The Quality of School-Age Child Care in After-School Settings

Priscilla M. Little
Harvard Family Research Project

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The Research-to-Policy Connections series summarizes current research on key topics in child care and early education and discusses implications for policymakers. This brief identifies current measures of quality in school-age settings as well as highlights indicators linked to high-quality after-school programs and positive child outcomes.

For more information on school-age care see the Research-to-Policy Connections brief on School-Age Care Arrangements that defines and examines a range of school-age care arrangements, including: parental, relative, nonrelative, center-or school-based, sports and other activities, and self-care.
Overview

Emerging research indicates that regular attendance in quality after-school programs can yield a range of positive developmental outcomes for school-age children, but many after-school programs struggle with understanding and improving the quality of their programs. While only a handful of developmental research and program evaluations have rigorously tested the relations between after-school program quality and child outcomes, there are dozens of program quality assessment tools to help after-school programs improve the quality of their programs. Most of the research on quality of school-age care settings, as well as most of the federal investments in school-age quality improvements, have been confined to school-based and center-based care. Thus this brief will discuss care in those settings.

This brief identifies the features of high-quality after-school settings that have emerged from the research and are reflected in program quality tools. It also examines key research linking program quality to positive developmental outcomes; it reviews current practice in program quality assessment; and it offers considerations for policymakers regarding future school-age care decisions in order to promote high-quality programs. Finally, it includes a listing of program quality assessment tools.

Examples of some of the critical features emerging include: (1) appropriate supervision and program structure; an environment that fosters positive youth-adult relationships; (2) programming with opportunities for autonomy and choice; and (3) good relationships among the various settings in which program participants spend their day—schools, after-school programs, and families. Moving forward, these emerging critical features should help shape future programming and professional development efforts and investments, as well as the development of appropriate program quality assessment tools.

Why are High Quality After-School Programs Important?

There is growing recognition that participation in high-quality after-school programs can complement in-school learning and development. Regular attendance in high-quality after-school programs is associated with a range of positive developmental outcomes including: improved academic performance, task persistence, improved work habits and study skills, and improved feelings and attitudes.

Moreover, the numbers of children between the ages of 5 and 18 years of age participating in after-school programs is growing, and the need is rising. In 2003, polling data indicated that approximately 6.5 million children participated in after-school programs, but an additional 15.3 million would participate if a program were available.

Federal investments in after-school programs are at an all-time high. A range of funding streams, including the Child Care and Development Fund, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) funds, and Workforce Development funds, as well as more targeted funds, such as the 21st Century Community Learning Centers grants, are being used to support the development and implementation of a diverse set of after-school programs serving a diverse population of youth.
Finally, recent research identifies a phenomenon called “parental after-school stress” (PASS, the degree to which parents are worried about the well-being of their children during the after-school hours) that affects the psychological well-being of a large proportion of the workforce, with PASS positively correlated with unsupervised after-school arrangements.\(^4\)

The growing public awareness that after-school program participation can benefit all youth in their communities, as well as relieve parental concerns about safety, coupled with the increasing realization that schools alone are insufficient to close our nation’s achievement gaps, shines the spotlight on after-school as a place to support and complement learning and development.\(^5\) However, many programs struggle with understanding and improving the quality of their programs, and a growing body of evidence suggests that participation alone is insufficient to yield positive results.\(^6\)

In fact, program quality is a key determinant of getting youth in the door and sufficiently engaged in order to reap the maximum benefits of participation.\(^7\) Increasingly, evaluators are trying to tease out the key features of program quality that contribute to program outcomes. Understanding low quality as a potential barrier to participation in programs and the powerful influence that high quality has on determining good outcomes for youth who do participate, the time is ripe to better understand the challenges of developing and implementing high quality after-school programs.

How is Quality Defined in School-Age Care Programs?

Overall, the only school-age care settings in which program quality has been studied are the set of programs that loosely fall under the rubric of after-school programs. These settings include: center-based, school-based, and other formal before- and after-school arrangements for children, as well as summer programming.

Three inter-related literatures have informed current definitions of after-school program quality, including how program quality is assessed: the school-age care literature; the youth development literature; and the literature on quality in educational settings.\(^8\) Together, they converge on a set of program quality indicators. (See Box 1.)

From these three literatures, as from the infant and toddler care literature,\(^9\) two primary categories of program quality features emerge: structural and process.

- **Structural** features include: (1) child-to-staff ratios and group sizes; program management; (2) staff qualifications, educational level, and training, and (3) length of time in service. In part, the indicators of these features have been informed by in-school classroom practices.

- **Process** features examine aspects of the program that directly affect a participant’s experiences, such as youth-adult relationships and interactions, variety in program offerings, availability of activities that promote sustained cognitive engagement, opportunities for autonomy and choice, and the organizational supports necessary to promote effective staff practices. Indicators for these features have been informed by recent research and evaluation in after-school and youth development settings.
Within the realm of after-school, there is growing consensus about the features of positive developmental settings for youth, which are in alignment with the eight features identified by a national Committee on Community-Level Programs for Youth. Increasingly, program quality assessment tools are incorporating these concepts into their measures:

- Physical and psychological **safety**
- Appropriate **structure**
- Supportive **relationships**
- Opportunities for meaningful **youth involvement**
- Positive social **norms**
- Learning-oriented, with skill-building activities
- Balance of **autonomy and structure**
- **Connections** with school, home, and community

These eight features serve as a springboard for current research that examines the link between specific aspects of program quality and youth outcomes and are in concert with many other syntheses of program quality features.

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**Box 1. Indicators of Quality After-School Care Programs**

*Note: Italics indicate strong support in the research literature.*

**Staff Management Practices**
- Hiring and retaining educated staff
- Providing attractive compensation
- Training staff

**Program Management Practices**
- Ensuring that programming is flexible
- Establishing and maintaining a favorable emotional climate
- Establishing clear goals and evaluating programs accordingly
- Having a mix of younger and older children
- Keeping total enrollment low
- Maintaining a low child-to-staff ratio
- Maintaining continuity and complementarity with regular day school
- Paying adequate attention to safety and health
- Providing a sufficient variety of activities
- Providing adequate space
- Providing age-appropriate activities and materials
- Providing enough quality materials

**Communications with Other Organizations**
- Involving families
- Using community-based organizations and facilities
- Using volunteers

What Does Developmental Research and Evaluation Say About the Impact of Program Quality on Outcomes?

Research on after-school program quality is largely descriptive with only a handful of rigorously designed studies. Evidence regarding the characteristics of program quality is largely dependent on correlational studies and expert opinion. However, a small but powerful set of studies provides an emerging picture of some of the key elements of after-school program quality and how they affect a range of developmental outcomes. There is no single research study that examines the full range of quality features and their links to outcomes.

A meta-analysis of findings from 73 after-school program evaluations reveals that youth of a variety of ages who participated in programs that used intentional, evidence-based skills training approaches (defined as those that are sequenced, active, focused, and explicit) to promote personal and social skills improved significantly in three outcomes areas—feelings and attitudes, indicators of behavioral adjustment, and school performance—compared to youth who were not exposed to these approaches.

As part of a large quasi-experimental study of 19 elementary and 16 middle-school after-school programs located in 14 cities and eight states, researchers examined the extent to which participation in structured after-school activities affected outcomes. They found that in comparison to a low-supervised group, school-age children who frequently attended high-quality after-school programs displayed better work habits, task persistence, social skills, prosocial behaviors, and academic performance, and less aggressive behavior at the end of the school year.

A recent case study of two inner-city elementary after-school programs, one assessed to be “high-quality” and one determined to be “low-quality,” aimed to identify the conditions under which an after-school program can support (or inhibit) child development. The study reaffirmed that key program features—quality of staff-child interactions; continuity of program activities; opportunitues for choice; and staff characteristics such as commitment, training, and background—were positively related to child functioning. In particular, researchers observed an
improvement in peer relations among participants of the high-quality program and a decline in the quality of peer relations among those participating in the low-quality program.\textsuperscript{18}

A quasi-experimental external evaluation of 96 of the After-school Corporation of New York (TASC) elementary and middle-school after-school programs found that one of the program features associated with greatest gains in school achievement for TASC participants was that the project site coordinator had a license to teach.\textsuperscript{19} In a follow-up to this study, evaluators reanalyzed student performance data collected during the multiyear evaluation of the TASC initiative to identify “high-performing” projects where the TASC after-school program was especially likely to have contributed to improvements in students’ academic achievement. High-performing sites share five common features:

- A broad array of enriching activities.
- A variety of experiences that promoted skill-building and mastery.
- A focus on intentional relationship-building.
- Utilization of strong managers, differentiated staffing, and supports for line staff.
- Support from partner organizations.

Staff and youth surveys and observations were recently conducted at five of Philadelphia’s Beacon Centers (school-based community centers that include a range of after-school opportunities) to understand three questions: (1) What conditions lead youth to want to attend an activity? (2) What aspects of an after-school activity lead youth to be highly engaged? (3) What conditions lead youngsters to feel that they have learned in an activity?

Based on the responses of 402 youth surveys, 45 staff surveys, and 50 activity observations, two staff practices emerge as critical to youth engagement: effective group management to ensure that youth feel respected by both the adults and the other youth and positive support for youth and their learning process.\textsuperscript{20}

Using two large datasets, researchers examined the relationship between critical youth supports and long-term outcomes. They found that youth with high-quality supportive relationships early in high school are twice as likely as the average youth to have optimal developmental outcomes at the end of high school. Further, youth with unsupportive relationships in their early teens are 94 percent more likely to have poor developmental outcomes at the end of high school. This suggests that there are “tipping points” for some critical elements of program quality.\textsuperscript{21}

Program quality is both shaped by, and a reflection of, regular program attendance. \textit{Consistent attendance can help programs develop continuity in staffing and program offerings}. This continuity can lead to increased, sustained engagement on the part of program participants. For example, the San Francisco Beacons evaluation reports that the number of supportive adults is the single most significant predictor of sustained participation for middle-school age youth.\textsuperscript{22}
What is the Current State of Quality Assessment in After-School Programs?

In fall 2005, the Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP) conducted a national scan of program quality assessment tools. (See Appendix 1 of this brief for a list the 44 tools included in the scan.) The scan revealed that the diversity of programming in the nonschool hours is mirrored by the wide variability in how quality is measured in after-school programs.

The tools reviewed by HFRP revealed 12 different categories of standards and over 3,000 indicators to measure those standards. The 12 categories are:

- Assessment, evaluation, and accountability
- Equity and diversity
- Family, school, and community linkages
- Fiscal management and sustainability
- Organizational capacity
- Physical space and the environment
- Program administration and management
- Program planning, activities, and structure
- Relationships
- Safety, health, and nutrition
- Staffing and supervision
- Utilizing a youth development approach

Box 3. Definitions of Quality

A **program quality standard** describes the conditions of quality for the program, its participants, and all stakeholders.

A **program quality indicator** is a specific measure that quantifies the attainment of quality standards.

For example, a program quality standard is: program activities purposely complement school-day classroom instruction, improving children’s ability to meet learning standards.

Indicators of this standard are:

- Children and youth can select from a variety of activities that are aligned with curricular standards.
- The program staff intentionally integrates opportunities that support and enrich classroom-based instruction.
- Students have the opportunity to integrate and apply in-school concepts in the after-school program.

**Accreditation** is a process to assure consumers that services meet a professionally recognized level of quality.
Many after-school programs do not use any form of quality assessment measures. The National AfterSchool Association’s (NAA, formerly the National School-Age Care Association) Standards for Quality School-Age Care, often serves as the basis on which communities develop their own standards, but more often than not, programs report that they do not use any form of quality assessment.

There is wide variation in the categories of standards that programs adopt. As the field has grown, so has the comprehensiveness of the tools, with early assessments having fewer sets of standards than later assessment tools. For example, early standards documents tend to nest standards related to evaluation within a general category of program planning and management. Later tools, such as the New York State After-School Network tool have a separate section on “Outcomes and Evaluation.”23 Similarly, standards related to engaging families in after-school programs are nested within a category called “Human Relationships” in the NAA’s Standards for School-Age Quality Care.24 Several years after the creation of that tool, and with a greater recognition of the critical role of families in young people’s learning and development, many newer standards documents have an entire category of standards related to family-program linkages.

Most program quality tools were developed for the purpose of self-assessment and program improvement, with some having their roots in accreditation or licensing, and the use of some being tied to funding. Very few after-school program quality assessment tools currently being used have been developed using a research process.

Most after school program quality assessment tools were developed to span programming across the elementary, middle, and high school years. The format of quality assessment tools varies widely from checklists, to true/false, to rating scales with specific descriptors. Alignment of state quality rating systems, child care licensing requirements, and local program quality assessments is underway in a few states, but overall, there is little coordination across these three systems for monitoring program quality.25 (For a list of related resources on assessing and improving quality in school-age care settings, see Appendix 2.)

Considerations for Policymakers

The current state of research on program quality in school-age settings has a number of implications for policymakers concerning program standards.

- There is a baseline set of quality standards to which all after-school programs should adhere. However, for program quality to impact child outcomes, programs must be intentional about a broader set of standards. Given the emerging research on after-school program quality and its relationship to outcomes, it is clear that in addition to ensuring adequate physical and psychological safety and effective management practices, high-quality after-school programs also share the following features: appropriate supervision and structure; an environment that fosters positive youth-adult relationships; intentional programming with opportunities for autonomy and choice; and good relationships among the various settings in which program participants spend their day—schools, after-school programs,
and families. These emerging critical features should help shape future programming and professional development efforts and investments, as well as the development of appropriate program quality assessment tools.

- **Consider the local context of the program.** Given the diverse nature of the after-school arena, there is no one-size-fits-all tool for assessing program quality. When making recommendations about program quality, local programs must be given the flexibility to respond to specific community needs and adapt tools to their own contexts, while adhering to the baselines described above. Further, the process of adapting quality standards to fit local needs is, in itself, a useful practice to build consensus on the key features of quality in particular communities.

- **Program quality does not happen overnight.** While programs need to open their doors with a baseline set of quality features, such as adequate supervision and adherence to safety regulations, it takes time to develop adherence to a more comprehensive set of quality features. New and existing programs can use quality assessment tools to engage program stakeholders in a “diagnosis” of where the program needs to improve; to set priorities for what aspects of quality to tackle when; and to develop quality improvement plans based on stakeholder input. Decision makers need to give programs time to mature with regard to program quality, and accountability mechanisms need to take the evolution of program quality into account when establishing benchmarks.

- **Agencies taking leadership roles in the after-school field need to adopt and advocate for the widespread use of quality standards.** In addition to program improvement, quality assessment has become a significant accountability practice and often helps after-school programs sustain funding and/or licensure. Yet, there are a number of after-school staff, administrators, researchers, funders, and evaluators that are not familiar with any quality assessment tools. Future funding of after-school programs needs to be aligned with program quality efforts to ensure that investments are reaping the largest returns possible.

- **Policymakers need to insure greater alignment between licensing, quality rating systems (QRS), and program quality assessment.** Currently, many programs are struggling with trying to serve many quality taskmasters. Statewide quality improvement efforts need to facilitate a streamlined quality improvement process to ease the burden on local programs and get common and consistent data to feed into statewide quality improvement efforts.

- **Linkage to schools and families has emerged as a key feature of program quality.** Research is now demonstrating the power of linking multiple nonschool supports with schools to move the needle on a range of developmental outcomes, and a number of recently developed quality assessment tools include standards related to building these connections. Quality improvement efforts should include outreach to schools and families to better align these critical supports with after-school programs.

- **Conduct research on quality in other school-age settings, including parental and nonparental care, nonrelative care, and sports.** Public investments continue to target a range of school-age care settings beyond after-school programs. For example, of the school-aged children (ages 5 to 12) served by the Child Care and Development Fund, 48 percent are in noncenter-based care. Therefore, greater attention should be paid to the quality of these
settings as well as center-based before, after, and summer school settings. Researchers should ask: Are there basic minimum requirements of quality that should transcend all child care settings? Do these cut across the developmental age span as well, so that there is a core set of program quality features that is consistent from birth through adolescence?

- **Invest in research to identify program features likely to impact specific outcomes, and better disseminate research-based practices to promote program quality.** Finally, there is a need to invest in and conduct research to test and identify the program features that are most likely to impact specific outcomes, coupled with the need for more and better dissemination of the research-based practices that promote program quality.

**Endnotes**

1. The definition of school-age care used in this brief includes center-based, school-based, and other formal before-school, after-school, and summertime arrangements for children ages 5-12. The brief also draws on research from older-age youth to inform quality for this age group. The definition does not include parental, relative, nonrelative, or self care, or sports and other activities. The author will refer to the subset of school-age care settings under review as after-school.


7. Ibid.


11. Examples include RAND’s 2001 review of the features that are associated with high-quality programming. See Bodilly & Beckett in Endnote 8.

12. Correlation is the degree to which two variables are associated. Variables are positively correlated if they both tend to increase at the same time. Variables are negatively correlated if as one increases the other decreases. For
13. Meta-Analysis is a statistical technique that combines and analyzes data across multiple studies on a topic.


15. Quasi-Experimental Research: research in which individuals cannot be assigned randomly to two groups, but some environmental factor influences who belongs to each group. For further definition see Child Care and Early Education Research Connections Research Glossary, on the web at: <www.researchconnections.org/servlet/DiscoverResourceController?displayPage=resources/researchglossary.jsp#M>.

16. Programs were rated using the Promising Practices Rating Scale that assesses eight processes: (1) supportive relations with adults; (2) supportive relations with peers; (3) student engagement in activities; (4) opportunities for cognitive growth; (5) mastery orientation; (6) appropriate program structure; (7) setting chaos; and (8) staff overcontrol.


23. Available at: <www.tascorp.org/programs/building>.


## Appendix 1: Quality Assessment Standards Reviewed

For information on how to obtain these tools, please visit the Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP) web site at: <http://www.gse.harvard.edu/hfrp/content/projects/afterschool/conference/summit-2005-breakdown.pdf>

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Appendix 2: Related Resources


Acknowledgements

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