Afterschool Program Support of Children's Social-Emotional and Behavioral Health

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Key Findings
Staff view children's social skills and self-confidence as important program goals.
Staff-child and peer relationships are viewed as central in helping children develop social skills, understand and regulate their emotions, and build self-confidence.
Overall, only one program uses an evidence-informed curriculum, though a few programs provide formal training to staff on how to promote social-emotional and behavioral health (SEBH). More training is needed to appropriately address child trauma and secondary trauma in staff.
Program observations revealed positive peer and staff-child interactions and children engaged in afterschool program activities and content.

Background

Children sometimes experience stressful or traumatic events, such as abuse, neglect, or unstable home environments that threaten SEBH.[1][2] Afterschool programs not only provide support for working parents by offering children a safe, supervised environment, but research also shows[3][4][5] they mitigate risk factors by promoting positive SEBH skills that serve as important protective factors, including—

- Self-confidence and self-esteem
- Social skills (such as conflict resolution, empathy)
- Positive school behaviors (positive feelings and attitudes toward school, school bonding,[i] following school rules and directions)

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[i] School bonding refers to children's connections and feelings of commitment with their schools and academic lives.

Increasingly, supporting these nonacademic skills is seen as essential in providing children with competencies needed to perform well in school and function in society. Social-emotional and behavioral skills are foundational in predicting positive outcomes across multiple domains, both in the short and long term. These skills serve as lifelong protective factors to buffer children against exposure to risk factors.[6]

Programming provided in afterschool settings offers a unique and invaluable opportunity to fill gaps from the school day and promote positive SEBH outcomes for young children. Afterschool settings are often less structured and provide more opportunities for interactions with staff and peers to develop nonacademic skills. In fact, SEBH is often an explicit and central goal of afterschool programs, where the nature of routines and activities are specifically designed to support building social skills and positive peer relationships, which complements the traditional academic focus of the school day.[7] Afterschool programs also provide a unique opportunity to promote girls' involvement in physical activities. During middle childhood and throughout adolescence, girls tend to be less physically active than boys, which can lead to later disparities in the domains of social-emotional, and behavioral health.[8] [9]

This brief summarizes how five afterschool programs—representing diverse geographic regions, program settings, and served populations—view their roles and contributions to promoting young children's SEBH. Findings were gathered through interviews with multiple program staff and observations of afterschool programs during two-day site visits. For an overview of the study, see the related brief entitled *"Providing an Essential Service: An Overview of Afterschool Program Support of Children's Social-Emotional, Behavioral, and Physical Health During Middle Childhood."*

Promoting Social-Emotional and Behavioral Health in Program Goals

Overall, programs discussed goals that either indirectly or directly relate to SEBH. For example, most programs reported providing a safe and supportive environment as a central goal, which sets the stage for focusing on social-emotional and behavioral skills. Additionally, some discussed more targeted goals such as promoting children's social skills, self-regulation, and self-confidence.

Safe and supportive environment. All programs discussed providing a safe space and supportive environment as an important program goal. Staff members view their afterschool programs as a place for children to not only be cared for in a structured environment supervised by adults, which is an essential service to provide working parents, but also an opportunity for children to be part of a supportive community. Staff members discussed the importance of building a sense of community and belonging and providing children with fun learning opportunities not otherwise accessible during

the school day or at home. Positive and supportive relationships with peers and adults are important protective factors in mitigating the negative consequences of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) on children's development.

"We want every child to feel this is a family environment. They're connecting with other kids and adults and building relationships. Staff are providing a quality program so that the child will be successful, be it in school or at home with life skills."

Promoting social skills and self-regulation. Most programs focus on character development,[ii] life skills,[iii] or values that relate to social-emotional health. Programs often labeled these skills differently and, depending on local context and children's needs, had slight variations in the meaning of these labels. However, there was also a great deal of overlap across programs. For example, programs discussed providing opportunities for children to develop specific social skills like teamwork and empathy. Most discussed helping children understand and regulate their emotions and manage relationships with others. One program uses a framework designed to promote children's awareness of their emotions and internal state by prompting them to reflect on and label how they are feeling and reacting during challenging or stressful situations. Others discussed how promoting children's social skills and ability to regulate their emotions and behaviors help create a calm afterschool environment where children can relax and de-stress from the school day or adverse home or community environments.

Building self-confidence. Building children's self-confidence was another commonly reported goal. Three programs discussed how providing children a safe space to explore their interests and engage in fun learning activities creates a pathway to building new skills, self-confidence, and a sense of independence.

Staff Supports

Programs provide several sources of support to staff members to help promote SEBH. This includes providing curricula, monthly activity sheets, or guiding frameworks to inform daily program activities.

[ii] Examples of character development skills referenced by staff include helping others and caring, leadership, honesty, respect, and responsibility.

[iii] Examples of life skills referenced by program staff include preparing your own food, taking care of your belongings, and being a responsible and caring citizen.

Programs also provide training and ongoing coaching on how to communicate with children, address challenging behaviors, and recognize sources of trauma. Last, staff members discussed the sense of family and community among coworkers and supervisors as a valuable resource when dealing with challenging or stressful situations with children.

Curriculum, monthly activity sheets, and guiding frameworks. Only one program uses a structured, evidence-informed curriculum explicitly focused on promoting SEBH skills; three do not use such a curriculum; and one does not target SEBH at all. This program uses the SPARK early literacy program, which is offered to kindergarten through second grade children for one hour afterschool to reinforce what children are learning during in-school one-on-one SPARK tutoring and home visits with families.[10] An impact evaluation suggested SPARK is a promising practice for building literacy and social-emotional skills, and the intervention is being further evaluated.[11] The program described SPARK as a guided-reading curriculum to build children's social-emotional competencies through stories that foster empathy and connection. Instead of a structured curriculum or set of activities, two programs use monthly activity sheets they typically adapt to implement flexibly in meeting children's developmental needs and interests. These activity sheets, developed by program supervisors, sometimes focus on promoting a social-emotional or behavioral skill. For example, one activity aims to help children understand—through concrete visuals—how hurtful words and actions can negatively impact others. A fourth program uses a framework designed to help children become more aware of their feelings and internal emotional states. This framework does not include a set of structured program activities or content, instead it provides a guide for staff on how to interact with children.

Staff training to address challenging behaviors and recognize trauma. Some programs provide training on child behavior management and how to de-escalate challenging behaviors with children. Staff members at two programs discussed how role playing and scenarios provided in training helped them think through how to handle challenging behaviors and situations. Two programs also provide training on using positive language and redirection with children as a strategy for addressing challenging behavior. Another provides training to help staff recognize sources of trauma children experience, better understand their behavior in coping with trauma, and avoid exposing them to potential triggers (such as loud noises or changes in routine). However, it was noted that programs may need additional support when it comes to addressing trauma. A few staff members discussed how children shared sensitive information about their home lives and indicated they were not fully prepared or trained on how to appropriately address these sensitive situations.

"All our students experience trauma in some way, fashion, or form—whether it's a chaotic home environment or something going on at school—and then our staff experience it as well."

A majority of staff training, which focuses on multiple topics including administrative issues, is provided outside of afterschool program time, typically during regularly scheduled staff meetings and training days. Through discussions with staff on the identified needs of children and families served, program administrators identified training needs and topics. A few program administrators mentioned observing new staff during afterschool program time to provide direct coaching and modelling on how to interact with children and manage challenging behaviors.

Supportive work environment. Almost all staff members discussed the afterschool program as a "family" or second "home." The sense of community among staff and children serves as an important source of support to staff. Staff members receive ongoing support from other staff and supervisors to help overcome challenging situations and manage some of the stressors associated with working with young children who face adverse experiences, often called secondary traumatic stress.

Program Content, Activities, and Interactions

Apart from curricula, program staff discussed specific ways to focus on social-emotional and behavioral skills. Some of the examples provided were less intentional in nature and more a function of how services are delivered. For example, staff discussed building children's self-confidence and reducing behavioral issues through engaging program content and activities. Staff gave examples of specific activities and tools used to help children recognize and reflect on their emotions and behaviors. Typically, social skills are discussed through positive, responsive interactions with staff and peers.

Engaging program content and activities. Programs strive to provide engaging content and activities to promote children's self-confidence and reduce challenging behavior. For example, one program offers activities ranging from a junior chef course to a basketball league and mentorship to help children identify healthy ways to handle feelings and emotions. Another offers several activities specifically designed to promote social-emotional and behavioral health, including providing a family style meal to encourage sharing and teamwork, a martial arts program to promote focus and self-discipline, and yoga and meditation to promote mindfulness.

Observations of Program Content, Activities, and Interactions
As part of the two-day site visits, structured observations were made of afterschool program content, activities, and interactions. Observations were guided by the Promising Practices Rating System (PPRS).[12] Overall, observations are listed below. • **Children engaged in program activities.** Children showed focus and interest in program activities. Overall, on a daily basis children had the opportunity to choose in which activities

they wanted to participate. While structured activities were offered and a general afternoon schedule was followed, children had opportunities to choose specific activities in which they wanted to participate. Children were observed following instructions, demonstrating concentration and enjoyment during activities, and engaging in on-task discussions with peers and staff.

- **Children engaged in positive peer interactions.** Children were observed sharing materials and working well together. Children also listened to one another and resolved conflicts agreeably. When there was a conflict between children, staff intervened in a timely and appropriate manner and encouraged them to work through and resolve it.

- **Staff members engaged with and showed interest in children.** Observed staff-child interactions were characterized as warm and supportive. Staff used a positive voice tone with children and responded to their comments or questions. Staff also noticed, in a timely manner, when children were struggling and responded appropriately.

Opportunities for Reflection and Peer Support. One program starts each afternoon with a reflection time focused on a specific topic, often related to treating others with respect and care. During this time, children act out scenarios and discuss possible solutions for addressing challenging situations with peers. This program also uses reflection sheets to help them recognize and reflect on their feelings, especially after situations where their feelings may have been hurt or when behavior was not appropriate. Another program described using group discussions to provide children with a space to discuss how they are feeling and work through issues and disagreements as a group.

Behavior management. Two programs use behavior charts for children struggling with behavioral issues. These programs indicated they often work with school-day teachers and parents to share information and strategies for addressing behavioral issues and to provide continuity for children across the school day, during afterschool time, and at home. These programs also actively involve children in the development and implementation of behavior charts. Another program uses a token system that is aligned with the school-day curriculum to promote helping behaviors. Through this system, children earn tokens for helping with tasks such as wiping down tables or taking out the trash; tokens can later be exchanged for items at their school store (e.g., toys, snacks, school supplies).

Positive and responsive interactions. Program staff discussed how developing relationships with children promotes social-emotional and behavioral skills. Staff at three programs highlighted the importance of understanding the children, observing their behavior, and noticing when they might be struggling with managing emotions so they can intervene. For instance, staff at one program described providing support for children's emotional intelligence by talking them through situations and helping them reflect on their emotions and behaviors.

"A lot happens in the language. Really, we use language as the tool and the vehicle for creating opportunities for emotional intelligence practice. You'll often hear teachers coaching the students. If the child is frustrated, saying, 'So if you don't know that, what do you know that could help you?'"

Program Successes and Opportunities for Improvement

A clear strength highlighted in this brief is the dedication of afterschool program staff in providing children a safe and supportive environment where they can thrive socially, learn how to better manage behavior, and build new skills and confidence. Staff members uniformly recognize a need to promote social-emotional and behavioral skills, reporting that children may otherwise not have support for this type of skill development either during the school day or at home. However, most programs don't provide formal support or guidance in the form of evidence-based curricula, content, or structured program activities to address this need. Instead, programs try to support the development of these skills by structuring activities promoting teamwork, providing engaging content to minimize behavioral issues, and fostering positive relationships to serve as a secure base for children to feel emotionally safe and supported.

Implications for Policy and Practice

To strengthen, align, and deliver high-quality learning opportunities that promote SEBH within afterschool programs serving low-income children and families, additional research and support is needed to—

- Provide a better understanding of the national landscape of afterschool programs with respect to how programs are working to promote SEBH, the extent to which this differs by location of programs, whom they currently serve or do not serve, what children's and family's needs are, and whether programs are meeting these needs

- Consider how best to support afterschool providers to more effectively and intentionally leverage afterschool routines and activities to promote children's social-emotional and behavioral skills through the use of evidence-based curricula, programs, and activities; to provide continuity and alignment and consider how to adapt and build on curricula implemented during the school day

- Develop and evaluate programming that recognizes and leverages the interconnected nature of development during middle childhood, including the interdependent nature of SEBH, physical health, and academic outcomes

- Identify ways to help afterschool programs provide more intentional learning opportunities to promote SEBH to bolster positive child outcomes, including addressing SEBH disparities by gender

- Recognize children's SEBH influences development in other developmental domains and impacts later development into adolescence and early adulthood. This recognition can help build support for the importance of afterschool programs focusing on promoting SEBH in middle childhood.

- Ensure the needs of both staff and children and families are met in more comprehensive ways, consider mental health supports and additional trauma-informed training for staff members, and strengthening partnerships with other social services to help refer children, families, and staff with more intense needs

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