After-School Activities

by: David Shernoff

After-school time—typically from about 3:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m. on week days—can be extremely risky or remarkably beneficial for middle school students. It can be risky because this is the time when adolescents most often get into trouble. For example, youth are at higher risk for delinquency and drug use during this time, especially among children who are unsupervised after school.

It is important for parents to know that structured, supervised after-school and extracurricular activities such as sports, art, music, community projects, and special-interest academic pursuits can help children and adolescents negotiate important developmental tasks. Developing varied skills, a positive motivational orientation, and social relationships is especially important during the middle school years. Unfortunately, junior high and middle school classes alone are not always sufficient to develop these capacities. Organized afterschool programs can help build talents and support relationship-building and social skills and with peers and adults. Because after-school activities are usually supported by adults and competent peers, middle schoolers often develop social skills and a sense of belonging when they participate in after school activities. Research also shows that participation in after-school activities and programs is related to higher levels of self-esteem and self-confidence, positive outlooks for the future, school bonding, and behavioral adjustment.

Organized after-school programs and activities are located in schools, community centers like park districts, or churches. In our research, we followed middle school students in a variety of school-based after-school programs throughout the Midwest, and found that students were more engaged, involved, motivated, concentrated and tried harder in skill-building activities, and had more positive emotions when participating in school-based after school programs than when they were elsewhere after school. They spent more time in productive activities, less time watching TV and snacking, and were never alone. They were particularly engaged during organized sports, arts enrichment, and academic enrichment activities.

The quality of programs is a large factor determining positive developmental and academic outcomes. For example, we found that students who were more engaged and challenged in their programs than elsewhere after school were the most likely to have positive academic gains in math and science after a year of participation. Therefore, programs must be chosen carefully. Effective programs are sequenced, active, focused, and set explicit goals for participating youth.

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