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Marci Malone
Utah State University

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**AFTER-SCHOOLS PROGRAMS AND THEIR INFLUENCE ON
PARENT INVOLVEMENT WITH CHILDREN AT HOME**

by

Marci Malone

**Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree**

of

DEPARTMENTAL HONORS

in

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Approved:

Thesis/Project Advisor
Dr. Martha Dever

Departmental Honors Advisor
Dr. Deborah Byrnes

Director of Honors Program
Dr. Christie Fox

**UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY
Logan, UT**

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After-School Programs Influence on Parent Involvement with Children at Home

Honors Thesis

Marci Malone
Utah State University
Fall 2006
Advisor: Martha T. Dever, Professor

Eight-year-old Victoria, with hands on hips and chin stuck up, defiantly said, "No mom, I want to stay for After-School Club. I don't care about the dentist." Her mother patiently responded by telling Victoria, "I know you want to stay but we have to leave now or we will be late for our appointment." The little girl, seeming to know from experience that her mother would not budge, stomped her foot as she began leaving the school saying, "I hate when I have to miss After-School Club!"

This is an interaction between a mother and her daughter that I witnessed over two years ago when I first became involved with after-school programs. While most of us might choose many things over a trip to the dentist, I was nonetheless impressed by Victoria's desire to attend After-School Club and her dramatic responses. However, I did not yet understand the value and importance that the program had for the school, the community, the families, and most importantly for each individual student. I was naive concerning the programs ability and obligation to "engage, guide, energize, and motivate students to produce their own successes" (Epstein, 1995, p.702). But now, looking back on my experiences with those children, I know that the After-School Club program was an important part of their lives and of mine.

Epstein (1995) suggests that a primary concern of schools and programs should be the family. However, this does not mean that they only support the family concerning their children's academic success. Good schools and good programs will find ways to support the home environment as well. This raises the question that is the focus of my project, concerning the role of after-school programs in this subject: *What influence do after-school programs have on family or parent involvement with their children at home?* By reviewing the literature and talking with a parent, I was able to better understand how

these programs can effectively support the home and family environment. I feel that this project had an influential impact on my teaching philosophy and practices concerning family involvement in my classroom, supporting the home environment, and other school and community programs.

Review of Literature

This review of literature is divided into two parts. Because this project is designed to examine the link between after-school programs and parental involvement in children's learning, the first part discusses after-school programs including some components such as creating positive relationships and academic or enrichment activities. The second part discusses parent involvement.

After School Programs

After-school programs provide children with safe places to be during after-school hours when their parents might not be home (Kugler, 2001). One study estimated that, after the regular school day, 14 million children are left unsupervised in the United States (Trends & Transitions, 2006). The U.S. Department of Education had a similar estimate of 8 to 15 million unsupervised children after school. This is most often the result of the parents' employment outside of the home. However, these startling statistics show the need our society has for after school care.

Youth crime reports also create a societal concern. During the hours of 2:00 to 6:00p.m, children are more likely to be involved in juvenile crime or be victims of non-family violent crime. When children are left alone for these long periods of time they are more likely to become bored and engage in high-risk activities (Kugler, 2001). These activities include involvement with violence, delinquency, and substance abuse (Riggs &

Greenberg, 2004; Trends & Transitions, 2006). Thus, many researchers agree that the statistics of parents in the workforce show the critical reality that our communities have “a greater need for adult-supervised activities after-school” (Gayl 2004, p.2).

Politicians and community leaders see after-school programs as a solution to the growth of these social and educational problems, especially in low-income areas. In 1998, Mayor Thomas Menino announced the Boston 2:00 to 6:00 Initiative which would provide quality after school activities in any neighborhood for any child that wanted to participate (Halpern 2003, p.87). Many believe that because of the increased number of unsupervised children, after-school programs have become a necessity in communities nationwide because of the programs ability to provide a safe place for children to be (Kugler, 2001).

Positive Relationships

After-school programs also present opportunities for children to enjoy positive relationships with other students and adults (Kugler, 2001). Children need to have positive experiences with their peers and adults. After-school program leaders can “provide companionship, direction, practical help, and emotional support that make a real difference to children” (Belle 1999, p.114). Children that may come from an unsteady home environment or background need to learn coping skills including how to build strong and positive relationships with others. When dealing with environmental factors such as violence or neglect, Brooks states that children need “at least one stable emotional relationship with a caregiver who serves as a model of coping” (2001, p.329). She continues to develop this thought by introducing how schools and community programs can help children develop these relationships. When children have acquired

these skills, they will be more capable of building positive relationships into adulthood.

Brooks states:

When children experience trustworthy care that encourages independence, competence, and a positive sense of identity unburdened with excessive shame and guilt, then as adults they can commit themselves [to others]. From these childhood experiences, parents internalize a working model of how people relate to one another, how trustworthy others are, and how much control one has over interactions with other people. This internal model influences how parents perceive their children and interact with them (p.57).

Community after-school programs can provide children with those relationships. The programs can be “havens from the academic pressures of schools, where children can learn social skills and develop mentors and role models to help them in their difficult circumstances” (Bodily & Beckett 2005, p.xii). Gayl states that “the adult supervision inherent in after-school programs helps children develop more meaningful ties with responsible adults, which research has shown to be beneficial for young people” (2004, p.4). Therefore, it could be said that the quality of the staff at after-school programs relates to the quality or level of influence that the programs have on the development of the children involved.

Many studies have shown the great impact that staff members can have on after-school participants. Kugler states that “successful programs are often staffed by people who have worked in them many years” and therefore “have the trust of the students and their families” (2001, p.46-47). Other characteristics of high-quality staff include being attentive to and aware of children’s needs, helping students obtain a strong sense of self,

continually practicing efficient behavior management skills, and also being responsive to events or circumstances that need immediate attention and support (Mahoney, et al., 2005a; Riggs & Greenberg, 2004). Surprisingly, it has been found that in many programs the staff tend to hold a college degree or are actively pursuing a degree at the time of their employment (Mahoney, et al., 2005b; Kugler, 2001). This dedication to their own education may be a supportive factor as to the quality of character and commitment that these after-school leaders show for the children in their programs.

However, it is clear that no matter the ethnicity, gender, or economic status of the staff, it is critical that all members are continually working together as a team to create a “comprehensive program that involves all families” and continues as the individual children grow-up and progress through the grades (Epstein 1995, p.707). The interactions between the adult leaders and the children will have a strong influence on the relationships that are built and supported between the children themselves and also their families. More specifically, the relations between the children are highly controlled by the environment and the models that the leaders create in the program. Thus, it is apparent that positive relationships in childhood create a foundation for future interactions and associations. It is critical for after-school programs to support that development.

Learning and Enrichment

In addition to supervision and social opportunities, after-school programs provide children with supplementary learning and enrichment activities (Kugler, 2001). Recent research brought to light a correlation between after-school programs and academic success (Mahoney, Lord, & Carryl, 2005b). It was found that children participating in an

after-school program showed higher achievement at the end of the year, specifically in reading. This group was compared with children who were placed in a variety of other after-school arrangements other than the particular after-school program. Teachers also perceived that the children participating in the after-school program had higher expectations for their success than did the children receiving alternative care. This study shows the ability of after-school programs to successfully promote academic achievement in their participants.

The first area that most after-school programs focus on is the academics, as most are designed to provide help with the completion of homework (Kugler, 2001). This homework help comes in many shapes and forms depending on the specific needs of the students at each after-school site. Individual tutoring, mentoring groups, and volunteer teachers are just a few examples of how children can be supported academically after school.

Enrichment activities are usually the second focus of after-school programs. However, each program will vary concerning the extra activities it provides for the students. Epstein (1995) states, "Good programs will look different in each site, as individual schools tailor their practices to meet the needs and interests, time and talents, ages and grade levels of students and their families" (p.704). Examples of various opportunities that might be available to children after school include nutrition programs, extra library hours, technology instruction, service groups, athletic participation, enrichment clubs, and music or art classes. Each of these activities provides students with extra-learning opportunities that are not easily found during the regular school day. After-

school programs give the students the opportunity for achievement and success in areas outside of the academic realm.

Parent Involvement at Home

After having children “parents are no longer the same individuals they were. A whole new role begins, and they start a new way of life” (Brooks 2001, p.1). This means that parents and children encounter a new life together, walking side-by-side exploring the many opportunities and experiences that are presented. Children learn new skills, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors from their parents, who in turn either reinforce or discourage those characteristics. Parents help children to demonstrate their abilities and practice new skills. Nevertheless, as children grow and develop, their parents cannot be constant in their supervision and involvement in each child’s life due to work or other outside responsibilities. Knowing that schools have the most influence in a child’s life, only second to the home, it is understandable that children “make the most progress when they have the active understanding, support, and involvement of adults at home and in school” (Cohen, 2003, p.37). Parents ultimately will need support from others for their family’s well-being and success.

In raising children, parents have many objectives and responsibilities. Brooks (2001) outlines three main goals that most parents work to achieve concerning their children, which are “(1) ensuring the physical health and survival of the child, (2) preparing the child to become an economically self-sustaining adult, and (3) encouraging positive personal and social behaviors” (p.40). Because these parental goals parallel the after-school program goals of a safe environment, positive relationships, and extended

opportunities or experiences it is possible that after-school programs will influence parental involvement.

Nevertheless, even though the goals of home and school are similar, it is critical that both environments work together to ensure that those goals are actually being met. "Most parents need help to know how to be productively involved in their children's education at each grade level. School programs and teacher practices to organize family and school connections are 'equalizers' to help families who would not become involved on their own" (Epstein & Dauber, 1991, p.290). Therefore it is the responsibility of school organizations, such as after-school programs, to inform and educate parents on how they can be more effective and involved in their child's learning.

This involvement will not only be shown by having an interest and participation in the child's school day, but after-school programs can influence how the parents involve themselves at home. Focusing specifically on an after-school program, the children will usually return home with their assignments complete, which can create time for more leisure or family-oriented activities. However, the after-school programs can still "provide information and ideas to families about how to help students at home with homework and other curriculum-related activities, decisions, and planning" (Epstein, 1995, p.704). Another practice to increase parent involvement is to include the parents in decisions concerning their child. Creating committees or councils could achieve this inclusion with parent leaders that discuss the safety, curriculum, and personnel in the after-school program. Active organizations such as this will allow the parents to be more aware of their child's progress during after school hours and also what they can do at home to support that progression.

The Project

Most parents strive to help their children be safe and healthy, and become self-sustaining adults who have positive personal and social behaviors. These goals parallel the general after-school program goals to create a safe environment, positive social relationships, and extended learning opportunities or experiences. Thus it is possible that after-school programs will influence parental involvement. The purpose of this project is to learn more about how children's after-school programs influence that parental involvement. For the completion of this project, I interviewed one parent who currently has a child attending an after-school program.

The Project Setting

The project was conducted in a K-5 school in Utah. The student population was primarily white and middle class.

Procedure

Many parents were asked to participate in this study. However, only one parent, whom I will refer to as Susan for this study, was willing to be interviewed. Susan is married and works full-time, as does her husband. The family is Caucasian and middle class. They have two children, one in preschool and the other in first grade. The daughter in first grade is attending an after-school program for the first time.

Data collection consisted of an interview with Susan shortly after her daughter started attending the after-school program. Questions were open-ended in order to best obtain her perspectives. The interview took place in October 2006 and also included follow-up through electronic mail (See appendix A for interview protocols.)

Data Collection

The interview with Susan was tape-recorded. The tape was transcribed into a word document. This was helpful in capturing the responses of Susan and any comments that she made during the discussion. This method was used over written responses or a survey because many ideas and thoughts could have been limited or restrained through the writing process. By participating in an open discussion, Susan was given a greater chance to share any comments or feelings.

Data Analysis

For this research project an adapted method of data analysis was used by categorizing and coding the units of data. The four steps I followed were: (1) read and record my thoughts (memo-ing) to get a feel for parent's attitudes and behaviors, (2) examine the individual responses and break them down into units of meaning, (3) group similar responses or units of meaning, and (4) define and name each cluster or category of data.

Ethics

This project was approved by the Institutional Review Board of Utah State University, Cache County Schools, and the building principal. The parent interviewed, Susan, provided informed consent.

Findings

Because I was only able to secure one participant for my project, I decided to reexamine the literature for the themes that emerged from the one interview that I was able to conduct. Thus, I examined it again to see if I could make specific connections to the following themes that emerged from my interview: (1) Work schedules, (2)

Homework Help, (3) Enrichment Activities, and (4) Social Interaction. As a result of this process, I expanded and added to my review of the literature.

Work Schedules

Today, more adults are entering the workforce than ever before. In 2002, an estimated 68 percent of families with children in the United States of America had both parents working. Women, who traditionally did not work full-time years ago, now make up 47 percent of our country's labor force (Office of the Press Secretary, 2004). This means that 18.4 million families have both parents working outside of the home and their children need somewhere or someone to be with after school. Mahoney, Larson, and Eccles (2005a) state that:

The entry of many more women into the workforce over the past 30 years has changed American family life dramatically, and the public response to these changes has been insufficient. Many schools do not offer youth enough after-school alternatives to hanging out on street corners or staying in unsupervised homes (p.421).

Children need someplace to go when school is over and someone to supervise their activities. Parents have many options available to them including babysitters, day cares, family members homes, religious groups, or other community sponsored programs. Government supported after-school programs provide another choice for parents. These programs serve as "an important protective function" by being held "responsible for the well-being of children during the after-school hours" (Riggs & Greenberg 2004, p.180). Therefore, since parents expect their children to be in a protected and safe environment

while they are at work, the supervision of trained and other volunteer adults at after-school programs provides a good alternative for the care and safety of children.

In discussion with Susan, the parent participant for the study, it was made clear that the primary purpose for having her child in the after-school program related to the parents work schedules. When asked why her child was enrolled in the after-school program, Susan replied, "Mainly because I work until five." Both parents work full-time outside of the home and therefore need a place for their child to stay after school. The parent noted of her assurance that the program provides a safe and structured environment while responsibilities at work are fulfilled. The program supports a working parents schedule and more specifically, the goals that this particular parent has of having a career outside of the home.

Another topic of interest discussed during the parent interview was the need for structure in a child's life. Susan felt it was critical to maintain stability throughout a child's daily schedule. An attraction of the after-school program was that "there was structure" and that it created smooth transitions between school and home. Many children experience well-structured routines and schedules during school hours and often at home. It is therefore important that an after-school program or other childcare center continues the same organized and orderly environment that a teacher or parent would create for their children.

Homework Help

After-school programs come in many shapes and sizes, with goals ranging from a variety of content areas to extracurricular activities. However, the majority of programs have a definite focus on academic achievement (Kugler, 2001). In fact, some after-school

programs maintain a primary focus specifically and only on the academics. This is often done as a result of the view that many public school officials hold concerning after-school programs. Officials frequently use these programs as a tool to help narrow the achievement gap that has been a growing concern for students in our public school system (Riggs & Greenberg, 2004). Programs such as these provide an “after-school opportunity [that] is academically focused and instruction is virtually a continuation of the regular school day” (Policy Study Associates 2004, p.6). Nevertheless, most programs do try to find a balance between academics and other educational learning opportunities.

An academic focus, however strong or weak it may be, is accomplished through the “implementation of content that focuses on building academic success” such as homework help or tutors (Riggs & Greenburg 2004, 180). Many children who join after-school programs do so because of their need for academic enrichment and support. Whether urged by parents or teachers, students find the extra motivation to achieve through the help of mentors or leaders involved with the programs. Individual time is set-aside during the program hours to sit down and specifically work on the children’s homework making sure that the child understands and completes his or her assignments successfully. This one-on-one help creates a positive and encouraging backbone for the academic success of each child in the program.

Not only will children complete their homework during the program hours, but also by working together with other adults and peers, the children will receive messages and examples conveying “the importance of school, of working hard, of thinking creatively, of helping one another, and of staying in school” (Epstein 1995, p.702).

Therefore, the academic support that after-school programs offer will not only help children complete immediate assignments but also will affect the child's attitude and view towards learning in their future academic careers.

In making the decision concerning where her child should go after school, Susan recognized the important influence that the academic focus of the after-school program had while looking at options for child care. She was pleased with the program and acknowledged the leader's ability and willingness to help the children complete their homework and also any extra projects or tasks that needed to be done for school. "I think it's great," Susan mentioned. "They're doing homework...and they obviously like it." During the interview, she also commented on how helpful and convenient it is for the family to finally arrive home after work and be able to spend quality time with each other since the child's homework is already complete.

Enrichment Activities

Aside from the academic focus of after-school programs, the enrichment activities provided are also a major component of a program's appeal and ability to maintain participants. Some programs may lean more towards the enrichment or extra-learning opportunities rather than having a strong emphasis on the academics. It depends on the design of the program and its goals to enhance a child's development in a specific area (Riggs & Greenberg, 2004). Programs may offer a variety of activities including art, music, athletics, service, etc. or they may focus on one area or extracurricular activity specifically. In a recent survey, it was found that parents and the program participants believed that a primary purpose of after-school programs is to provide cultural and enrichment opportunities as well as recreational activities (Riggs & Greenberg). Each

after-school program has an emphasis or purpose that it is trying to uphold and parents will look for those activities that provide the best opportunities to fit their child's needs and interests.

The enrichment activities are often what make an after-school program succeed or fail. Within the walls of a supervised and safe environment, children need a structured program that still allows for new opportunities and experiences to arise. Similar to a mission statement, many programs express a "greater emphasis on arts, culture, knowledge application, and recreation than is possible during regular school hours" (Policy Study Associates 2004, p.6). Supporting and extending student creativity and collaboration, or extended projects and events that once again are outside of the regular school routine are often the means to achieving this emphasis.

When discussing extra enrichment opportunities that are available at after-school programs, Susan expressed gratitude for the variety of activities that are offered in the program that her child attends. The children in the program could participate in and have experiences with many activities including art projects, science experiments, field trips, athletic games, sports, music education, and more. Because the children are usually attending the program until five o'clock each day, they miss out on opportunities to be a part of other extracurricular groups such as music lessons or team sports given that those practices are usually held directly after school. The parents of these children generally work until five and thus, they are not as easily able to get their children involved in other community activities or events. Susan discussed how the program provides a lot of variety for the children including "fun time and then they have an activity." She talked about the major benefit that the enrichment activities are for the children in the program

as well as their parents and families. It provides participants with experiences that are valuable and important to their development by being involved in activities outside of their school and home.

Social Interaction

Some researchers consider the social atmosphere that is found in after-school programs the most important aspect or tool used in the program to support a child's development. Mahoney, et al. (2005a) discussed this idea through the exploration of the positive longitudinal effects that leaders and mentors in after-school programs can have on the participants that they work with each day. Their influence can be found in many components of a child's character and being. These researchers believe that:

Community-based youth programs provide, then, a rich source of support for the healthy development of young people. The relationships that young people have in these facets of the ecology of development constitute potentially potent means to enhance healthy and thriving psychological and social development, including positive changes pertinent to emotional development, identity, moral development, and civic engagement...in order to better enable young people to flourish" (p.xi).

Thus, it could be said that the way students spend their time out of school can have an influence on their future development and well-being. And the leaders and mentors in those programs play a large role in building and maintaining a positive and constructive environment that supports those changes and growth.

Susan, the parent participant, frequently discussed social relationships that occurred in the after-school program. The positive benefits of having her child

“interacting with older kids” and other students from school were apparent in the discussion. The program provides the opportunity for many social experiences and connections that cannot be found during the school day or at home. Susan knew that the interactions with other children in a different environment are a critical part of her child’s growth and social development.

During the interview, Susan also mentioned that she is “one hundred percent happy with the leaders” that work in the after-school program. The structure that they provide and also the stable foundation created through trust and respect is a constant need in a child’s life. When asked how the children feel about and respond towards the leaders, Susan replied, “The kids just love them!” She explained how her daughter loves the program and at the end of the day will often refuse to go home. The reason for this was believed to be the positive impact that the after-school leaders have on the children. There is a “good bond” between the leaders and the participants of the program, which is recognized by Susan. She knows that her child is well taken care of in the after-school program.

Personal Reflection

This research and study was very useful to me as a teaching professional. Through the process of reviewing literature, data collection, and data analysis I have learned that research is a very informative yet unpredictable task. When beginning my project, I decided upon a focus or topic and what I thought would be good procedures to conduct interviews and gather data. However, I learned that there were many factors that I did not take into consideration such as after-school program beginning dates, accessibility to program participants and parents, and also the willingness of parents to volunteer for

interviews. These issues played a huge role in the continued progress of my research. However, these setbacks helped me to be more aware of the research process and how to prepare for the unexpected.

Discussion

During my analysis and interpretation of the project information and data, two specific things were evident. First, after-school programs can and do have a positive influence on children's lives today. Second, I found no evidence from my one participant that after-school programs directly impacted parent involvement in their home.

As discussed, many studies have shown the positive impact that after-school programs can have on the development of children physically, emotionally, and academically. This idea was reflected many times in my interview with Susan. A huge factor in placing her daughter in an after-school program was Susan's career. In result of the changes occurring in the work force, it has now become a community responsibility to help meet the needs of the modern-day family. Susan recognized her family's need to have community support. With the majority of families in our country having both parents work outside of the home, just as Susan and her husband do, after-school programs are becoming more accepted as a tool to support the family unit. During the interview Susan brought up many advantages to having such support through her child's school and its after-school program. Even though programs vary from place to place, Susan felt that any well-structured program could help many families and their children to succeed. This suggests that while parents are obligated to fulfill career responsibilities, they are seeking programs that will support those goals by helping children to succeed in a positive and structured environment that is similar to that found in the home.

The program her daughter attended did provide a safe and structured environment according to Susan. A daily schedule and routine provided a constant foundation that paralleled and supported the organization of time and activities that can be found during the school day and also at home. This reflected the structure of Susan's routine at home for her children. She appreciated that other adults were also trying to support her children when she could not be there herself. Thus, the after-school program that Susan's daughter attends, supports the goals and the responsibilities that many parents find in the workforce. This is clearly a huge advantage for individual families within a community.

More parents are beginning to realize and understand the positive effects that a quality after-school program may have upon their child. After interviewing Susan, it was clear that she knew her child would be safe while she was still at work. Another concern that she had as a parent was that she wanted her daughter to interact with other peers and adults. This was a positive factor that can help build a child's confidence in their social skills and ability to interact with others. Susan also knew that her daughter would be supported in academic achievement by having the help of leaders or mentors. The leaders spend one-on-one time with the participating children to help them learn specific concepts and find success in their education. In addition, Susan was pleased with the enrichment activities provided in the after-school program that introduced her daughter to new environments and interactions that may not have otherwise been experienced. These benefits, although not studied until recent years, are continuing to help after-school programs find a voice in a society that is in critical need of structured and positive childcare programs.

Although Susan's child had a positive experience in her after-school program, there is not enough evidence to suggest that this influence effected parent involvement at home, which was the proposed focus of this study. Susan did recognize the benefits that her child has experienced thus far from being involved in the after-school program including the environment, the social development, and the academic support. Even though Susan considers the attitude or personality of her daughter as "outgoing" and "friendly," she does not believe that this is result of positive interactions or experiences in the after-school program. Thus, these positive behaviors found at home were not necessarily contributed to the child's participation in the program although it was noted that an increase in such behaviors could be a result in the future. Susan could not identify any attitudes or behaviors that were influenced by program involvement and then manifested at home. When asked if the program influenced the parent-child interactions or relationships at home, she believed that any characteristics found were already present before her daughter ever participated in the program.

While after-school program participation may influence a child's behavior and success, it is not clear how far that influence can stretch into the home environment. Susan made it evident that although she appreciates and supports the goals and attributes of quality after-school programs, she does not see the influence of the program past 5:00PM. Further, to determine more clearly how after-school programs can positively effect the involvement of parents with their children at home, more interviews and continued research would need to take place.

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Appendix A

Interview Protocol

Parents with Children Enrolled in After-School Program:

1. What was your rationale for enrolling your child in the after-school program?
2. How do you think the program will benefit (has benefited) your child?
3. What do you expect to learn (have you learned) regarding appropriate home activities?
4. Do you expect (has) your child to develop some important relationships through the after-school program?