Published in final edited form as:

Criminol Public Policy. 2009 June 22; 8(2): 413–422. doi:10.1111/j.1745-9133.2009.00558.x.

Youth After-School Programs: Time to Involve the Parents and Community?

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After-school programs (ASPs) provide supervision and activities for children in the period between the end of school and parent's return from work and have intuitive appeal in the U.S., where it is estimated that 33% of children ages 12–14 years with a single working parent or working parents are in self-care (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005). As noted by Cross, Gottfredson, Wilson, Rorie, and Connell (2009, this issue), 65% of voters believe ASPs are an “absolute necessity” for their communities (Afterschool Alliance, 2002). As we have learned many times in the past, however, the fact that a program for youth may seem logical and appealing does not mean that it will be effective or even that it will not have, overall, more negative than positive effects (e.g., boot camps and wilderness challenges; Dishion, Dodge, and Lansford, 2006). In this essay, the value of ASPs for middle and high school youth will be considered.

Fortunately, the state of the field is such that there now has been much careful research and evaluation on ASPs. Gottfredson, Cross, and Soule (2007) reviewed 35 ASPs for effectiveness in preventing delinquency and victimization among middle and high school students. The study was well designed in controlling for individual-level predictors of problem behavior and program-level average population characteristics. Findings indicated that students (with an average age of 12 years) who attended larger programs with less structured programming experienced more delinquency and/or victimization, whereas more highly educated staff and a higher percentage of male staff were related to reductions in these outcomes. For an older sample of high school students and young adults, Osgood and Anderson (2004) similarly found that unstructured time use, but also unsupervised socializing in the programs, was related to delinquency. In their review of ASPs, Gottfredson et al., (2007) found that this latter association was explained by age.

The study by Cross et al. (2009, this issue) is a carefully designed and conducted multisite randomized control trial of an ASP, focusing particularly on whether ASP services in a community change the routine activities of youth after school. Unfortunately, the findings indicated that the ASP was associated with a very small decrease in the amount of time in unsupervised socializing by youth, which did not translate to reductions in their problem behaviors. Furthermore, Cross et al. (2009) found that the youth were engaged in many organized activities and that the addition of the ASP did not impact the quantity of activities in which they engaged. Program absenteeism, the bane of preventive interventions, was a major issue. ASPs are by nature voluntary, and those students who are most at risk are less likely to attend and show higher rates of absenteeism (Weisman and Gottfredson, 2001). However, the findings of Cross et al. (2009) indicated that increasing attendance and targeting relatively unsupervised youths would not boost the effect of ASPs on unsupervised socializing. Taken together with earlier studies, as reviewed by Gottfredson et al. (2007), the value of ASPs is seriously called into question, along with the one billion dollars annually allocated by congress to ASPs Cross et al. (2009)

The major issue with ASPs that may undermine beneficial effects for those attending the program is the possibility that the extra exposure time they provide to a relatively large and likely diverse peer group may have unintended detrimental effects. The chief concern is conduct problem behaviors, particularly delinquent behaviors, and use of substances, including alcohol, tobacco, marijuana, and other drugs. These concerns are very well founded. Delinquency and substance use are social behaviors in adolescence. When adolescents are arrested, it is usually for delinquent acts in which they are engaging with peers, rather than solitary acts (Aultman, 1980). Whereas parental substance use is particularly important to initiation of use of alcohol in adolescence, peer influence factors are probably the strongest predictor of growth in frequency and volume of use (Duncan, Duncan, and Strycker, 2006) and in initiation of use of illicit drugs (Dishion, Capaldi, and Yoerger, 1999). Essentially, these unintended processes wage an ongoing war with the potential positive effects of youth programs.

On the basis of observations of peer interactions at adolescence, Dishion and colleagues have developed a theory of deviancy training, whereby peers display antisocial behavior or rule-breaking talk (e.g., swearing) and peers reinforce this by a positive response and giving higher status to the peer. This behavior has been observed in peer dyads and also in intervention groups, even in the presence of adults in a supervisory capacity (Dishion, Poulin, and Burraston, 2001; Dishion, Spracklen, Andrews, and Patterson, 1996).

In reviewing deviant-peer influences for interventions that involve groups of youth, and considering public policy implications, Dodge, Dishion, and Lansford (2006) reported negative effects on youth problem behaviors of some after-school programs, and concluded that after-school programs that serve only or primarily high-risk youth are most likely to have harmful effects (Dishion, Dodge, and Lansford, 2006). They identify school-based extracurricular activities and Job Corps (Schochet, Burghardt, and Glazerman, 2000) among viable alternative programs. Extracurricular activities are usually highly structured and do not involve grouping risk youth. Parents are often involved, for example, in helping with or watching a sports team. Job corps teaches job skills and connects youth with career opportunities.

Dodge et al. 2006 identify improved training in behavior management practices as an important issue for classroom teachers, particularly the use of group contingencies, self-management techniques, and differential reinforcement. Similarly, such training may be critical for leaders of ASPs. Among the five key policy recommendations by Dodge et al. (2006) for reducing deviant peer influences in youth interventions was that group settings should be highly structured and led by well-trained adult leaders. These are both important but quite difficult to achieve for ASPs. Adolescents who have just spent a full structured school day may understandably be ready for some more relaxed “down time” after school. Also, finding well-educated and adult staff, providing the training, and then retaining the staff will be challenging for such later afternoon part-time positions that provide few hours of work.

Setting these issues in the context of what we know more generally about the relationship of problem behaviors to age, delinquency shows a very rapid rise in the early adolescent period, and the prevalence of arrests peaks at about ages 15–19 years (Empey, 1978), with recent statistics showing peak ages for arrests for index offenses to be 18 for males and 16 for females (Uniform Crime Reports, 2003). Thus, the middle and high school years are years of distinct vulnerability for antisocial peer influence. Following the peak, the rate of arrests decreases dramatically until about age 25 years and then more slowly after that. Delinquent peers do not just evaporate after ages 15–19 years. The adolescent years are years of vulnerability to problem behaviors due to the confluence of higher sensation seeking, immature inhibitory or impulse control, and exposure to a large peer group in the school system, whereas young adults are more mature (Capaldi, Kim, and Owen, 2008; Steinberg et al., 2008). Desistance may be related

to neurological maturity, with most brain development, including myelination, being completed by early adulthood (Casey et al., 2005; Giedd et al., 1999), which results in the maturity of inhibitory control systems (Welsh, Pennington, and Groisser, 1991). Yet engagement in problem behaviors in adolescence often has long shadows, for example, in associations with academic failure, teen pregnancy, and in greater likelihood of problems with substance abuse in adulthood (Roche, Ahmed, and Blum, 2008; Wiesner, Vondracek, Capaldi, and Porfeli, 2003; Woodward, Fergusson, and Horwood, 2001). Thus, protecting youth during the vulnerable middle and high school years is a high priority.

The most important people in the role of protectors in the lives of adolescents are their parent(s) – if they fulfill that role. Despite some controversy regarding the importance of parental monitoring versus spontaneous youth disclosure (Kerr and Stattin, 2000), there is strong evidence that parental monitoring, including supervision, tracking, and communication, is protective against delinquency and substance use at adolescence (Dishion and McMahon, 1998; Lahey, Hulle, D’Onofrio, Rodgers, and Waldman, 2008; Laird, Criss, Pettit, Dodge, and Bates, 2008). We have posited that the foundation of parental monitoring is parental awareness of all aspects of their child’s life and development, including activities in and outside the home, friendships and other relationships, progress in school, and health-related behaviors (Capaldi, 2003). Parents must track the indicators of normal development, observe relationships with peers, watch for signals of potential problems, and adjust their parenting behaviors accordingly.

A concern with programs such as ASPs is that parents may assume they are beneficial and are protecting their adolescent from engagement in harmful behavior when in fact they are not. A study by James-Burdumy et al. (2005) of the 21st Century Community Learning Centers Programs indicated that these ASPs, which aggregated high-risk youth, resulted in higher rates of deviant behavior, suspensions, and disciplinary actions for participants than for control group youth. Critically, as discussed by Dodge et al. (2006), the program resulted in *increases* in parents’ feelings of safety for their children and in increased parental employment. The former is particularly of concern. In general, it is problematic that many preventive efforts with adolescents focus only on youth and exclude parents; for example, programs to prevent teen dating violence usually focus only on youth (e.g. Foshee et al., 2004; Rosenbluth, 2001; Wolfe et al., 2003), yet parents are the likely source of help and protection for their children in trouble. Such exclusion can send a message to parents that it is time for them to step back.

Parents are often confused about their role in parenting adolescents. Their child’s physical maturity and desire for independence can lead them to feel that the youth is adult like and to grant them a high level of autonomy. Physical maturity occurs earlier than in the past, and the average age at menarche for girls has dropped considerably to 12.8 years by the 1970s (Zacharias, Rand, and Wurtman, 1976), likely contributing to confusion about when an adolescent should be granted more autonomy and also increasing the years of risk exposure for such outcomes as teen pregnancy. However, pubertal maturity and brain maturity do not coincide developmentally (e.g., Giedd et al., 1999). Those engaged in preventive efforts should be cautious about inadvertently reinforcing parental misapprehensions regarding their role.

Findings for ASPs, along with studies of parental monitoring and involvement, indicate that programs promoting parental knowledge and involvement in after-school activities for adolescents should be considered. After-school programs that follow the recommendations for the program design of Gottfredson, Gerstenblith, Soulé, Womer, and Lu (2004) and Cross et al. (2009), among others (namely, structured, evidence-based programs that involve fewer youth and do not aggregate risk youth), but that have an added component of parental involvement may be a viable option. Benefits may include increased supervision, better use of after-school time, improved parental knowledge and monitoring, and improved connections between neighborhood youth and adults. Leaving work early 1 day a week for one of the parents

in the family (or possibly a grandparent or other relative) to take their volunteer turn may be achievable, especially if this became accepted as normative practice for employees with children. Other approaches to increasing opportunities for parental monitoring of adolescents in after-school hours may be effective, including an involved proxy parental figure with whom they may communicate regularly (e.g., a relative or neighbor). This could possibly involve small clusters of youth by neighborhoods and even at a home, rather than the school setting. Small groups could be more easily monitored by parents or parental proxies. With small well-monitored groups, it might be possible to relax the structure to allow youth more down time, which might improve participation.

Programs that involve youth in the community and provide them with valuable experience should also be considered. One such program that fills at least some of adolescents' after-school time and has been found to have beneficial effects is the Teen Outreach Program, which links regular community volunteer work to classroom-based discussions of life skills and life options. This national volunteer service program was designed to prevent adolescent problem behaviors by supporting normative processes of development in high school students (Allen, Philliber, Herrling, and Kupermine, 1997). Volunteer activities include work as aides in hospitals and nursing homes, participation in walkathons, peer tutoring, and a wide range of other types of work. As discussed by Allen, Seitz, and Apfel (2006), such volunteer service provides adolescents with the chance to expand their education with community experiences, yet unlike paid employment, these volunteer activities within the curriculum do not compete with school work or undermine parental influence by providing teens with early financial independence (Steinberg, Fegley, and Dornbusch, 1993). Rates of pregnancy, school failure, and academic suspension have been found lower in the Teen Outreach group (Allen et al., 1997), and the program appears most effective for those students at greatest initial risk for the problem behaviors that are targeted (Allen and Philliber, 2001). Similar findings were found in an independent study of youth volunteerism and community service (O'Donnell et al., 1999).

Cross et al. (2009) discuss some other promising new approaches to after-school time. One is a program that connects high school students with professionals in the community for after-school apprenticeships in a range of disciplines from fine arts to technology (Halpern, 2006). Such a program has the high advantage of providing work apprenticeships to youth. For the Oregon Youth Study sample, we have examined work outcomes for this community sample of boys who were at risk for involvement in delinquency and substance use as they were from schools with a higher than usual incidence of delinquency in the neighborhood. The entire fourth grades of boys from the selected schools in the medium-sized metropolitan area were invited to participate and followed through to the early 30s. Issues of school completion, college attendance, and employment were examined (Wiesner et al., 2003). Only 48% of the boys graduated from high school, and very few attended either a 2- or 4-year college. At age 25 years, nearly 70% reported working in menial service work or manual labor, semiskilled or skilled. Very few men received any substantial job training, as such training was costly and the sample was low income. Thus, an after-school apprenticeship program could have the very strong benefit of providing some training, as well as helping youth to decide what career and training to pursue. In community programs such as Teen Outreach and after school apprenticeships, the ratio of adults to youth should be higher than in more traditional ASPs, as presumably few youth will be in any one placement. Also, they should usually be highly structured. The programs may be more compelling to older youth in particular than ASPs, which have a "day-care" aura.

In sum, we now know that it is very difficult to get positive effects with an ASP compared to no program, and it is difficult even to avoid negative effects of ASP participation on problem behaviors. Second, we know that it is beneficial when parents have higher levels of knowledge

of their adolescent's behavior outside the home and are actively involved in monitoring their adolescents. Finally, we know that many youth from at-risk backgrounds receive little job training and have related employment problems. In light of these facts and the large sum spent on ASPs, rethinking approaches to youth's after-school hours may lead to improved programs for youth's after-school time. It seems that tests should be conducted combining the best characteristics of current ASPs but adding in more parent and parent-figure involvement. Such programs may be particularly suited to middle school youth (ages 11–12 to 13–14 years), as these youth are rather young for community placement options. Secondly, community placement programs showing evidence of positive outcomes should be considered for high school youth (ages 14–15 to 17–18 years), and parents should receive communications regarding their child's placement and progress and be given the opportunity at least once a term to "shadow" their son or daughter in the placement. Parental involvement in the program may also aid in providing placements for program youth at their work place. Federal support of ASPs should be provided only to programs that show evidence of no negative effects and at least some positive effects, and phased out for ASPs that continue to use practices indicated to have detrimental effects (e.g., lack of structure, clustering risk youth).

Acknowledgments

Support for this project was provided by Grant DA 051485 from the Division of Epidemiology, Services, and Prevention Branch, National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), and the Cognitive, Social, and Affective Development, National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), National Institutes of Health (NIH), U.S. Public Health Service (PHS); Grant MH 37940 from the Psychosocial Stress and Related Disorders, National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), U.S. PHS; and Grant HD 46364 from the Cognitive, Social, and Affective Development Branch, NICHD and Division of Epidemiology, Services, and Prevention Branch, NIDA, NIH, U.S. PHS.

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Biography

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