of fostering strong adult support--support that is valuable even beyond the activities' immediate purpose.