

A Big-Picture Approach to Wellness: Afterschool Supporting Strong Bodies and Minds

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Taking a comprehensive approach to wellness—which includes healthy eating and physical activity and extends to additional aspects of health, such as social and emotional skills and competencies—can provide the necessary supports to help healthy children grow into healthy adults. Afterschool and summer learning programs are well-situated to be an integral component of initiatives that address the whole child. Children in quality programs have access to healthy snacks and meals, take part in physical activities, feel safe and supported by caring mentors, work collaboratively with peers, develop new skills, and gain confidence as they learn to set goals and make responsible decisions for themselves. Afterschool and summer learning programs are embracing broad definitions of health set forth by national health leaders like the World Health Organization and the Department of Health and Human Services and are part and parcel of the support system ensuring that children become healthy, happy, and capable adults.

The Health Issues Facing Our Children Today and the Adults of Tomorrow

National public health issues among children today are physical, social, and emotional

Data from the most recent National Survey of Children's Health reveal that children are struggling with physical, social, and emotional health issues. Although data over the past decade do indicate that the percentage of children ages 10-17 who were either overweight or obese has largely plateaued, close to 1 in 3 children still fall into this weight range,¹ placing them at a higher likelihood for a number of health issues including asthma, type 2 diabetes, and high blood pressure.²

"Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity."

— World Health Organization Constitution

"Promoting health and well-being and preventing disease are linked efforts that encompass physical, mental, and social health dimensions."

— Department of Health and Human Services' Healthy People 2030



The survey also found that 45 percent of children in the U.S. have experienced at least one adverse childhood experience (ACE).³ ACEs refer to a specific set of experiences, such as being a victim of physical or emotional abuse or living in a household with a person who has had problems with substance use* (*See footnote for full list*), that have been linked to negative health outcomes and behaviors, including substance misuse and depression, with a higher number of ACEs placing children in a higher risk category.^{4,5}

There are linkages between children’s physical and social and emotional health

Studies have also established a relationship between the physical and social and emotional health issues children struggle with today. While one does not automatically lead to the other, there is a symbiotic relationship. Research has found that children who are obese are more likely to suffer from low self-esteem, depression, and anxiety, and studies have shown the association between adverse childhood experiences and a higher likelihood of being overweight and obese.^{6,7,8}

Issues in childhood have long reaching effects

Children’s physical and emotional health not only has an immediate impact on their childhood wellbeing, but can have long-term consequences for their health as adults. Kaiser Permanente conducted a groundbreaking study that made the connection between ACEs and their impact on an individual’s health in adulthood, such as a higher likelihood of drug and alcohol abuse, depression, and heart disease.⁹ In a similar vein, separate research has linked obesity in childhood to a higher likelihood of obesity in adulthood, which then places them at risk for health issues, some of which overlap with negative health outcomes associated with ACEs, including heart disease.¹⁰

In addition to the health impacts on individuals, there are broader national implications. From a national security perspective, obesity was the second highest medical condition disqualifying individuals from military service from 2010 to 2014, with 27 percent of individuals ages 17 to 24 too overweight to qualify.¹¹ From a national economic perspective, adverse childhood experiences have been shown to negatively impact one’s socioeconomic status in adulthood, with higher ACEs scores related to a higher likelihood of reporting unemployment and household poverty,¹² translating to high economic costs, from loss in productivity to criminal justice costs.¹³ The national costs of obesity are estimated at close to \$150 billion.¹⁴

* The foundational Kaiser Permanente study included seven categories of adverse childhood experiences: psychological, physical, or sexual abuse; living in a home where they were exposed to violence against their mother; or living in a household with members who were substance abusers, mentally ill or suicidal, or had been incarcerated. Since then, additional experiences have been incorporated into the original list to capture a broader set of encounters children face. The 2016 National Survey of Children’s Health includes nine categories: a parent or guardian has been divorced or separated, passed away, or been incarcerated; lived in a household with exposure to violence or one that often or very often struggled to get by on income; experienced or witnessed violence in the neighborhood; lived with an individual who had a substance use problem or who was mentally ill, suicidal, or depressed; or was often treated or judged unfairly due to race/ethnicity.

ACEs vs. Toxic Stress

A common misconception concerning ACEs and toxic stress is that the two are interchangeable. Although a relationship exists between the two, ACEs do not necessarily lead to toxic stress, which has been linked to developmental delays, health problems, and behavior issues.

The Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University emphasizes the importance of recognizing the three levels of stress a person may undergo: positive, tolerable, and toxic stress.

Toxic stress is the response that could occur, “when a child experiences **strong, frequent, and/or prolonged adversity**—such as physical or emotional abuse, chronic neglect, caregiver substance abuse or mental illness, exposure to violence, and/or the accumulated burdens of family economic hardship—**without adequate adult support**” (emphasis added).

The duration and intensity of the adverse childhood experiences, in addition to the absence of a supportive adult in the face of these hardships, differentiate toxic stress from ACEs. Also of note is that the presence of a responsive and caring adult in a child’s life plays a significant role as a buffer from the adverse experiences they may be exposed to, helping prevent stress levels from reaching the toxic stage even in the face of an adverse experience.

Learn more at: [InBrief: The Impact of Early Adversity on Children’s Development](#)

Bringing It All Together: Afterschool Programs Support HEPA and SEL

Despite the serious health issues affecting children today, there are encouraging developments to help promote wellness. Identification of protective factors—factors “...that [are] associated with a lower likelihood of problem outcomes or that reduce the negative impact of a risk factor on problem outcomes”¹⁵—is one example. A number of protective factors at the individual level are related to HEPA and social and emotional skills and competencies, such as the ability to manage emotions, maintain healthy relationships, experience and show empathy, and develop healthy habits.¹⁶ At the community level, organizations can provide an environment that promotes protective factors, including fostering HEPA and social and emotional skills and competencies through a safe and supportive environment, providing opportunities to belong, reinforcing positive goals, and providing opportunities for skill-building.

The above framework emphasizes the importance of providing an inclusive host of supports for children and youth. Afterschool and summer learning programs have long excelled in creating a safe environment for all students, including those in need of additional supports, to thrive by building individual protective factors and providing positive experiences. Regular participation in quality afterschool and summer learning programs has been shown to improve students’ self-confidence, self-awareness, and positive social behaviors, as well as decrease problem behaviors.¹⁷

Healthy Eating and Physical Activity + Social and Emotional Learning

Through a focus on healthy eating and physical activity, as well as social and emotional learning, afterschool and summer learning programs are taking a holistic approach to wellbeing.

Healthy Eating and Physical Activity (HEPA)

Increasing children’s access to healthy foods and time for physical activity helps promote lifelong health. To encourage best practices related to healthy eating and physical activity, the National Institute on Out-of-School Time (NIOST), University of Massachusetts Boston, and the YMCA of the USA developed the healthy eating and physical activity (HEPA) standards for out-of-school time, which were adopted by the National AfterSchool Association (NAA) in 2011.

To learn more, visit Afterschool Alliance’s [Health and Wellness webpage](#).



Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)

The definition of SEL by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) is: “...the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.” CASEL’s SEL framework is comprised of five domains: self-awareness, social awareness, responsible decision-making, self-management, and relationship skills.

Read [“An Ideal Opportunity: The Role of Afterschool in Social and Emotional Learning”](#) to learn more about SEL and afterschool.

Programs also provide healthful foods and keep kids active;¹⁸ along with having physical health benefits, research has shown that physical activity is associated with decreasing anxiety and emotional distress and increasing self-esteem.¹⁹ Below are a sampling of ways in which programs have been able to support both their students' physical and social and emotional health:

Focusing on activities that intrinsically embrace HEPA and SEL

The **Zhang Sah afterschool program**, located in Philadelphia, Pa., implements a curriculum that teaches elementary and middle school students martial arts—including Tae Kwon Do, judo, and aikido—through a social and emotional learning lens. Students in the Zhang Sah program, which translates to “brave scholar” in Korean, learn martial arts techniques and form from instructors and their peers while practicing the program's core tenets of benevolence, courtesy, humility, indomitable spirit, integrity, perseverance, self-control, and stewardship. For instance, during their introduction to Tae Kwon Do and judo, students learn to listen, focus, and cooperate. A three-year internal longitudinal study of the program found that a majority of students fell within or performed above the healthy fitness zone in a number of fitness domains, including flexibility and frontal and back core strength, and exhibited high levels of empathy, connection to others, and an internal sense of confidence.²⁰

Using HEPA as a vehicle to build students' social and emotional skills and competencies

There are also afterschool and summer learning programs that view HEPA as an effective means to develop their students' social and emotional skills and competencies. **Coaching Corps** uses sports to work with low-income youth to develop their “POSE” skills and competencies: persistence, optimism, self-regulation, and empathy. Through its training program, Coaching Corps carries out its mission, “to ensure that all kids get to reap the benefits of playing sports with a trained, caring coach,” by partnering with more than 100 afterschool and summer programs across California, Florida, Georgia, Maryland, and Massachusetts, to offer sports as a tool to build students' teamwork, communication skills, leadership, and self-confidence.²¹ For example, coach Benita Vargas shared that for her, coaching volleyball was about teaching her middle school girls to “work together, accept new challenges, and use their voices,” asking the girls to treat each other with respect and commit themselves to improving.²² Independent evaluations of Coaching Corps have found that the program helps to build students' self-efficacy and confidence, learn teamwork, form positive friendships, and improve physical activity and fitness levels.²³

Training staff to model healthy behaviors

An implementation best practice for HEPA and SEL is support for staff. NAA's HEPA standards identify lack of staff training as a barrier to quality programming.²⁴ Similarly, the guide, “Preparing for Effective SEL Implementation,” points to the importance of staff support and training, the ability of staff to turn everyday interactions into teachable moments, and practicing social and emotional skills and competencies in real-time.²⁵

DC SCORES, a Washington, D.C., afterschool and summer learning program that combines soccer, poetry, and service learning, prioritizes the training and development of its frontline staff, or coaches. The program dedicates staff to work closely with coaches, ensuring that they have everything they need to create a safe and supportive



environment for students. Coaches receive training based on the program’s quality standards—which have integrated HEPA standards and social and emotional learning best practices—and are provided technical assistance. In addition to guiding students to work as a team through the soccer season and their creative writing process, coaches model sportsmanship, promote goal setting, and celebrate students’ individual and team accomplishments. An internal evaluation found that 70 percent of DC SCORES students improved their body mass index, 77 percent improved their aerobic capacity, and 86 percent reported being “better at staying positive when things don’t go their way.”²⁶

“Preparing young people for fit and fulfilling lives” is the mission of **A World Fit for Kids! (WFIT)**, an afterschool program serving 14 Los Angeles Unified School District Title I schools. The program takes a multifaceted approach to develop the whole child, using youth development principles to blend physical activity and nutrition education with academic support, mentoring, and enrichment activities. WFIT developed Mentors in MotionSM, a research-based training model that prepares high school “coach-mentors” to work closely with elementary and middle school students as role models. Coach-mentors first identify their personal and health goals and strategies to reach them. This process teaches them how to help their mentees achieve their health and fitness goals, and practice modeling healthy behaviors and positive social skills. An independent evaluation found that WFIT students were much more likely to be regularly involved in moderate to vigorous physical activity, improved their healthy food and beverage choices, and felt more confident and goal-oriented. Of students surveyed who completed Mentors in Motion, 96 to 100 percent graduated from high school and 76 percent were enrolled in or had completed community college or university degrees.²⁷

Empowering students to take charge of their health

At **Camp Fire Lone Star** afterschool programs in and around Dallas, Texas, staff show students how to take ownership of their health and their self-perception, by concentrating on balancing “energy in” and “energy out.” Through Camp Fire’s Wise Kids[®] health and wellness programming, students learn the importance of balance and control in their lives, gaining greater understanding of the power they hold to take charge of their health based on the choices they make. The program uses its “Thrive{ology}” framework, founded on the pillars of SEL, helping children to: 1) Identify Their Sparks; 2) Develop a Growth Mindset; 3) Learn Goal Management; and 4) Take Time to Reflect. Layered over the framework is the Texas Education Agency’s Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills health and physical education standards, which are largely aligned with the HEPA standards. Camp Fire’s 2017 Annual Report found that the youth served improved in a number of domains, including life skills, confidence, social skills, and conflict resolution.²⁸



Conclusion

The traditional picture of good health is physical health, namely a healthy diet and physical activity. Today, that picture has widened to encompass other aspects of health, such as social and emotional health, creating increased opportunities to inspire students to make healthy decisions in all facets of their lives. Afterschool and summer learning programs are a part of the systems and supports established to ensure that all children have a place where they feel safe, are surrounded by supportive mentors, have access to nutritious foods, are able to be active, can form relationships with their peers, learn how to set positive goals for themselves, and feel empowered to take charge of their lives. The adaptable nature of the afterschool field to adjust to the specific needs of the children and families they serve and the field's roots in positive youth development establish afterschool and summer learning programs as a strong partner in an inclusive approach to improve children's health. Increased support for programs presents a significant opportunity to broaden the circle of resources that can take a comprehensive approach to children's overall wellbeing. Together with families, schools, and communities, afterschool and summer learning programs are helping children become the best version of themselves.



Endnotes

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