

After-school settings are interpersonal in nature, and the quality of the relationships that are forged can directly influence youths' attendance decisions and the developmental benefits they derive. Programs should more effectively capitalize on this potential for caring adult-staff relationships.

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The critical ingredient: Caring youth-staff relationships in after-school settings

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AFTER-SCHOOL PROGRAMS have become an increasingly integral component of youth services in this country. Numerous federal, state, and local initiatives have been implemented or expanded recently, resulting in a broad array of school- and community-based programs. A growing number of peer-reviewed outcome studies¹ and longitudinal evaluations² suggest that thoughtfully developed after-school programs can lead to improvements in academic performance, social skills, and internalizing and externalizing behavior.

Additional research attention is needed, however, to understand these influences and to decipher the underlying processes by which participation in after-school programs promotes positive outcomes. Such processes are likely to be as varied as the needs of particular young people, and they may range from simply keeping adolescents out of harm's way or improving grades to more profound shifts in

developmental outcomes. Despite this range of purposes, there is growing consensus that caring youth-staff relationships may be a key determinant of both retention and success in these programs. In the following sections, I review the literature as it pertains to youth-staff relationships in after-school settings.

Youth-staff relationships

Although not fully appreciated, after-school settings represent fertile ground for the formation of strong intergenerational ties. Faced with fewer curricular demands than teachers, after-school staff are often afforded unique opportunities to engage in the sorts of informal conversations and enjoyable activities that can give rise to close bonds with youth. Although students may have one or two important teachers over the course of their schooling, close and confiding student-teacher relationships tend to be more the exception than the rule.³ Teachers are often constrained by their busy schedules and the nature of their roles as evaluators.⁴ Similarly, working parents, who are frequently stretched to their limits by job and family demands, rarely have the luxury of spending downtime engaging in activities and conversations with their children during the afternoon hours.

Because staff have the advantage of standing outside these roles and constraints, they can provide a safe context for support and guidance while transmitting adult values, advice, and perspectives.⁵ Moreover, because many of the adults who gather or work in the programs are relatively young and from the same community that they serve, they are well positioned to connect with adolescents.⁶

Beyond the emotional support, the adults who work in community programs are often prepared to provide tutoring, educational guidance, advice about the college application process, athletic coaching and instruction, and job search assistance. Along these lines, researchers have characterized community youth centers in disadvantaged communities as performing a “bridging” function, referring to the link these programs provide between two disparate

cultures—that of the inner city and that of the mainstream population.⁷ Heath⁸ has characterized youth programs as a “border zone” between the streets and the mainstream culture.

In that sense, staff may even have advantages over volunteer mentors. Although mentoring programs have been increasingly advocated in recent years, far more youth are in after-school programs. And because after-school staff may be more familiar with the culture, they may be better positioned to offer credible advice and guidance. Youth tend to see after-school staff with far greater regularity and thus have increased opportunities for relationship formation and spontaneous disclosure.

Of course, involvement in an after-school program is no guarantee that close mentoring relationships will form. The term *mentoring* is generally reserved for special intergenerational bonds of mutual commitment, respect, identification, and loyalty—and the imbalanced ratio, multiple demands, and high turnover of staff conspire against the formation of close individual ties. As such, the proportion of youth-staff ties that progress into these more intensive relationships is likely to be relatively small. Nonetheless, many youth actually prefer and benefit from the group context in which caring adults are available but not necessarily assigned to them individually.⁹ Thus even the less intensive youth-staff relationships available to the larger proportion of youth in after-school settings are likely to yield a range of developmental benefits.

Research support

Although practitioners have recognized the potential benefits of caring youth-staff ties, few studies of relationships in youth development organizations have been undertaken. An exception is a study by Hirsch and colleagues,¹⁰ which analyzed youths’ relationships with adult staff in several Boys & Girls Clubs. Club staff were found to offer a distinct form of support, falling somewhere between the caring and love received from extended family and the more specific targeted skills received from schoolteachers.

Although teachers tended to provide instruction only around academic skills, relationships with club staff members tended to involve mentoring around a combination of skills and life lessons. The skills that the staff taught included academics (they were the only group out of the three groups of nonparental adults studied to provide help with homework), but they also extended their efforts to sports, health behavior, and the arts. The life lessons the staff provided included conflict resolution, the avoidance of drugs and pregnancy, the development of more positive body image, and the need to maintain lofty career goals and aspirations for the future. The majority of youth attended the club every day, and three-quarters of the adolescents considered the club “a second home.” Moreover, staff support was strongly related to positive youth outcomes.

These findings are complemented by other studies of community-based youth programs. For example, Gambone and Arbretton¹¹ found that social support from adult staff was a major force motivating youth to participate in after-school programs. This support was facilitated by the structure of the programs and by specific staff practices, several of which are similar to the program practices that have been associated with more successful volunteer mentoring programs. Structural program elements included a high staff-youth ratio, a high level of staff stability, and time in the schedule for informal staff-youth interactions. Staff practices included becoming familiar with youths’ outside lives (at home and at school) and making time to talk with them about their progress and concerns. By focusing on youths’ potential and operating in a respectful and informal manner, staff at community-based programs offered opportunities for young people who often did not have access to adults through social networks or mentoring programs.

Additional support for the central role of caring relationships in after-school programs comes from a multimethod, intensive analysis of ten programs participating in the Extended-Service Schools (ESS) initiative. The researchers observed that staff relationships were an important indicator of program quality and that staff

greatly influenced the social and intellectual climates of the settings. As the authors reflected, “Staff practices and behaviors are the critical ingredient. Staff in high-quality activities set up physically and emotionally safe environments in which they heighten and sustain the youths’ interest, making the activity challenging, as well as promoting learning and self-discovery in multiple areas (academic, social, personal).”¹²

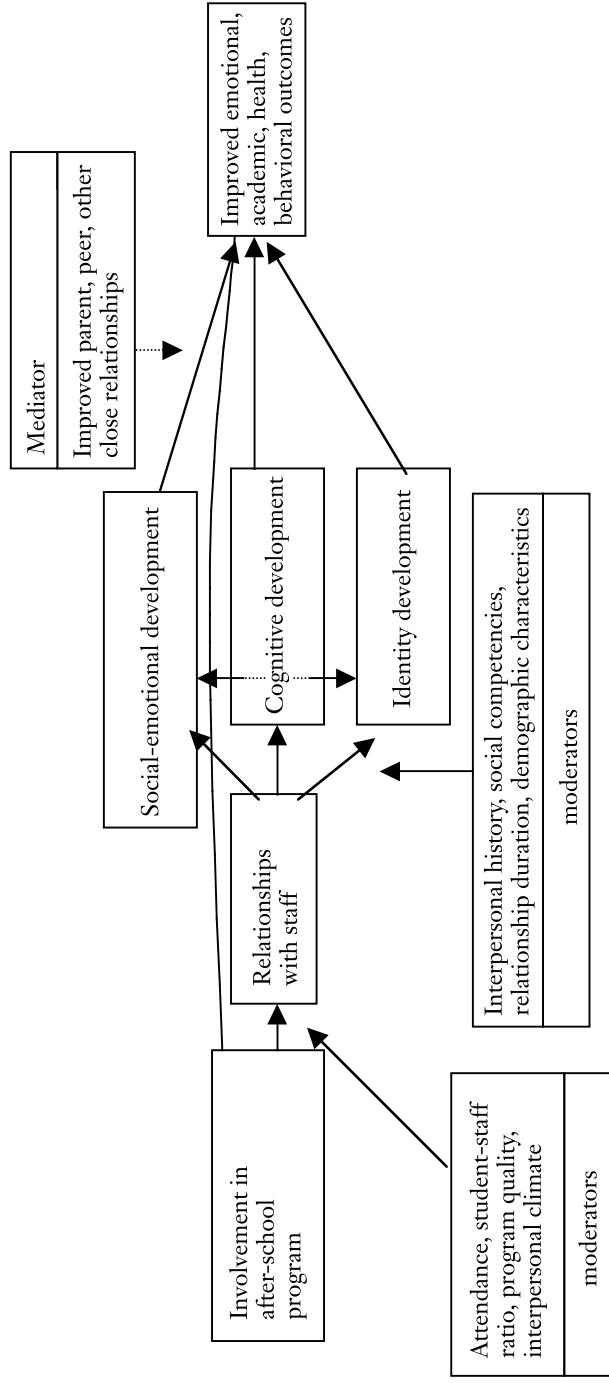
Governing processes

Such observations and findings are intuitively appealing and suggest that staff can influence outcomes, not only through the support, respect, and caring that they offer students but through the overall interpersonal atmosphere they help establish. In this sense, after-school programs can be assessed in terms of the quality of the relationships that are forged. Despite this emerging consensus, most work has fallen short of specifying the underlying processes by which such relationships can translate into positive changes. Nonetheless, it appears that after-school programs affect youth outcomes both directly (through close bonds and exposure to programs and instruction) and indirectly (through the staff’s establishment of a supportive interpersonal climate characterized by warmth, respect, and friendship).

In the following section, I present a conceptual model in which staff partially mediate the effects of after-school programming in three important ways: (1) by enhancing youths’ social skills and emotional well-being, (2) by improving youths’ cognitive skills through instruction and conversation, and (3) by serving as role models and advocates (see Figure 7.1).

The likelihood of developing close staff relationships is affected by a youth’s attendance, interpersonal history and style, particular program characteristics (for example, staff retention, ratios), and interpersonal climate. Moreover, the effectiveness of each of these is likely to be governed, at least in part, by the quality and intensity of the relationships that are established between youth and staff

Figure 7.1. Conceptual model of program effects



in the program. Program staff whose influence extends into more than one arena are likely to have the greatest impact on adolescents' development. In the next sections, I briefly describe the processes through which program staff can have a positive influence.

Enhancing social and emotional development

A frequent observation among program personnel and parents is that close connections with nonparent adults can foster improvements in adolescents' ability to connect with others, especially their parents. Through consistently warm and accepting interactions, youth can begin to recognize the potential that exists in close relationships and open themselves up to the people around them, particularly their parents. In certain cases, program staff can serve as alternative or secondary attachment figures, helping adolescents to realign their conceptions of themselves in relation to others. In other cases, program staff may act as a sounding board, providing a model for effective communication and helping youth to better understand, more clearly express, and more effectively control both their positive and negative emotions. In doing so, staff can provide a model of effective adult communication; staff can also help adolescents better understand, express, and regulate both their positive and negative emotions.¹³ For example, Gottman¹⁴ has referred to "emotion coaching," in which adults model and teach strategies for managing feelings, including learning to approach negative experiences as opportunities for intimacy, learning, and personal growth. These changes, in turn, can affect the ways in which youth approach their relationships to their parents and other adults.

Relationships with staff can also facilitate improvements in youths' peer relationships. After-school connections to adults typically take place in the context of a larger group and, to the extent that the adult-staff ties can help with peer relationships, it is likely to have far-reaching effects. Hartup¹⁵ has observed that "the best early predictor of adult adaptation is not IQ, or school grades or classroom behavior, but rather the adequacy with which children

and adolescents get along with their contemporaries.” Adult support in after-school settings may scaffold youths’ understanding of social processes and provide a safe context in which relational skills relevant to peers can be developed.

Rhodes and colleagues¹⁶ tested some of these social and emotional processes and found that volunteer mentoring relationships led to improvements in adolescents’ perceptions of their parental relationships, including levels of intimacy, communication, and trust. These improvements, in turn, led to positive changes in a wide array of areas, such as the adolescents’ sense of self-worth, scholastic competence, and academic achievement. These findings lend support to the possibility that connections with after-school staff can facilitate changes in adolescents’ perceptions of themselves and the formation and maintenance of close relationships, which, in turn, can have important effects on developmental outcomes. Other studies of adult-youth relationships have shown improvements in youths’ perceptions of support from peer relationships¹⁷ and significant adults in their social networks.¹⁸

Improving cognitive skills through meaningful conversation

As mentioned earlier, after-school programs afford heightened opportunities for informal staff-youth interactions. Social interaction, particularly conversation, can play a major role in honing and improving school-aged children’s mental abilities. For example, Vygotsky¹⁹ has described the learning that takes place in children and adolescents’ “zone of proximal development”—a boundary that is beyond what a young person reaches when problem solving on his or her own but within the range of what he or she can do while working under adult guidance or with more capable peers. Along similar lines, Rogoff²⁰ has described how children “appropriate” from shared activities with more sophisticated thinkers.

A trusting relationship with a mentor can thus provide a framework in which adolescents acquire and refine new thinking skills. Research on the role of teacher support in fostering cognitive

development underscores the social nature of learning. Consistent associations between perceptions of teacher-student relationships and increases in motivation, academic competence and achievement, school engagement, school value, and behavioral and psychological adjustment have also been documented.²¹

Role modeling and shaping

Beyond any particular interactions, program staff often influence youth by exemplifying desired knowledge, skills, and behavior. Indeed, many lower-income youth have limited contact with positive role models outside the immediate family and believe that their opportunities for success are restricted.²² Even among middle-income youth, adult occupations and skills can seem obscure and out of reach.²³ Particularly when the staff have overcome obstacles (difficult neighborhoods, underfunded school systems) similar to those confronting youth, staff can serve as concrete models of success, demonstrating qualities that the youth might wish to emulate and offering training and information about the necessary steps to achieve various goals.

Meanwhile, by observing and comparing their own and program staff's performance, adolescents can begin to adopt new behaviors. This modeling process is thought to be reinforced through program staff support, feedback, and encouragement.²⁴ Even when program staff do not serve as direct models, they can be influential. They can teach new skills and help youth select more socially desirable, or higher-achieving, peer groups who may gradually influence their choices.

Additional considerations

The processes just described work in concert with one another over time and, depending on the characteristics and preferences of youth and staff and on the circumstances and length of their relationships, different processes will unfold. Adolescents who have

enjoyed good relationships with their parents may be drawn to project staff as role models and confidants. Their relationship may center more on the acquisition of skills and the advancement of critical thinking than on more emotional processes. Those who have experienced unsatisfactory parental ties may develop more intense bonds with their program staff, which satisfy their social and emotional needs.

Such functions may also vary with age. For example, older children and adolescents tend to prefer programs where adults are available but more on the sidelines. Indeed, Grossman¹² observed that offering teen programs with flexible open-door policies, along with opportunities for leadership and loosely guided autonomy, were most effective. Other researchers have highlighted adolescents' preferences for programs in which they have a voice in formulating the program activities and their implementation.²⁴

Such observations illuminate key tensions regarding the optimal structure and focus of after-school programs and have implications for youth-staff relationships. For example, an important issue in many after-school programs is the extent to which programs are aligned with the school curriculum. Although children may benefit academically from remediation and homework assistance, the extension of a didactic school-day approach represents a missed opportunity to engage youth in the more experiential approach that the after-school setting affords.²⁴ For example, project-based learning in the arts, sports, and other areas can provide opportunities to practice classroom learning and enhance the quality and closeness of staff-youth relationships.²⁵

In addition to the trend toward academic activities, many settings are adopting structured curricula to redress a range of social or academic problems. Although some measure of structure is necessary and beneficial,² close adherence to packaged programs can short-circuit staff members' spontaneity, empathy, and judgment in ways that undermine the formation of close ties and impede more meaningful, structural changes in and beyond the setting.²⁵ Indeed, Oakes and her colleagues²⁶ have described how "watered down wisdom makes its way into packaged materials and prescribed trainings. Such technical assistance nearly always blocks the deep

inquiry and learning that fundamental shifts in norms and practices require.”

An overemphasis on academics and specific problems can ultimately undermine strong youth-adult ties. Research on school-based mentoring, for example, has shown that the tendency of volunteers to focus on school work comes at the expense of the kinds of social activities that help to build close bonds. Perhaps not surprisingly, Herrera and colleagues found that significantly more community-based mentors felt “very close” to their protégés than did school-based and work-based mentors.²⁷ Other studies have shown that youth in group mentoring programs that are heavily focused on academic activities are least likely to feel close to their mentors. Youth who characterize their relationships as providing moderate (as opposed to high) levels of activity and structure derived the largest number of benefits when compared with the control group.²⁸ Along similar lines, in a meta-analysis of fifty-five mentoring program evaluations, DuBois and colleagues²⁸ found that programs in community and other settings outside school (for example, the workplace) yielded more favorable outcomes than those in school settings. These and other findings underscore the importance of involvement in enjoyable activities. A challenge will be to determine how to meld the flexibility, intensity, and enduring nature of successful community-based approaches with the structure and support of school-based approaches.

A small but growing number of studies provide some insights in this regard. Herrera and colleagues,²⁷ for example, examined the predictors of mentoring relationship quality, interviewing 669 volunteers who were in one-on-one matches in community- and school-based programs. The strongest contributing factor to all measures of relationship quality was the extent to which the youth and mentors engaged in social activities (for example, having lunch or just hanging out together). Other factors that predicted close relationships were engaging in academic activities, meeting regularly, and making decisions jointly. Grossman and Rhodes²⁹ note the beneficial effects of longer-lasting youth-adult ties; Grossman and Johnson³⁰ found benefits among pairs who interacted more frequently and in which adults sought the input of the youth and took

a more open, less judgmental stance with them. Others have found that the adult's capacity to refrain from harsh judgment, effectively cope with difficulties, and express optimism and confidence made important contributions to the mentoring relationships.³¹ These findings point to the inherent value of both academic and nonacademic activities in fostering strong adult support—support that is valuable even beyond the activities' immediate purpose.

Implications

After-school settings are interpersonal in nature, and the quality of the relationships that are forged can directly influence youths' attendance decisions and the developmental benefits they derive. Unfortunately, school- and community-based after-school programs are often structured in ways that diminish the potential for caring adult-staff relationships. Programs, particularly those for low-income youth, tend to be poorly and unevenly funded. Moreover, because no uniform standards or regulations apply to after-school programs across the country, wide variation in ratios and staff qualifications can be found.³²

These organizational limitations constrain youths' experiences in predictable ways. For example, although a wide variety of activities and more flexible programming tend to give rise to more positive staff-child interactions, programs often lack sufficient resources to achieve these goals. They offer relatively few extracurricular sports and activities and are often funded to address specific risks and problems. Similarly, although fewer students per staff give rise to warmer, more sensitive, and more supportive interactions, ratios in many programs hover around 25:1. In addition, although relationship continuity predicts closeness and outcome,²⁹ low salaries and limited hours contribute to staff turnover rates as high as 40 percent, with prolonged staffing vacancies.³²

This state of affairs is discouraging, particularly when we begin to view staff as a linchpin of after-school programs. Although close youth-staff relationships are often viewed as the by-product of the

more essential program activity, they are an important end unto themselves. And, although youth are likely to experience disappointment and sometimes even bereavement in response to the departures of beloved staff,²⁹ the negative consequences of high turnover are rarely considered. Viewed from this perspective, it is puzzling that parents and programs are not making a more concerted effort to professionalize, and thus stabilize, the staffing in after-school settings.

Perhaps our blind spot in this area reflects a general cultural ambivalence regarding what it means for children to connect in meaningful ways to adults outside the family. In Western societies, parents have come to be considered solely responsible for their children, so the involvement of other adults is often met with suspicion and discomfort. As Scales³³ argues, “Americans are neither sure of the importance of adults outside the family to children’s and youths’ development, nor even debating how best that influence might be exerted to promote positive, optimal development for all children and youth.”

In addition to redressing these cultural and structural constraints within the settings, it will be important to continue to tap into pools of volunteers from the larger community of adults. Some programs have recognized the enormous volunteer potential that exists among retired adults. Volunteer older adults, for example, can provide tutoring and emotional support to youth.³⁴ Collaborations between after-school and established mentoring programs (which carry the burden of recruiting, screening, training, and supervising volunteers) have shown considerable promise.⁹

Hiring schoolteachers and aides is another promising strategy for increasing continuity and retention in after-school programs. Similarly, after-school staff can work in children’s classrooms for part of their regular school day as a means of extending employee hours and offering continuity of care and learning in children’s lives. Noam and colleagues have described a program in which staff serve as specially trained “prevention practitioners,” bringing supports into the school and after-school classroom rather than pulling children out of classrooms for piecemeal services.³⁵

Conclusion

Even under the best of circumstances, no one institution—be it after-school programs, families, schools, or church—can completely compensate for the social isolation that many children and adolescents experience, and each institution is stretched by the limitations of the others. Nonetheless, after-school programs can and should take measures to increase the likelihood of youth connecting with caring adults in those settings.

A major challenge for programs will be to create settings that can increase and facilitate staff's caring potential while maintaining high standards and reasonable levels of staff autonomy. Along these lines, after-school policies should be viewed in terms of how they may constrain or facilitate positive adult-student relationships. As the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development³⁶ concludes, "Good programs recruit carefully and invest in staff (and volunteer) development as a regular cost of doing business, recognizing that the quality of adult leadership is critical to program success."

Increased attention to the processes that govern staff-youth relationships and to the settings, activities, and training that are most likely to give rise to them could go a long way toward improving the after-school experiences of our nation's youth. As after-school programs assume an increasingly important role in our society, we need to improve our understanding of the ways in which they work and do not work. With a deep, clear, and academically rigorous understanding of mentoring, we can structure after-school programs to more effectively foster healthy developmental outcomes.

Notes

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