

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

HEALTHY EATING AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY (HEPA)
+
SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LEARNING (SEL)



"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

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 for healthy children to grow into healthy adults. Afterschool and summer learning programs are well-situated as 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 is 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 Problem: The health issues facing our children today and the adults of tomorrow

National public health issues among children today are physical, social, and emotional. The National Survey of Children's Health reveals that children are struggling with physical, social, and emotional health issues, where close to 1 in 3 children are overweight or obese, placing them at a higher likelihood for a number of health issues, including asthma and high blood pressure, and 45 percent of children have experienced at least one adverse childhood experience (ACE),^{1,*} which has been linked to negative health outcomes and behaviors.²

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, 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 ACEs and a higher likelihood of being overweight and obese.^{3,4,5}

* Refer to the full issue brief, "[A big-picture approach to wellness: Afterschool supporting strong bodies and minds](#)," for the list of categories of adverse childhood experiences.

Issues in childhood have long reaching effects. Children’s physical and emotional health can have long-term consequences for their health as adults as well. ACEs have been linked to negative health issues in adulthood, such as a higher likelihood of drug abuse and heart disease, and obesity in childhood has been associated with a higher likelihood of obesity in adulthood.^{6,7}

Afterschool Can Help: Bringing it all together to support HEPA and SEL

Despite the serious health issues affecting children today, there are encouraging developments promoting wellness, for example 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.”⁸ Several protective factors are related to HEPA and SEL, including the ability to manage emotions, maintain healthy relationships, and develop healthy habits.⁹ The afterschool field has long excelled in creating a safe environment for students to thrive, building individual protective factors and providing positive experiences. Regular participation in quality afterschool and summer learning programs improves students’ self-confidence, self-awareness, and positive social behaviors.¹⁰ Programs also provide healthful foods and keep kids active;¹¹ along with having physical health benefits, research has shown that physical activity is associated with decreasing anxiety and emotional distress and increasing self-esteem.¹²

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.

Below are a sampling of ways programs support students' physical and social and emotional health:

Focusing on activities that intrinsically embrace HEPA and SEL. Located in Philadelphia, Pa., the [Zhang Sah afterschool program](#), which translates to “brave scholar” in Korean, implements a curriculum teaching elementary and middle schoolers martial arts through a SEL lens. Students learn martial arts from instructors and their peers, while practicing the program's core tenets, which include integrity, perseverance, and stewardship. An internal longitudinal study 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.¹³

Using HEPA as a vehicle to build students' social and emotional skills and competencies. [Coaching Corps](#) partners with more than 100 afterschool and summer programs in low-income neighborhoods in ten major markets across five states, offering sports as a youth development tool by training volunteer coaches and afterschool staff to build students' teamwork, communication skills, leadership, and self-confidence. Independent evaluations have found that the program helps students build self-efficacy and confidence, learn teamwork, form positive friendships, and improve physical activity and fitness levels.¹⁴

Training staff to model healthy behaviors. At [DC SCORES](#) and [A World Fit for Kids!](#) (WFIT), training staff is a priority. DC SCORES, an afterschool and summer learning program that combines soccer, poetry, and service learning, ensures that coaches have everything they need to create a safe and supportive environment for students, including training based on the program's quality standards—which integrate HEPA standards and SEL best practices. WFIT, in Los Angeles, Calif., employs Mentors in MotionSM, a research-based training model that prepares high school coach-mentors to work with elementary and middle schoolers as role models. Coach-mentors first identify their personal and health goals and strategies to reach them, using the process to practice modeling healthy behaviors and positive social skills and learn how to help mentees achieve their health goals.

Empowering students to take charge of their health. At [Camp Fire Lone Star](#) afterschool programs in and around Dallas, Texas, through its 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. Camp Fire's 2017 Annual Report found that students improved their confidence, social skills, and conflict resolution.¹⁵

Conclusion

The traditional picture of good health is 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. The adaptable nature of the afterschool field to adjust to the 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.

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





Endnotes

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