

Introduction

For Susan Prandhan, ourBRIDGE for KIDS, an afterschool program that primarily serves the immigrant and refugee community in Charlotte, North Carolina, made all the difference.

Born in the Sanischare refugee camp in Eastern Nepal, Susanna came to the United States with her family when she was just 11 years old. Her transition to a new country was difficult. "The language barrier and the culture shock almost felt tangible. In 6th grade, I was bullied because I did not fit the mold the other students were expecting," Susanna, now an alumna of ourBRIDGE explained.

But after joining the program, things began to change. "[ourBRIDGE] provided me a safe space where I could thrive academically and socially without fearing judgment from others," Susanna said. "The program helped me improve in English and other school subjects and exposed me to extracurriculars and different aspects of American culture, while interacting with intelligent and compassionate tutors and volunteers from all walks of life."

Susanna is one of countless young people for whom afterschool and summer enrichment programs have made life-changing differences, providing access to a set of essential holistic supports, such as safe and supportive spaces, caring adult mentors, and help building confidence in who they are and who they can become. Afterschool and summer programs like Susanna's are vital to communities across the nation. They work with students, families, schools, and other community partners, helping provide the positive settings, relationships, and experiences that are the foundational building blocks for young people's healthy development.

That has never been more clear than over the last two years. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, concerns about the well-being of young people have become paramount. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, mental health-related emergency room visits by 12- to 17-year-olds in 2020 increased 31



percent compared to 2019, and multiple surveys show parents' growing concerns for their children's well-being.¹ Recognizing the serious impact the pandemic has had on young people's health and well-being, in October 2021, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, and the Children's Hospital Association joined together to declare a National State of Emergency in Children's Mental Health.²

Afterschool and summer programs have an important role to play in supporting the healthy development of young people and are all the more critical today. But the soaring demand for programs is far from being met.

Promoting Healthy Futures: Afterschool Provides the Supports Parents Want for Children's Well-Being, based on a pre-pandemic national household survey—America After 3PM—of more than 31,000 parents of school-age children, takes a closer look at parents' perceptions of afterschool programs, their priorities for their children, and whether afterschool programs were supporting the healthy development of the children they serve and were positioned to do so going forward. This report also identifies gaps in supports and areas of opportunity for policymakers and communities to ensure that young people have the necessary resources to persevere through the pandemic and emerge on the other side healthy, happy, and hopeful.

Key Findings

I. Parents increasingly view afterschool as important to the healthy development of children

From building social skills and positive relationships with mentors to keeping kids safe in the hours after school, the 2020 America After 3PM study finds that parents overwhelmingly agree that programs are providing a broad set of supports for children that are integral to their healthy development.

- **A strong majority of parents agree that afterschool programs support young people's healthy development:**

More than 8 in 10 parents agree that afterschool programs provide opportunities for young people to engage with their peers and reduce unproductive screen time (85 percent), learn life skills (82 percent), and build confidence (81 percent). And more than three-quarters of parents agree that children in afterschool programs have opportunities to learn responsible decision-making (79 percent) and build positive relationships with caring adults and mentors (77 percent). Additionally, most parents agree that afterschool programs provide working parents peace of mind that their children are safe and supervised (83 percent), that they reduce the likelihood that young people will use drugs or engage in other risky behaviors (75 percent), and that they keep kids in their community safe and out of trouble (74 percent).

- **Regardless of community, region, or politics, parents agree on the benefits of afterschool:** Across community types, regions of the country, and political affiliations, large majorities of parents agree on the benefits of afterschool programs. For example, more than 8 in 10 parents in urban (85 percent), suburban (83 percent), and rural communities (82 percent); parents in the Northeast (85 percent), Midwest (84 percent), West (83 percent), and South (82 percent); and parents who identify as Democratic (86 percent), Republican (83 percent), and Independent (82 percent) agree that afterschool programs provide working parents peace of mind that their children are safe and supervised.

- **More than ever before, parents believe programs support kids' needs:** Parents are now more likely to agree that programs provide children a wide range of supports than a decade ago. For instance, compared to 2014, parents are more likely to agree that afterschool programs keep kids in their community safe and out of trouble (74 percent vs. 66 percent), reduce the likelihood that young people will engage in risky behaviors (75 percent vs. 73 percent), and provide working parents peace of mind that their children are safe and supervised (83 percent vs. 75 percent).

- **Parent views on the benefits of afterschool have grown stronger—whether they have kids in programs or not:**

Ranging from keeping children safe and out of trouble to helping children build their social skills, more parents with and without a child in an afterschool program agree that programs provide such supports. For example, 90 percent of parents with a child in an afterschool program currently agree that afterschool programs keep children safe and out of trouble, 6 percentage points higher than 2014 (84 percent) and 13 percentage points higher than reported in 2009 (77 percent). Among parents without a child in an afterschool program, agreement grew from roughly 6 in 10 parents in 2009 and 2014 (59 percent and 60 percent, respectively) to 70 percent in 2020.

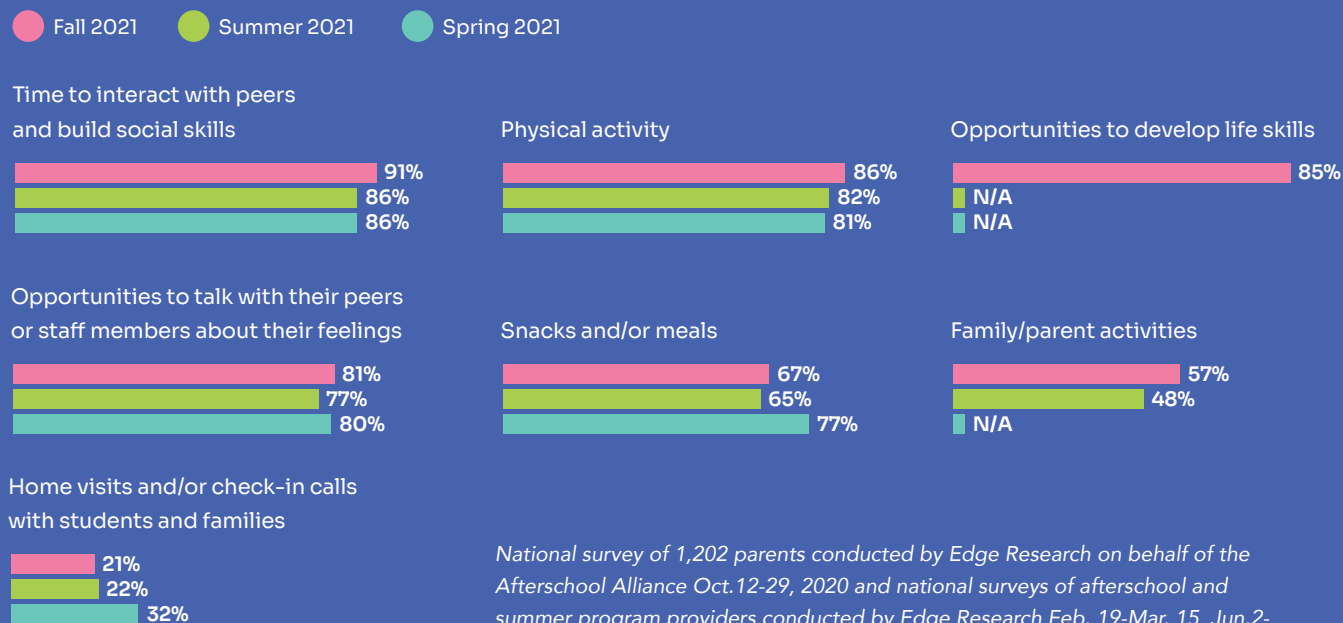




SUPPORTING HEALTHY DEVELOPMENT IN THE TIME OF COVID-19

During the fall of 2020, more than 8 in 10 parents reported that they were concerned about their child's well-being (84 percent), that their child had friendships and personal connections (82 percent), and that they were active on a regular basis (81 percent). When asked about the types of experiences they most wanted for their child, parents were most likely to report that they thought that their child needed more opportunities for physical activity (44 percent) and time to build life skills (40 percent). Rising to meet the needs of the children and families in their communities, afterschool and summer learning programs further established themselves as an integral partner in the network of supports necessary to ensure that all students, in particular those who were struggling and missing out, were provided the care and opportunities that they needed to emerge from the pandemic re-engaged and re-energized.

Afterschool and summer programs reporting that they are providing their students:



National survey of 1,202 parents conducted by Edge Research on behalf of the Afterschool Alliance Oct. 12-29, 2020 and national surveys of afterschool and summer program providers conducted by Edge Research Feb. 19-Mar. 15, Jun. 2-28, and Nov. 1-Dec. 13, 2021.

II. Afterschool programs support healthy development

America After 3PM finds that parents increasingly recognize afterschool programs' role in providing foundational supports to help young people learn and grow—supports that are the primary drivers for the choices parents make when selecting their child's afterschool program. Focusing on the activities and supports provided by afterschool programs, the three most important aspects parents look for when selecting their child's afterschool program are a safe environment, knowledgeable and caring staff, and the opportunity to build life skills. And, in keeping with parents' priorities, America After 3PM finds that afterschool programs are providing the supports that parents are seeking for their child.

- **Parents prioritize and afterschool programs provide safe and nurturing spaces:** By wide margins, a safe environment and quality of staff are the aspects of an afterschool program parents regard as the highest priority. Overall, more than 9 in 10 parents report that safety of environment (93 percent) and knowledgeable and caring staff (93 percent) were important when selecting their child's afterschool program, with 80 percent and 75 percent of parents respectively reporting each were extremely important. The percentage of parents reporting satisfaction with these aspects has increased over time, with the percentage of parents reporting satisfaction with their child's afterschool programs' safe environment growing from 85 percent in 2009, to 88 percent in 2014, and to 92 percent in 2020. Satisfaction with knowledgeable and caring staff at the program has trended upwards as well (76 percent, 84 percent, and 89 percent, respectively).

- **Parents value opportunities for children to build life skills, and afterschool programs are delivering:** Eighty-eight percent of parents report that opportunities to build life skills were important when selecting their child's afterschool program, with nearly 6 in 10 (58 percent) reporting these opportunities were extremely important. An overwhelming majority of parents report that their child's afterschool program offers time for them to build social skills (90 percent), their self-confidence (82 percent), and life skills (68 percent). Eighty-four percent of parents report satisfaction with opportunities for their child to build life skills, such as interacting with peers, developing social skills, and responsible decision-making.
- **The physical activity and nutritious foods provided by afterschool are important factors for parents:** Eighty-four percent of parents report that opportunities for physical activity were important in choosing their child's afterschool program, while 71 percent say the availability of snacks, meals, or both, which include healthy options, was important in their selection of their child's program. Both have increased in importance for parents since the previous America After 3PM survey in 2014 (68 percent and 62 percent, respectively). Currently, 85 percent of parents report that their child's afterschool program offers opportunities for physical activity and 83 percent are satisfied with the opportunities for physical activity, while 70 percent report that their child's

afterschool program offers snacks and/or meals that include healthy options, and 73 percent report that they are satisfied with the snacks, meals, or both that are offered by their child's afterschool program. For families with low incomes, families living in urban communities, and families living in the South, as well as Black and Latino parents, the availability of food was more likely to be extremely important when selecting their child's afterschool program than for parents nationally.

- **Parents see afterschool programs as helping to reduce risky behaviors:** When asked if afterschool programs reduce the likelihood that young people will engage in risky behaviors, 84 percent of parents with a child in an afterschool program agree. However, specific programming to reduce risky behaviors, including substance use, teen pregnancy, and violence prevention programs, is a lower-tier priority for parents of middle and high school students, with a minority of parents (43 percent) reporting that this was extremely important in choosing an afterschool program. The case can be made that the high percentage of parents who agree that afterschool programs reduce the likelihood of young people engaging in risky behaviors indicates that parents view supports and activities offered by afterschool programs, such as time to interact with peers and opportunities to build life skills, as contributing to reducing risky behaviors and helping young people make positive choices.



“ At the Boys and Girls Club, we create bonds, meet new people, and just have fun. My afterschool program helped me open up and be more vocal. I now feel more comfortable being able to shout out my opinions when needed. The program brought me out of my shell and without it, I wouldn't be the social and fun person that I think I am. Through the program, I also get the chance to give back to my community. We have lots of community service projects that focus on what people in the community need. One important moment was when we made over 1,000 sack lunches for people experiencing homelessness in downtown Salt Lake City, Utah. It was so great to work with so many different people and connect with others to make a difference.”

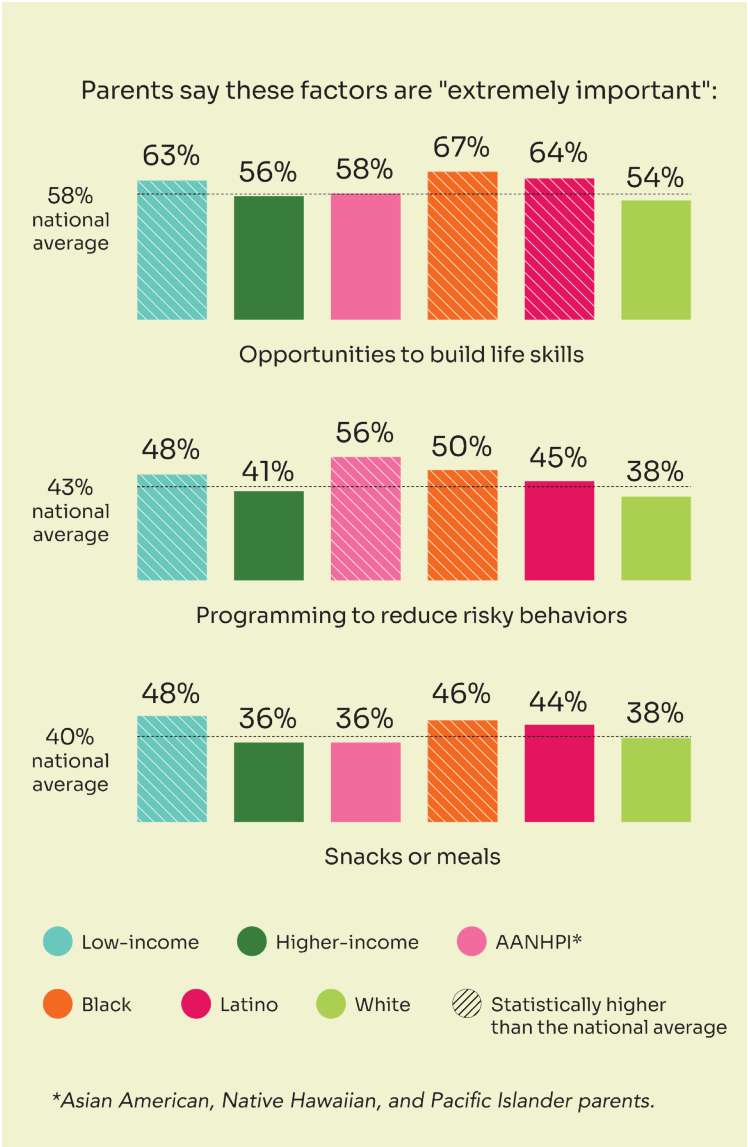
– Noah, Miller Family Boys & Girls Club
Murray, Utah

III. Parents of color and families with low incomes especially value afterschool’s role in supporting healthy development

While a safe environment and knowledgeable and caring staff are by far the most important qualities in an afterschool program for families overall, according to survey results, parents of color and families with low incomes place higher priority on certain supports than do White and higher-income respondents.

- **Opportunities to build life skills:** Black (67 percent) and Latino parents (64 percent) and families with low incomes (63 percent) are more likely to say that opportunities to build life skills were extremely important in choosing an afterschool program than parents overall (58 percent), families with higher incomes (56 percent), and White parents (54 percent).
- **Programming to reduce risky behaviors:** Higher shares of AANHPI* (56 percent), Black (50 percent), and Latino parents (45 percent), and parents with low incomes (48 percent) report that programming to reduce risky behaviors was extremely important when choosing their child’s afterschool program—higher than parents overall (43 percent), families with higher incomes (41 percent), and White parents (38 percent).

- **Snacks and meals:** For families with low incomes (48 percent) and Black (46 percent) and Latino parents (44 percent), snacks or meals that include healthy options were more likely to be extremely important when choosing their child’s afterschool program than parents nationally (40 percent), White parents (38 percent), and families with higher incomes (36 percent).



* This report will include findings on Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander (AANHPI) parents, respondents who selected either “Asian” or “Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander” when asked to describe themselves.

Summertime and Healthy Development

The report, *Time for a Game-Changing Summer, With Opportunity and Growth for All of America's Youth*, established that similar to the hours after school, a safe environment and knowledgeable and caring staff were the primary deciding factors when parents selected what their child did during the 2019 summer. However, unlike priorities during the school year, parents are more likely to report that opportunities such as time to experience the outdoors (52 percent vs. 41 percent), physical activity (60 percent vs. 53 percent), and building life skills (63 percent vs. 58 percent) were extremely important in their decision-making process when selecting a summer program.

For their child's summer, parents say that they want programs that offer activities that are engaging, offer choice, and keep their child active and outside, more so than a summer experience focused on academics.



During the pandemic, a national survey of parents commissioned by the Afterschool Alliance in August 2020 found that parents continued to prioritize a safe environment (90 percent), knowledgeable and caring staff (88 percent), and opportunities to build life skills (85 percent) when choosing their child's activities for the 2020 summer. Also among the top five reasons parents selected their child's summer activities were safety and cleaning precautions against COVID-19 (86 percent) and time for their children to interact with peers and supportive staff (84 percent). Similar to findings in the America After 3PM survey, parents were more likely to say that supports for their child's well-being were important during the summer compared to academic help.



IV. Areas of opportunity

Afterschool programs are providing young people a safe and supportive environment where they have opportunities to be active, interact with their peers, build confidence, and learn responsible decision-making. However, America After 3PM identifies areas where afterschool programs can do more to further support young people's healthy development.

- **Parent/family engagement:** While family activities were not among the top factors for parents when selecting their child's afterschool program (48 percent in 2014), engaging families is an opportunity for afterschool programs to build connections with families, thus helping to strengthen the web of support for children. Yet, the America After 3PM survey finds that only 43 percent of parents report that their child's afterschool program offers parent or family activities, a slight decrease from 45 percent in 2014. As 78 percent of parents with a child in an afterschool program agree that afterschool programs help parents build connections to their child's school day education, increased opportunities for family engagement in afterschool programs can further establish relationships and trust between families and program providers.
- **Service learning/community service:** Forging connections to one's community through activities such as community service and service learning has short- and long-term benefits for young people, including a positive impact on their health outcomes, educational achievement, feelings of connectedness to the community, and economic prospects. Afterschool and summer programs are an opportune time to engage students in community service or service learning, however, only 36 percent of parents report that their child's afterschool program offers service learning or community service. While this number jumps to nearly half among parents of high schoolers (49 percent), the number drops back down to roughly 1 in 3 among parents of middle schoolers (37 percent) and elementary schoolers (32 percent).
- **Addressing parent concerns:** America After 3PM finds that half of parents without a child in an afterschool program (50 percent) report that their decision not to enroll their child in a program is partly based on concerns that programs would expose their child to negative influences, experiences, and values, such as bullying and peer pressure. This concern is greater among Latino (56 percent) and Black parents (54 percent). As only 1 in 4 parents without a child in an afterschool program completely agree that information on

afterschool programs is readily available in their community and among parents of likely participants, 60 percent report it was difficult to find an appropriate afterschool program for their child, increasing access to information about available afterschool programs can help ensure that parents are well-informed when making decisions about enrolling in an afterschool program. Information sharing could take a number of forms, such as afterschool programs partnering with local schools to help increase awareness or programs hosting open houses for families to learn more about their offerings.

Conclusion

By April 2020, 41 states and the District of Columbia had issued statewide stay-at-home orders and schools in 45 states were closed for the academic school year.³ Two years later, children and families continue to cope with disruptions to school, work, relationships, and everyday life. Afterschool and summer learning programs are a pivotal component of the network of supports that young people need, now more than ever. However, from 2014 to 2020, afterschool program participation has decreased as barriers to participation and unmet demand for afterschool programs have grown.

As parents increasingly look to afterschool programs to support young people's overall health and development, but issues of access prevent millions of young people from benefitting from the opportunities that programs provide, action is needed at the local, state, and federal levels to ensure access to afterschool programs for every young person who wants to participate. For young people like Susanna and Noah, their afterschool programs provided a place where they felt that they belonged, where they had supportive adults and mentors, where they gained confidence, and where they found their voice. All young people deserve the same opportunities to help them forge healthy futures.

ENDNOTES

¹ Yard, E., Radhakrishnan, L., Ballesteros, M. F., Sheppard, M., Gates, A., Stein, Z., Hartnett, K., Kite-Powell, A., Rodgers, L., Adjemian, J., Ehlman, D. C., Holland, K., Idaikkadar, N., Ivey-Stephenson, A., Martinez, P., Law, R., & Stone, D. M. (2021). Emergency Department Visits for Suspected Suicide Attempts Among Persons Aged 12-25 Years Before and During the COVID-19 Pandemic — United States, January 2019-May 2021. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, 70(24), 888-894. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/70/wr/mm7024e1.htm>; Horowitz, J. M. & Igielnik, R. (2020). Most Parents of K-12 Students Learning Online Worry About Them Falling Behind. Pew Research Center. Retrieved from <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/10/29/most-parents-of-k-12-students-learning-online-worry-about-them-falling-behind/>

² American Academy of Pediatrics, American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, & Children's Hospital Association. (2021). AAP-AACAP-CHA Declaration of a National Emergency in Child and Adolescent Mental Health. Retrieved from <https://www.aap.org/en/advocacy/child-and-adolescent-healthy-mental-development/aap-aacap-cha-declaration-of-a-national-emergency-in-child-and-adolescent-mental-health/>

³ Kates, J., Michaud, J., & Tolbert, T. (2020). Stay-At-Home Orders to Fight COVID-19 in the United States: The Risks of a Scattershot Approach. Kaiser Family Foundation. Retrieved from <https://www.kff.org/policy-watch/stay-at-home-orders-to-fight-covid19/>; EducationWeek. (2021). Map: Coronavirus and School Closures in 2019-2020. Retrieved from <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/map-coronavirus-and-school-closures-in-2019-2020/2020/03>

Methodology

America After 3PM is a nationally representative survey of randomly selected adults who live in the United States and are the parent or guardian of a school-age child who lives in their household. The survey was conducted using a blend of national consumer panels, with the goal of completing at least 200 interviews in every state and Washington, D.C. In states where this goal could not be reached using online panels, supplementary telephone interviews were conducted. America After 3PM data included in this report was collected between January 27 and March 17, 2020. A total of 31,055 households were surveyed. For the 2020 wave of America After 3PM, interviews were conducted in both English and Spanish. Data from interviews are weighted on race and income within state and by state population. The overall margin of error for child-level and household-level data is +/- < 1 percent.

National and state America After 3PM data can be found on the interactive data dashboard at: afterschoolalliance.org/AA3PM/.

