

Research in Brief: After-School Programs for At-Risk Youth

Youth who are at greater risk for low academic achievement, low school attendance, low school engagement, and behavioural problems are often described as “at-risk”. Left unattended, these problems can easily develop into substance abuse, criminal behaviour, and other long-term anti-social problems.

After-school programs are designed to meet many needs, ranging from providing reliable childcare to decreasing behavioural problems at-risk youth face.

After-school programs are programs that run after school, providing extra-curricular and academic activities that include: play, sports, community service, music, arts and crafts, homework help, and academic enrichment.

Do after-school programs affect externalizing behaviours and school attendance in primary and secondary at-risk students?

A recent systematic review and meta-analysis attempted to determine whether after-school programs affect externalizing behaviours (any problematic behaviour) and school attendance. The programs under review ranged from academically oriented to mainly extra-curricular.

The results did not show any significant impact on externalizing behaviour or school attendance rates when at-risk students were enrolled in after-school programs compared to at-risk students who were not enrolled.

Why does this matter?

- ⇒ At-risk youth are more likely to develop behaviour problems and low academic achievement
- ⇒ Behaviour problems and low academic achievement can easily evolve into criminal involvement, substance abuse, and other behavioural problems
- ⇒ After-school programs can lower the risk of behavioural and academic shortcomings
- ⇒ After-school programs, currently, do not impact school attendance and externalizing behavior
- ⇒ Improvements to after-school programs include:
 - creating goals and desired outcomes for the program
 - developing specific mechanisms to address outlined problems
 - increasing at-risk students’ attendance in after-school programs
 - evaluating programs more carefully



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What is a Systematic Review?

The purpose of a systematic review is to sum up the best available research on a specific question. This is done by bringing together the results of several studies. Studies included in a review are screened for quality, so that the findings of a large number of studies can be combined.

What did they do?

The researchers used Academic Search Premier, ERIC, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, PsychINFO, Social Sciences Citation Index, Social Services Abstracts, Social Work Abstracts, and Sociological Abstracts to find their studies.

The following criteria qualified a study for inclusion in the review:

- Experimental and Quasi-experimental designs
- Studies must have used a comparison group
- The after-school program must have offered more than one activity
- The after-school program had to be running during the school year, after school hours
- The after-school program could not be solely academic

A total of 24 studies were included in this review. 16 studies measured attendance and 19 measured externalizing behaviour. The researchers assessed all the studies to find whether after-school programs increase attendance and lowered externalizing behaviour.

What did they learn?

Overall, students enrolled in after-school programs did not show better externalizing behaviours or school attendance.

Only a few of the 16 studies that measured school attendance stated that school attendance was the goal of the study. Because of this, it is recommended that if increasing school attendance is the goal of an after-school program, it should be clearly outlined in the development stages of the program. Additionally, the program should be designed with its goals in mind. Implementing a program without establishing specific

tools that will impact areas of concern, will not be successful.

Although this review did not find that after school programs affected externalizing behaviour, there is potential. Some literature suggests that providing structured activities and adult supervision may improve problem behaviours. However, this potential is interrupted; at-risk youth rarely and infrequently attend after-school programs. In order to unlock this potential impact on behavioural problems, it is necessary to first increase at-risk students' after-school program attendance. Increasing after-school program attendance will allow better measurement of its impact on externalizing behaviours.

The authors also note a need for after-school programs to be evaluated more rigorously. Specifically, evaluation should be directed at the intention of the after-school program in a specific school or population. Assessing after-school programs in terms of their intended outcomes will guide program developers to explicitly outline the intended outcomes to create a more directed program.



*This brief summary was prepared from: Kremer, K. P., Maynard, B. R., Polanin, J. R., Vaughn, M. G., & Sarteschi, C. M. (2014). Effects of after-school programs with at-risk youth on attendance and externalizing behaviors: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 1-21.*

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