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What research tells us about effective out-of-school time programs for preventing juvenile delinquency

A *WHAT WORKS, WISCONSIN* FACT SHEET

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Much of the research on out-of-school time (OST) programs (including after-school and youth development programs) has focused on the effects of program participation on school engagement, academic success, and positive youth development. However, these programs have also been shown to improve mental health and social-emotional competencies and reduce violent and anti-social behavior, substance use and abuse, and involvement in the juvenile justice system. Effective programs share the following characteristics:

Program Design and Content

- **Appropriate structure** – Effective OST programs provide a mix of structured activities and supervised free time for youth to relax and socialize. Clear and consistent rules, limit setting, and age-appropriate monitoring are indicators of appropriate structure.

  Note: programs that serve predominately deviant youth should provide more structured activities and little to no unstructured free time, to minimize the risk of negative peer influence within the program.

- **Physical and psychological safety** – OST programs promote safety for young people by providing supervision during the hours when young people are most likely to commit crimes, engage in other risky behaviors, and become victims of crime. In addition, high-quality programs provide an atmosphere of physical and psychological safety where children are protected from bullying, harassment, and fear, and feel comfortable expressing themselves.

- **Opportunities for skill building** – Effective OST programs provide youth with opportunities to develop skills that will help them succeed in school, work, and life. Effective programs focus on improvement rather than on competition or comparison with others.

- **SAFE (sequenced, active, focused, and explicit)** – Effective programs are highly *focused* on personal and social skill development; use activities that are *sequenced* and coordinated to achieve *explicitly identified outcomes* for youth; and require *active* involvement of youth.

Program Relevance

- **Opportunities to belong** – Effective programs provide opportunities for meaningful inclusion regardless of one's gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation or disabilities. Interactions between individuals belonging to different groups (however they are defined) will be more positive when they are cooperative rather than competitive, with individuals interacting across group divisions. Adults can model inclusive behavior, mediate or interpret between groups as needed, and promote values of inclusiveness.

- **Cultural competence** – Staff cultural competence may be more important than cultural tailoring of program content, both in making youth feel comfortable in a program and in impacting targeted outcomes. Culturally competent youth workers learn about and value participants' cultural backgrounds, understand how their own culture influences them, and communicate openly with participants and their parents to avoid misunderstandings.

Program Delivery

- **Supportive relationships** – Youths' relationships with staff are key features of OST programs. Effective staff provide both emotional and instrumental support for young people, meaning they are caring and responsive as well as providing useful advice and guidance.

- **Creative, well-trained, and committed staff** – Finding and retaining staff who are genuinely interested in working with youth, able to creatively meet the needs of participants, well-trained, and committed to their jobs is critical to running an effective OST program.

- **Sufficient staff for individual attention** – Programs are most effective when there are enough staff to facilitate small groups of youth and provide individual attention to participants.

- **Positive social norms** – Effective OST programs promote and enforce positive social norms. A program "culture" that values positive behaviors and discourages negative behaviors can support youth in making positive choices both within the program and in their lives outside of the program.

- **Support for efficacy and mattering** – Youth need opportunities to make a difference in their community, to be empowered, and to encounter and overcome challenges. High-quality OST programs provide a safe environment for these important developmental experiences, particularly when youth are highly engaged and feel a sense of belonging and contributing to the program.

- **Integration of family, school, and community efforts** – Programs that have good relationships with school staff, participants' parents, and other community youth programs are able to coordinate efforts and support participants' development across multiple contexts.

Program Assessment and Quality Assurance

- **Youth involvement in program planning and decision-making** – In addition to providing youth with valuable experiences that will prepare them for adult roles, involving youth in this way also allows for constant feedback on whether an OST program is meeting the needs of its participants.
- **Measurement of multiple outcomes** – Programs should evaluate their effectiveness on a variety of outcomes, not just academic achievement. Positive youth development outcomes should be valued as well. Tracking effectiveness on reducing problem behaviors may provide convincing data for stakeholders, but may run the risk of alienating youth participants.

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