

Expanded After-School Options Still Leave Parents with Tough Questions

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Working parents are often surprised to find that child care decisions become more difficult as their child moves from preschool into the elementary school years. In some places, parents can find a variety of school-age child care options available through local schools, private providers, and youth organizations. Other communities offer very few of these options. Even though a growing number of after-school care programs exist, parents will want to evaluate their quality, affordability, and accessibility before using them.

What Are Some Commonly Used After-School Care Options?

When parents think of how their children will spend the after-school hours, three basic choices generally emerge: leave the child alone, place her with a responsible party, or enroll her in a formal program. It is hard to know how many parents choose the first two options, but several studies tell us about the extent to which American parents use formal after-school programs. The *National Study of Before- and After-School Programs* provided the first nationwide picture of formal before- and after-school care for children ages 5 to 15 (Seppanen et al., 1993). This report found an estimated 1.7 million children in kindergarten through eighth grade enrolled in nearly 50,000 programs. The majority of these programs were nonprofit (66%), although many were sponsored by for-profit child care centers (29%). Public school sponsors accounted for 18% of the programs.

More recent data gathered by the U.S. Department of Education show that the percentage of schools (public and private) with after-school programs grew significantly between 1988 and 1994. The increase for public schools was from 16% to 30%,

and from 33% to 48% for private schools (Dryfoos, 1999, p. 119). Available data also show that the older children get, the less likely their parents or guardians are to enroll them in a school-age program. The vast majority of children attending after-school programs—84%—are in prekindergarten through grade three (Seppanen et al., 1993).

Studies on the use of formal after-school programs can't tell us the whole story about how parents are meeting the need for some form of after-school care. Families commonly use a combination of after-school care options. In a recent national survey, three-quarters of school-age children with employed mothers had at least two regular care arrangements after school hours. Children might be at home alone one afternoon, in a center care arrangement two afternoons, and in a sports or music program a fifth afternoon (Vandell & Shumow, 1999, pp. 65-66).

Transportation and cost are certainly factors in explaining the prevalence of this mixed-bag approach. The *National Study of Before- and After-School Programs* found that most programs relied on parent fees and that 86% of parents paid full fees for their enrolled children. It is therefore not surprising that low-income children are the least likely to be enrolled in these programs (Seligson, 1999, p. 138). Many parents often prefer to leave older children unsupervised or younger children in the care of older siblings for a few hours, a form of "self-care" (Halpern, 1999, pp. 82-83).

Evaluating Some Common Options

How does the option of "self-care" measure up? Scholars use several different definitions of self-care (Vandell & Su, 1999, p. 63; Belle, 1997, pp. 479-

480). The term “self-care” can mean any of the following:

- Child is home alone.
- Child is home under the care of an older sibling.
- Child is in a public place (e.g., libraries, parks, shopping malls) without a particular adult supervising.

Estimates of the number of school-age children in self-care range from 4% to 44%, depending on how it is defined and whether parents indicate it as their primary or occasional care arrangement (Vandell & Shumow, 1999, pp. 66-67). Research on the developmental effects of self-care yields conflicting results. Some studies indicate negative outcomes, while others show no difference between children in self-care and those in other after-school care arrangements. These findings are not absolute, and they depend on a variety of factors, including ages of children involved, amount of time in self-care, and characteristics of the family and neighborhood setting (Vandell & Shumow, 1999, p. 67). What is clear is that for younger school-aged children and for economically disadvantaged children, self-care is generally associated with social and academic problems (Bates & Dodge, 1997, p. 517).

Are formal after-school programs better? As with preschool child care programs, the effects of school-age child care depend on the quality of the staff, family economic resources, and neighborhood safety (Posner & Vandell, 1994, p. 454). Some of the positive impacts reported from participation in high-quality after-school programs include improved social skills, reduced problem behaviors, increased academic achievement, improved work habits, and better school attendance (National Network for Child Care, 1994, pp. 12-13; Vandell & Su, 1999, pp. 68-69; Posner & Vandell, 1994, p. 454).

High-quality after-school care is usually characterized by low child-adult ratios, a well-educated teaching staff, and flexible programming (Vandell & Su, 1999, p. 67). Not surprisingly, staff wages and turnover are also key components of quality. Some

after-school programs report staff turnover rates of 40% to 60% annually, seriously affecting relationships between staff and children (Vandell & Shumow, 1999, p. 71).

Formal after-school programs are particularly beneficial for low-income children, who are less likely to have access to alternative after-school enrichment activities such as youth clubs, music lessons, or organized sports (Posner & Vandell, 1994, p. 454). There is also some evidence that formal, high-quality after-school programs serve as a protective factor for children in high-risk environments. They do so in two ways. They provide enriching activities and experiences (Posner & Vandell, 1994, p. 455). Also, at an age critical to the prevention of such behaviors as smoking, drinking, and drug use, these programs provide an alternative to these risky youth activities (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2000, pp. 68-72).

After-School Care: Opportunities and Challenges

Because of the promising outcomes of high-quality after-school programs, especially for at-risk youth, there has been an increase in private and public funding to expand existing after-school programs and to start new ones (Larner, Zippiroli, & Behrman, 1999, p. 5). Chief among the public funding sources is the U.S. Department of Education’s 21st-Century Community Learning Centers Program. Started as a \$1 million demonstration program in 1997, it has grown to a \$453.7 million effort in 2000 (Larner, Zippiroli, & Behrman, 1999, p. 6; “Study Highlights Benefits,” 2000, p. 2). The 21st-Century Community Learning Centers Program provides grants to schools that form partnerships with other public and nonprofit agencies, businesses, and universities to create more after-school, summer, and weekend programs for their communities (Dryfoos, 1999, p. 121, 123). The range of possible program activities supported by the 21st-Century Community Learning Center Program includes “integrated education, health, social service, employment, technology, recreation,

or culture programs, along with child care, senior citizen activities, and parenting supports” (Dryfoos, 1999, p. 123). For more information about the 21st-Century Community Learning Centers initiative, go to <http://www.ed.gov/offices/OESE/21stcccl/>.

Notable private funders of after-school initiatives include the DeWitt Wallace-Reader’s Digest Fund, which supported the MOST initiative (Making the Most of Out-of-School Time) in Boston, Seattle, and Chicago. Another organization, the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, has committed significant funds to provide training, technical assistance, and evaluation support for the programs funded through the 21st-Century Community Learning Centers (Seligson, 1999, p. 136).

While after-school programs have attracted much positive attention from child advocacy groups, private and public funders, elected officials, and the public at large (Seligson, 1999, p. 135), there is also concern about overloading our schools with too many functions. Using regular school facilities for after-school programs creates challenges over sharing space, equipment, and custodial services (Dryfoos, 1999, pp. 127-128). Questions also arise about staffing after-school programs located within schools. Some argue that locating after-school programs in community organizations such as a Boys and Girls Club, YMCA, or Urban League would avoid these challenges. Others argue that, as publicly owned buildings, schools should be made more available for community use (Dryfoos, 1999, p. 127).

Most are in agreement, however, about the importance of program accessibility, affordability, and quality. Only when parents can find and afford programs in their community can after-school programs fulfill a useful purpose. They must provide the supervision and enrichment that parents want. The staff must be competent authority figures to the children, yet allow them the autonomy beneficial to youth. And the programs must offer learning and guidance, and meet the developmental needs of school-age children (Larner, Zippiroli, & Behrman, 1999, pp. 7-9).

For More Information

Local Child Care Resource and Referral agencies (CCR&Rs) can help parents locate and assess their after-school care options. CCR&Rs typically have information about subsidies available to help parents pay for care as well as resources on how to know when a child is ready for self-care. To find their local CCR&R, parents can call Child Care Aware at 1-800-424-2246. Also, parents can access other resources on after-school child care by visiting the following sites:

- Search the ERIC database: <http://ericae.net/scripts/ewiz/>
- Visit the National Child Care Information Center: <http://nccic.org>

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