Afterschool Alliance

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Afterschool: Fostering Protective Factors that Can Last a Lifetime

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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."[1] However, there are factors at both the individual and community levels that impact the development process. This includes risk factors that increase the likelihood that one will take part in unhealthy behaviors, as well as 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.

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.[2] 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.[3] 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 during these years play a significant role in their development.[4]

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.[5]

> "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)

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.[6] Close to half (45 percent) of children in the United States, from zero through age 17, have an ACEs score of at least one.[7] 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.[8,9]

At the individual level, depression and tobacco and substance use and misuse are also risk factors young people are grappling with today. In 2017, 32 percent of high school students reported feeling sad or hopeless for persistent periods of time and 17 percent seriously considered attempting suicide.[10] Additionally, while the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's 2017 Youth Risk Behavior Survey indicated a downward trend in substance use among high schoolers, the survey found that 14 percent of students reported misusing opioids,[11] and the 2018 National Youth Tobacco Survey found that e-cigarette use increased from 12 to 21 percent among high schoolers and 3 to 5 percent among middle schoolers between 2017 and 2018, totaling more than 3.5 million students.[12]

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.[13] 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,[14] but where the afterschool field excels.

Second, during the critical time of adolescent development, participation in afterschool programs helps to build protective factors among young people at the individual level—factors that positively promote one's health and well-being—including positive self-concept, agency, self-regulation, interpersonal skills, and belonging and connectedness.[15] Protective factors are linked to fewer problem behaviors, reduced substance misuse, and improved academic performance.[16]

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 vital to the fabric of community supports for young people.

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

In Colorado, **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. In Eldon, Missouri, the **Learning Enriched Afterschool Program (LEAP)** emphasizes the importance of positive and healthy staff members, incorporating staff wellness into staff training and meetings. 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 healthy individuals.

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

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.[17] **Jóvenes de Puerto Rico en Riesgo, Inc. (JPRR)**, also known as **Puerto Rico Youth at Risk**, and **Project Pneuma** in Baltimore, Maryland, both focus on building positive relationships. In JPRR, 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. Project Pneuma uses martial arts, meditation, camping, and poetry to help 4th- through 8th-graders work through their emotions, control their temper, and communicate productively with their peers. One mother shared, "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."

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

Serving Southeast Asian middle and high schoolers from immigrant and refugee families, **Southeast Asian Young Men's group (SEAYM)** is a documentary filmmaking afterschool and summer learning program in Seattle, Washington. Students find their voice and express themselves through film, using the medium to explore topics relevant in their lives,

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[*] 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."

including generational differences, culture, racism, and drugs and alcohol. For example, a documentary film *Why I Don't Smoke* interviewed 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

Afterschool programs often serve as a bridge between families and available systems of support. For example, Todos Juntos in Clackamas County, Oregon, provides family resource coordination, connecting families to local and state supports, including health programs, housing assistance, food banks, and parent education. The program also employs bilingual staff to reach and support their immigrant families. In southeastern Kentucky, Harlan County Boys and Girls Club adapted its programming to include additional support services that help youth cope with the disruptive and often traumatic effects of the opioid epidemic after 13 students lost their parents to overdose deaths in one winter. Supports included 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

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. Afterschool and summer learning programs are a part of this system of support during a critical time of development for young people, helping children grow their strengths, cope with the complications of life, and lead healthful lives to become healthy adults.

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

	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."

Endnotes

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