



An Ideal Opportunity: The Role of Afterschool in Social and Emotional Learning

SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING



Ensuring all children and youth thrive as they move through school and into their adult lives requires that they have the opportunity to develop the skills and competencies that will help them land their first job, navigate and overcome the challenges they will face, keep positive relationships, and make good decisions. While families are central to this, others who interact with students can play a supporting role. For instance, a bipartisan report by the American Enterprise Institute and the Brookings Institution recommended a holistic approach to education, promoting both academics and skills such as working well with others, self-management, and responsible decision-making.¹

Afterschool and summer learning programs, which have long been places for positive youth development, are helping students cultivate their social and emotional skills and competencies. Programs provide supportive mentors, create a safe space where students can explore new interest areas and build confidence in their abilities, show students how to work collaboratively, and provide meaningful ways for students to engage in the program.

The Problem: More opportunities to develop social and emotional skills and competencies are needed

Academics alone are not enough for students' future success. A Business Roundtable member survey found that an applicant's communication and teamwork skills were just as relevant as their basic reading, writing, and math skills.²

Schools recognize the importance of social and emotional learning, but barriers to implementation exist. Teachers and principals are strong proponents of social and emotional learning (SEL) for their students, however, schools struggle with the implementation of SEL practices during the school day, including a lack of sufficient time, training, and funding focused on building social and emotional skills.³

Too many children and youth today have faced a traumatic experience, placing them at higher risk for negative health and education outcomes. Close to half of children in the U.S. have experienced at least one adverse childhood experience, experiences that could have negative and lasting effects on their health and wellbeing.⁴

Afterschool Can Help: Afterschool programs supporting students' social and emotional development

The foundation for healthy and positive development is the possession of strong social and emotional skills and competencies that help youth: do well academically, maintain positive relationships, be mentally and physically healthy, and become civically engaged.⁵ Participation in evidence-based programs that take a SEL approach is linked to positive outcomes, including improved behavior in school and academic performance, lowered emotional distress, and improved self-perception and attitudes toward school, teachers, and others.⁶ Afterschool and summer learning programs are ideal settings to help students build their social and emotional skills and competencies. In afterschool, students connect to positive adult mentors, feel safe to try new things, and acquire new skills. When programs target their students' social and emotional skills, students see positive gains in their attitudes toward others and school, as well as in their performance at school.⁷ Below are a few ways afterschool programs support students' social and emotional development:

Taking an intentional and integrated approach. Programs that align their mission with SEL and intentionally design activities to grow students' social and emotional skills and competencies, strengthen their ability to implement and sustain SEL.⁸ For example, SEL is central to **WINGS for Kids' (WINGS)**, located in Charleston, S.C.; Charlotte, N.C.; and Atlanta, Ga. It promotes a culture and climate that is encouraging and fun, emphasizes positive relationships between staff and students, and employs a SEL curriculum to help staff consistently reinforce social and emotional learning objectives. Preliminary results of a randomized control study found that WINGS students improved their relationship with teachers and behavior in class.⁹

Prioritizing staff training and development. Staff are instrumental in delivering quality programming, helping foster an open and encouraging environment, establishing positive relationships with students, and serving as mentors. At **Girls on the Run (GOTR)**, located in all 50 states, plus D.C., girls run with their friends and coaches while learning and applying foundational skills, such as setting goals and managing emotions. GOTR's National Coach Training incorporates online and in-person elements, facilitated locally by council leaders who have attended a train-the-trainer workshop. GOTR Headquarters provides councils with coach support and site evaluation tools to aid in their local assessment of program quality. In a University of Minnesota evaluation, 97 percent of girls surveyed reported that they learned critical life skills through GOTR, including the ability to manage emotions, resolve conflict, and help others.

Providing relevant and engaging project-based opportunities. Creating authentic experiential learning opportunities helps promote student engagement and buy-in, while also giving students the chance to address an issue they care about, form relationships with their peers, think critically about a topic of concern, and identify solutions. Middle schoolers in the **Boys & Girls Club of Souhegan Valley** in Milford, N.H., formed the YES (youth empowerment service) team and reached the decision to become more involved in reducing opioid overdoses in the state after a weekend retreat reflecting on issues affecting them. The team designed an action plan to focus on drug and alcohol prevention and mental health awareness, which included hosting a Youth Summit.



For every **\$1** invested in SEL programming, there is an **\$11** return.





Promoting youth agency and voice. Afterschool and summer learning programs have the flexibility and adaptability to help students find their voice and gain the confidence in themselves. Through the arts, **The Possibility Project (TPP)** in New York, N.Y., concentrates on leadership, community action and responsibility, and positive future outcomes. Students create, produce, and perform original theatrical musicals based on their lived experiences while collaborating, setting goals, and prioritizing responsibilities. In addition to performing in an off-Broadway show, students work on community action projects, tackling issues of their choice to see their ability to affect change. An external evaluation found that students in the program performed better in conflict resolution and providing emotional support than their peers not in the program.

Conclusion

Agreement is high across the board that social and emotional skills and competencies are important for children and youth. More than 8 in 10 Americans said that it was “extremely” or “very” important for school to help students, “learn skills like being cooperative, respectful of others, and persistent at solving problems.”¹⁰ Together with families and schools, afterschool and summer learning programs can work to ensure that all children and youth are given the supports they need to build their social and emotional skills and competencies, paving a clear pathway to a healthy and fulfilling future.

For more information on how afterschool and summer learning programs are helping support social and emotional learning, check out the full issue brief and program spotlights at: <http://www.afterschoolalliance.org/research.cfm>.

ENDNOTES

¹ American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy and the Brookings Institution. (2015). *Opportunity, Responsibility, and Security: A Consensus Plan for Reducing Poverty and Restoring the American Dream*. Washington, D.C.

² The Business Roundtable. (2017). *2016 BRT Education and Workforce Survey: Results and Analysis*.

³ Jones, S.M., Barnes, S.P., Bailey, R., & Doolittle, E.J. (2017). “Promoting Social and Emotional Competencies in Elementary School.” *The Future of Children*. Vol. 27, No. 1, Spring 2017.; Bridgeland, J., Bruce, M., & Hariharan, A. (2013). *The Missing Piece: A National Teacher Survey on How Social and Emotional Learning Can Empower Children and Transform Schools*. Civic Enterprises with Peter D. Hart Research Associates; DePaoli, J.L., Atwell, M.N., & Bridgeland, J. (2017). *Ready to Lead: A National Principal Survey on How Social and Emotional Learning Can Prepare Children and Transform Schools*. Civic Enterprises with Peter D. Hart Research Associates.

⁴ Sacks, V. & Murphey, D. (2018). *The prevalence of adverse childhood experiences, nationally, by state, and by race or ethnicity*. Child Trends.

⁵ Jones, S., Brush, K., Bailey, R., Brion-Meisels, G., McIntyre, J., Kahn, J., Nelson, B., & Stickle, L. (2017). *Navigating SEL from the Inside Out-Looking Inside & Across 25 Leading SEL Programs: A Practical Resource for Schools and OST Providers*; Social and Emotional Learning. (2017). *The Future of Children*. Vol. 27, No. 1, Spring 2017; Durlak, J. A., Domitrovich, C.E., Weissberg, R.P., & Gullotta, T.P. (2016). *Handbook of Social and Emotional Learning Research and Practice*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.

⁶ Taylor, R.D., Oberle, E., Durlak, J.A., & Weissberg, R.P. (2017). “Promoting Positive Youth Development Through School-Based Social and Emotional Learning Interventions: A Meta-Analysis of Follow-Up Effects.” *Child Development*.

⁷ Social and Emotional Learning. (2017). *The Future of Children*. Vol. 27, No. 1, Spring 2017.

⁸ Jones, S., Brush, K., Bailey, R., Brion-Meisels, G., McIntyre, J., Kahn, J., Nelson, B., & Stickle, L. (2017). *Navigating SEL from the Inside Out-Looking Inside & Across 25 Leading SEL Programs: A Practical Resource for Schools and OST Providers*.

⁹ University of Virginia’s Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning, College of Charleston & Child Trends. (2018).

¹⁰ Phi Delta Kappan. (2017). *The 49th Annual PDK Poll of the Public’s Attitudes Toward the Public Schools*.