

Afterschool: Fostering Protective Factors that Can Last a Lifetime

ISSUE BRIEF NO. 75 | SEPTEMBER 2019



Early childhood has long been known to be a formative time in a child’s development—a time when the brain produces more than 1 million neural connections every second during the first few years of a child’s life.¹ Now, new research tells us that the adolescent years are a highly important developmental period for brain growth and “the second most critical period of development.”² Similar to the goal of early childhood, where infants and toddlers learn enough independence to become children, the goal of the adolescent years is for adolescents to develop the skills and competencies to grow up into healthy, capable, and responsible adults.

However, there are factors at the individual and community levels that impact the development process. This includes both risk factors that increase the likelihood that one will take part in unhealthy behaviors, such as substance misuse, and protective factors that spur healthy behaviors and development. In communities across America, afterschool and summer learning programs are providing a safe and supportive environment for adolescents during the out-of-school time hours. During those hours, staff work with young people to build up the skills and competencies they will need to navigate life’s challenges and become the country’s next generation of leaders, thinkers, and trailblazers.

“Researchers now widely consider adolescence to be the second most critical period of development, and experiences during this period are thought to have an unusually strong influence on long-term health outcomes.”

– Developmental
Psychopathology,
Risk, Resilience, and
Intervention (Volume 4)

The importance of the adolescent years

Science shows that, from birth through young adulthood, our brains are continuously developing: brain pathways grow stronger, information is processed more rapidly, and we build more complex connections that enable more complex thinking.³ A child's adolescent years hold enormous potential to grow and develop the skills—from building relationships to learning self-control—that they will need in adulthood. As adolescent brains are in a constant state of change and connections become stronger and more efficient, these years are a prime time for positive growth, as well as a potential time for recovery from negative childhood experiences.⁴ However, as neural connections that are not used are “pruned away,” and rapid development places adolescents in a more vulnerable state, adolescents' surrounding environments and supports—particularly non-familial supports—during these years play a significant role in their development.⁵

The effect of our surroundings

Research has found that our surroundings at the community, family, and individual levels can have a positive or a harmful impact on our development. Poverty, community violence, conflict within the family, and parent or family members that struggle with alcohol or drug misuse are just a few of the risk factors that exist at the community and family levels.⁶

In fact, many of the risk factors outlined by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration overlap with adverse childhood experiences (ACEs),* experiences that can have negative long-term effects at the individual level.⁷ Close to half (45 percent) of children in the U.S. from zero through age 17, have an ACEs score of at least one.⁸ Youth experiencing three or more ACEs are at a higher risk for negative mental and physical health outcomes and 6- to 17-year-olds who have experienced one adverse childhood experience are more likely to be disengaged in school and less likely to be interested in learning new things, control their emotions in a challenging situation, and stay on task than their peers with no ACEs.^{9,10}

At the individual level, depression and tobacco and substance use and misuse are also risk factors young people are grappling with today. In 2017, close to 1 in 3 high school students (32 percent) reported feeling sad or hopeless for persistent periods of time, an increase from 29 percent in 2007.¹¹ The percentage of students who seriously considered attempting suicide also saw an increase during the same timeframe, growing from 15 percent in 2007 to 17 percent in 2017.¹²

While the Centers for Disease Control's 2017 Youth Risk Behavior Survey indicated a downward trend in substance use among high schoolers, decreasing from 23 percent in 2007 to 14 percent in 2017, the 2017 survey was the first time researchers collected data on high school students' misuse of opioids.¹³ It found that more than 1 in 10 students (14 percent) reported misusing opioids. Additionally, the 2018 National Youth Tobacco Survey found that e-cigarette use saw a jump from 2017 to 2018, increasing by 78 percent among high schoolers (12 percent to 21 percent) and 48 percent among middle schoolers (3 percent to 5 percent), totaling more than 3.5 million students.¹⁴

* The 2016 National Survey of Children's Health includes nine categories of adverse childhood experiences: 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. To learn more about ACEs and connections to afterschool, read “[A Big-Picture Approach to Wellness: Afterschool Supporting Strong Bodies and Minds](#)” and “[An Ideal Opportunity: The Role of Afterschool in Social and Emotional Learning](#).”



The Opioid Epidemic

Although the most recent Youth Risk Behavior Survey shows a decrease in substance use among teens between 2007 and 2017, opioid use remains a public health concern for young people for three key reasons:

- ▶ **Opioids and young adults.** The highest rates for opioid and synthetic opioid overdose deaths is among young adults, ages 25-34. This age group also saw the greatest increases in fentanyl overdose deaths.
- ▶ **Fentanyl and the “third wave.”** In 2017, fentanyl—a synthetic opioid that is more than 50 times stronger than morphine—became the most common reason for drug overdose fatalities. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has termed the spike in fentanyl overdose deaths beginning in 2013 through 2017 as the “third wave” of the current drug overdose epidemic.
- ▶ **Lagging data.** As of the release of this brief, the most recent data on high schoolers' opioid misuse is from 2017. It is difficult to ascertain the extent of opioid misuse currently without a more recent accounting of the issue.

Sources: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *2018 Annual Surveillance Report of Drug-Related Risks and Outcomes*, retrieved from: <https://www.cdc.gov/drugoverdose/pdf/pubs/2018-cdc-drug-surveillance-report.pdf>; National Vital Statistics Reports, *Drug Overdose Deaths Involving Fentanyl, 2011-2016*, retrieved from https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/nvsr/nvsr68/nvsr68_03-508.pdf#%20

Afterschool: An essential partner

Before-school, afterschool, and summer learning programs foster protective factors in two primary ways. First, programs provide supports that are a protective factor in and of themselves, such as access to caring mentors and a safe and supportive environment. Second, during the critical time of adolescent development, participation in afterschool programs helps to develop protective factors among young people at the individual level—factors that positively promote one’s health and well-being—including positive self-concept, competence, self-efficacy, agency, self-regulation, problem solving and decision making, interpersonal skills, and belonging and connectedness.¹⁵ Protective factors are linked to fewer problem behaviors, reduced substance misuse, and improved academic performance.¹⁶

Similar to the risk factors outlined in the previous section, protective factors exist within individuals, but are also present within families—through features such as family bonding, security, and stability—and within communities through the presence of factors such as positive role models, opportunities for youth to engage in their community, and availability of supportive

systems of care.¹⁷ Afterschool and summer learning programs are vital to the fabric of community supports for young people. Adolescents benefit from ongoing opportunities to foster meaningful connections with adults and peers, space to make decisions on their own, and time to solve problems and think creatively—opportunities that are often challenging for schools to emphasize in classrooms,¹⁸ but where afterschool and summer learning programs excel.

Afterschool programs are unique in their ability to provide greater autonomy to students and promote youth choice, youth voice, and teamwork. Statewide evaluations of 21st Century Community Learning Center (21st CCLC) programs—local afterschool and summer learning programs that receive federal support through the 21st CCLC initiative—have found students in programs report that being involved in the program has helped them work well with their peers, communicate productively, feel like they belong and matter at the program, and are able to try new things at the program.¹⁹

Risk Factors and Protective Factors

Risk factors and protective factors are present at the individual, family, and community levels. Below are examples of risk and protective factors for adolescents at the various levels.



Individual



Family



Community



Risk Factors

- ▶ Low self-esteem
- ▶ Inability to communicate
- ▶ Substance use and misuse
- ▶ Family conflict
- ▶ Parent substance use
- ▶ Unemployment
- ▶ Lack of adult supervision
- ▶ Poverty
- ▶ Exposure to a community or school related traumatic event or violence
- ▶ Favorable community or peer group attitude toward alcohol and drug use



Protective Factors

- ▶ High self-esteem
- ▶ Positive self-image
- ▶ Positive peer relationships
- ▶ Engagement in school
- ▶ Supportive relationships
- ▶ Clear expectations for behavior
- ▶ Stability and consistency
- ▶ Positive adult mentor
- ▶ Engagement in school or community activities
- ▶ Healthy peer groups

Adapted from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration’s “Risk and Protective Factors for Mental, Emotional, and Behavioral Disorders Across the Life Cycle.”

From implementing practices that are protective factors for young people, to strengthening the skills and competencies within young people, afterschool and summer learning programs are playing an integral role in promoting protective factors within the lives of the children they serve.

Providing an environment that models and makes time to practice positive skill development

In Colorado, the **Montrose Recreation District's Summer Enrichment Program** creates a welcoming environment to help students feel safe to share their feelings. Program staff carve out time during the program to encourage students to convey how they feel and demonstrate constructive ways in which to express themselves. Talking about the focus on well-being and the role that the program serves, a staff member shares, "As leaders, we practiced our communication skills as well. We didn't yell; we role modeled appropriate conversations skills. We would see that during the program these skills would be modeled by the children to their friends if they had disagreements. They expressed themselves and learned to resolve their issues on their own."

As afterschool and summer learning program staff serve as mentors and role models for the students they work with, it is critical that there are supports in place to help staff be positive, present, and healthful individuals. In Eldon, Missouri, the **Learning Enriched Afterschool Program (LEAP)** emphasizes the importance of having positive and healthy staff members and incorporates staff wellness into staff training and meetings. For example, trainings cover topics such as self-awareness, self-care, and reflection. Program staff are encouraged to create a self-awareness plan, take time to reflect on what energizes them, give themselves permission to take time for themselves, and appreciate the impact of their work on the kids and community they serve. A regular mantra in the program is asking staff to think about what they are doing for their mind, their body, their relationships, and their emotional health.

Focusing on helping students form and grow positive bonds with and between staff and their peers

A strong relationship exists between a positive youth-adult connection and a young person's health and well-being. Research has found that high-quality youth-adult relationships were linked to improvements in school day attendance, school engagement, and social skills, and a decrease in involvement in bullying.²⁰ At **Jóvenes de Puerto Rico en Riesgo, Inc. (JPRR)**, also known as Puerto Rico Youth at Risk (PRYR), one-on-one mentoring is at the center of the program's approach to serve students who are at risk of dropping out of school or who are prone to violence. A fundamental principle of JPRR's mentoring practice is that youth and adults come together as equals, in what is characterized as a conscientious exchange of life experiences, interests, and learning that fosters a supportive environment for youth to reinforce areas of personal, social, academic, and professional growth. The program also takes a culturally sensitive approach, incorporating Puerto Rican culture into its mentoring model that includes academic support, leadership opportunities, community service experiences, and life skills workshops. Since 2000, it has had a 95 percent effectiveness rate in preventing school dropout and delinquent behavior.

In Baltimore, Maryland, much like the name suggests, **Project Pneuma** (the Greek word for breath) focuses on the positive development of fourth through eighth graders through the principles of mindfulness and self-control. As a young adult, Founder and Executive Director of Project Pneuma Damion Cooper was near fatally shot as part of a gang initiation in east Baltimore. Through his recovery process, Cooper discovered the importance of forgiveness as a part of living a healthy and successful life. Today, he works to impart this knowledge to young males, particularly those who identify as African-American, through an afterschool program that focuses on social and emotional learning. Through martial arts, meditation, camping, and poetry, Project Pneuma helps their kids work through their emotions, control their temper, and communicate productively, driven by the belief that mindfulness can deter violent behavior. A program participant's mother said of the program, "I entered [my son] in Project Pneuma because of his attitude and anger. He needed to channel it. I've noticed his attitude has changed. It has leveled out. They've taught him about chivalry and humility." Cooper also reflects on the behavioral improvements of youth, saying, "Since we started this program, not one of these boys has been suspended. All their grades have gone up."

State-Level Afterschool Efforts to Address Substance Misuse

There are a number of afterschool initiatives taking place at the state level to address the opioid and substance misuse epidemic affecting communities across the country. For example, Afterschool Heals Tennessee, a project of the Tennessee Afterschool Network (TAN) to combat the opioid epidemic in the state, is providing professional development for program staff; education and support for families; and is engaging youth through an advisory council and a peer-to-peer anti-stigma campaign, all related to substance use prevention and recovery. Partnerships is also a key piece of this work, with TAN working with mental health organizations, school districts, and the state's departments of education and health.



Building self-awareness and self-confidence through youth voice and choice

Evaluations of afterschool and summer learning programs have demonstrated the supports programs provide to help students build their leadership skills. In a 2017 evaluation of Oklahoma's 21st CCLC programs, program staff reported that approximately half of their students "have opportunities to start their own projects, initiatives, or enterprises."²¹ A National Recreation and Park Association evaluation of summer camp programs in park and recreation sites found that 7 in 10 students said that they felt like they were a better leader because of attending the camp and leadership opportunities offered at camp and 83 percent of students said that they had more confidence at the end of camp compared to the start of the summer.²²

Serving Southeast Asian middle and high school students from immigrant and refugee families, **Southeast Asian Young Men's group (SEAYM)** is a documentary filmmaking afterschool and summer learning program in Seattle, Washington. The program encourages students to find their voice and express themselves through film, using the medium to explore topics impacting students' lives, including generational differences, culture, racism, and drugs and alcohol. The program, a part of the Asian Counseling and Referral Service (ACRS) group, is also able to connect students and their families to ACRS services, such as job training, citizenship and immigration assistance, health services, and counseling. Documentary films created by students in the program include "Model Minority Stereotype," which draws attention to the statistic that the high school dropout rate among Southeast Asians is higher compared to other Asian groups, and "Why I Don't Smoke": a compilation of firsthand stories with Southeast Asian high schoolers discussing their journey of reaching the decision to not use marijuana.

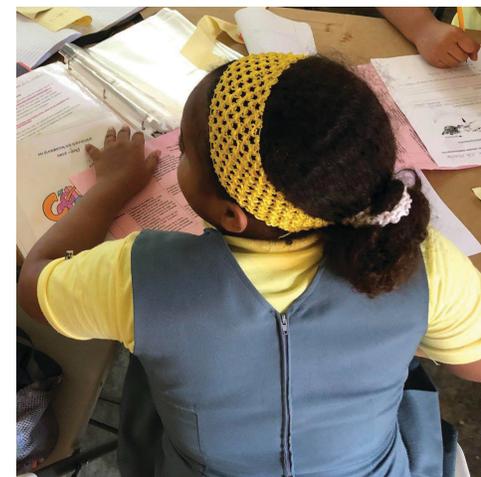
Being a resource for students and their families to help them connect to appropriate systems of support

In 2000, **Todos Juntos** first began as a Latin Club and soccer program serving gang-involved middle school youth in Clackamas County, Oregon. Today, the program continues to run a soccer club, but now also offers robotics, cultural leadership, college campus visits, and small group programming aimed at helping students manage conflict and treat others with respect. The program also provides family resource coordination, connecting families to local and state supports, including mental health services, health programs, housing assistance, legal resources, food banks, and parent education, to name a few. Todos Juntos also employs bilingual staff to help their immigrant families navigate the school system, county agencies, and social services. Since its inception, Todos Juntos has evolved into a program that provides a wide range of services and supports to more than 1,800 K-12th graders and families across nine schools.

In southeastern Kentucky, the **Harlan County Boys and Girls Club** is working to break the cycle of addiction that has reshaped the local community. In response to 13 students losing their parents to overdose deaths in one winter, the Club adapted its programming to include both additional immediate and long-term support services that help youth cope with the disruptive and often traumatic effects of the opioid epidemic. Immediate support includes a protocol that has been instituted by the program in response to a Club member losing a family member, where the program assists with care for youth as their families make funeral arrangements and offers to accompany youth to funeral-related proceedings. Longer-term supports include connecting students to professional grief counseling and trained staff members providing weekly one-on-one mentoring sessions to build the social and emotional resiliency of youth struggling with grief.

Conclusion

Challenging situations, difficult choices, missteps—these are circumstances that everyone has faced at one time or another in their lifetime. For some individuals, the issues that they are confronted with are more daunting than what an average person may encounter, and for others, they may face many more difficult situations than the person next to them. Young people are in need of a continuous system of support from birth through adolescence into young adulthood that creates the conditions to help each person thrive and build the skills and attributes that will have a positive influence on their lives as they make thousands of decisions each day. Afterschool and summer learning programs are a part of this continuous system of support, providing services during a critical time of development for young people that will help children grow their strengths, cope with the complications of life, and lead healthful lives to become healthy adults.



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