



# The longitudinal effects of after-school program experiences, quantity, and regulatable features on children's social–emotional development



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## ABSTRACT

Experiences of 298 children with their caregivers in after-school programs (ASPs) were examined as predictors of social–emotional functioning across the first through fifth grade. Moderating effects of previous social–emotional problems, child gender, family income, quantity of care, and program regulatable features were also estimated. On average, ASP experiences negatively predicted externalizing problems and positively predicted social self-control and assertion. Interestingly, positive ASP experiences did not predict decreased externalizing behaviors, but instead children with negative experiences had higher levels of externalizing behavior problems. Changes in ASP experiences positively predicted changes in self-control scores, but only for boys. Finally, staff experience, staff wages, and changes in child-to-caregiver ratios predicted children's ASP experiences and levels of social–emotional development.

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## 1. Introduction

Participation in after-school programs has increased dramatically, from 6.5 million children in 2004 to over 8 million children in 2009 (Afterschool Alliance, 2009). Further, parents of another 18.5 million children indicate they would enroll their child in an after-school program if one was available (Afterschool Alliance, 2009). In response to this high demand, increases in after-school program funding have been dramatic during the last decade, with federal funding increasing from \$40 million in 1998 to \$1.154 billion in 2011 (Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, 2011). This funding stream, devoted to 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) that provide safe places for children to go in their communities during after-school hours, has allowed for a striking increase in the number of programs available to families (Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, 2011).

Along with this increase in funding, however, has been an increase in demand for evaluative evidence that after-school programs are providing support for positive child development. Researchers often propose that children involved in after-school programs are exposed to situations in which they can practice their social skills through peer interactions, and develop relationships with

responsible, caring adults, all of which support positive youth development (Lerner, 2005; Mahoney, Larson, Eccles, & Lord, 2005; Pettit, Laird, Bates & Dodge, 1997; Posner & Vandell, 1999). In addition, researchers hypothesize that after-school caregivers may also provide the emotional and social support some children are not receiving at home, hence serving as a protective factor for children from high-risk homes (Belle, 1999; Kahne et al., 2001; Riggs & Greenberg, 2004).

However, research findings from studies exploring the effects of after-school programs on children's social–emotional development have been unexpectedly mixed. Although after-school program participation has been linked with positive behavioral and social development (e.g. Grossman, Campbell & Raley, 2007; Kahne et al., 2001; Mahoney, Parente & Lord, 2007; Mason & Chuang, 2001; Posner & Vandell, 1994; Riggs, 2006; Shernoff, 2010; Vandell, Reisner & Pierce, 2007), there have also been notable studies that failed to find or even found a negative relation between after-school program participation and social–emotional outcomes (Dynarski et al., 2003; Dynarski et al., 2004; Galambos & Garbarino, 1985; James-Burdumy et al., 2005; NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2004; Vandell & Corasaniti, 1988; Zosky & Crawford, 2003).

There is theoretical support for the idea that after-school programs might foster positive development. Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006), in their bioecological model of development, suggest that “proximal processes,” or reciprocal interactions between a human and her environment, are the main mechanisms of development. More specifically, the authors suggest that in order to

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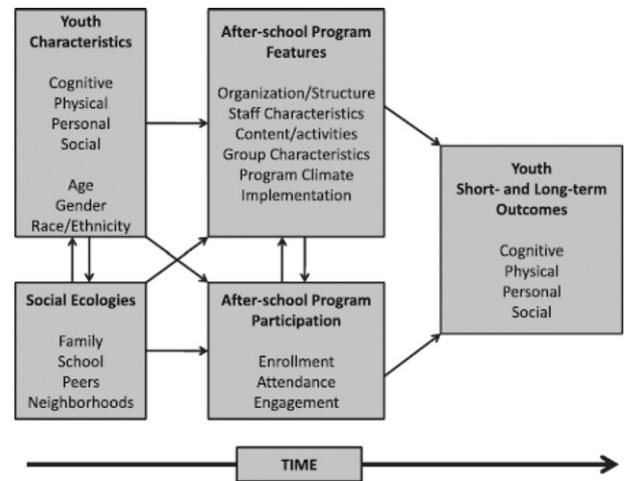
encourage development, these interactions must occur on a fairly regular basis and over an extended period of time. Initially, the primary people involved in these exchanges are children's parents. However, as children age, other people such as caregivers, teachers, and even after-school care providers, become main people with whom children regularly interact. Therefore, after-school programs, and more specifically the ongoing interactions children have with the providers in these programs, may play a crucial role in furthering development.

Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) specifically suggest that positive reciprocal interactions will benefit children growing up in disadvantaged environments (e.g., in poverty, with depressed mothers) in terms of a reduction of negative behavior, whereas children in more stable environments will show increases in behavioral competence. Thus, we would expect the effect of positive after-school care on children who are growing up in unstable environments to manifest itself in the form of a reduction in behavioral issues (e.g., external and internal behavior problems). For children in advantaged environments, positive caregiving after school would promote the ongoing development of more normal, positive developmental abilities (e.g., prosocial behavior).

The bidirectional nature of Bronfenbrenner and Morris' (2006) model also suggests the possible on-going benefits of after-school program participation. For example, a child who participates in an after-school program that encourages and supports positive social interactions may begin to seek out more positive peer relationships. As a result, the child may be seen as more social by her peers in the after-school program, therefore opening the door for her to experience even more positive interactions. These constructive peer experiences may also transfer into the child's academic life, allowing her to make more positive social relationships with children in her class, which in turn might decrease the number of negative interactions she has with her peers. This decrease may then lead the teacher, when asked to report about her pupils' social skills, to describe this child as having greater social abilities than might have previously been reported. In this way, after-school programs could have a powerful effect on a multitude of developmental factors, and these effects could then expand into other environmental contexts.

Additionally, dynamic systems views of human development suggest that the active relations between a child and her context encourage development (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Lerner, 2002). This view suggests that positive development is most likely to occur when there is a good "fit" between a child and the community around her. In other words, supportive contexts (such as after-school programs) that match a child's characteristics will enhance development. More specifically, researchers have suggested that developmental contexts which provide children with strong role models, encourage positive peer relationships, and support self-esteem may facilitate children's feelings of control over their environment and their emotional self-regulatory abilities (e.g., Chorpita & Barlow, 1998; Crick & Dodge, 1994; Durlak, Mahoney, Bohnert & Parente, 2010; Grossman, Campbell & Raley, 2007). Children who take advantage of after-school programs are able to participate in academic and extracurricular activities that enhance not only their academic skills, but also their social, behavioral, and physical skills, whereas their unsupervised counterparts spend much of their time watching television (Posner & Vandell, 1999). In fact, after-school programs have been suggested as a safe alternative for children who might otherwise engage in risky behaviors if left unsupervised (Cross, Gottfredson, Wilson, Rorie & Connell, 2010; Kahne et al., 2001; Riggs & Greenberg, 2004).

To further elucidate how theories such as the bioecological and dynamic system models would predict how after-school programs influence children's development, Durlak, Mahoney, Bohnert and Parente (2010, p. 287) proposed a more detailed ecological model specific to after-school programs:



As suggested by this model, the effect that after-school program participation has on a child's outcomes is dependent on a host of factors, including the youth's characteristics, programmatic features, and changes across time.

### 1.1. Children's experiences in after-school programs

Often, research in the area of after-school programs focuses on the main effects of participation on social–emotional outcomes. There is reason to believe, however, that children's experiences may play an important moderating role in this relation. For example, youth report positive interactions with program staff as being an important factor in their choice to attend after-school programs and to make positive behavioral choices (Diversi & Mecham, 2005). Similarly, more frequent positive interactions with staff and fewer negative interactions with peers predicted lower levels of externalizing and internalizing behavior problems and higher levels of psychological functioning and increased social skills for boys (Mahoney, Schweder & Stattin, 2002; Pierce, Bolt & Vandell, 2010; Pierce, Hamm & Vandell, 1999; Roffman, Pagano & Hirsch, 2001). However, research is still needed to explore how children's experiences may also interact with participant factors (e.g., levels of risk), program regulatables (e.g., staff–child ratios, caregiver education and experience), quantity of attendance, as well as the effects of changes in experiences over time.

### 1.2. After-school program participation as a protective factor

There is also reason to believe that after-school programs may provide a protective factor for children at risk for developmental problems, such as a child's sex (i.e., boys are considered to be a high-risk population) and living in urban, low-income neighborhoods (which tend to be plagued with high levels of crime, violence, drugs, and poor schools) (e.g., Belle, 1999; Kahne et al., 2001; Mahoney, 2000; Pederson & Siedman, 2005; Riggs & Greenberg, 2004; Roffman, Pagano & Hirsch, 2001).

Indeed, positive outcomes such as lower psychosocial symptoms and fewer behavior problems have been found for boys who participate in after-school programs (e.g., Pettit, Laird, Bates & Dodge, 1997; Pierce, Hamm & Vandell, 1999; Pierce, Bolt & Vandell, 2010; Roffman, Pagano & Hirsch, 2001). Similarly, children from urban neighborhoods are often found to benefit from after-school programs through decreases in behavioral and social–emotional problems and increases in reading and math grades (e.g., Beck, 1999; Mahoney, Lord, & Carryl, 2005; Mason & Chuang, 2001; Roffman, Pagano & Hirsch, 2001). Finally, research suggests that children from low-income families benefit from after-school programs through decreases in externalizing and

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