

**Dr. Mary Larner** is a Policy Analyst and Editor with the David and Lucile Packard Foundation's Children, Families, and Communities Program. She develops and edits issues of the journal, *The Future of Children*, which focuses on diverse topics related to the well-being of children. The December 1999 issue, "When School Is Out," includes articles by leading researchers in the field of school-age child care and youth development summarizing current knowledge about after-school programs for children ages 6 to 14. Previously, Dr. Larner studied child care use by low-income families at the National Center for Children in Poverty in the Columbia University of Public Health. She also examined home visiting programs and the long-term impacts of preschool programs at the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation. She has authored several reports, book chapters, and articles on child care and family support topics.



# Why Should We Care About After-School Care?

Mary Larner

*The United States is experiencing an increasing need for out-of-school care for children. While all children need safe out-of-school options, the demand is especially great for younger children (ages 5 to 9) and children living in low-income neighborhoods. Children, families, and communities all stand to benefit when children attend high-quality programs after school. Demonstrated benefits include higher grades in school and improved work habits and social skills. Advocates argue that reduced rates of crime and risky activities such as drug or alcohol use and sexual contact may also result. Currently, however, four major barriers hamper delivery of after-school services to children: (1) inadequate funding, (2) under-qualified and high-turnover staff, (3) inadequate and/or inappropriate space, and (4) lack of long-term evaluations of program impact. Recent polls show that most voters believe that organized activities for children and teens should be provided after school, and that most voters are willing to pay more in taxes to increase the availability of such programs.*

## The Problem

With nearly 40 million children between the ages of 5 and 14, the United States is experiencing a burgeoning need for out-of-school care (i.e., before school hours, after school hours, summer, and school holidays). Widespread shifts in family and community life have changed the lives of school-age children. Because more parents are working, fewer familiar adults are home or nearby when children are dismissed from school. Consider these facts:

- More than 75% of mothers with school-age children are employed, and two-thirds of them work full time [7].
- Public schools meet for only 6 hours per day, 180 days per year. The gap between parents' and children's schedules may amount to perhaps 1,000 hours per year, time when children may engage in leisure and non-school activities—or may court trouble.

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- An estimated 35% of 12-year-olds care for themselves regularly during after-school hours while parents are working [51].
- During the afternoon hours, rates of juvenile crime triple, and many unsupervised youngsters experiment with tobacco, alcohol, drugs, and sex. Police statistics indicate that both these risky behaviors and juvenile crime increase significantly from 3:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m. Widely reported FBI statistics indicate that 47% of violent juvenile crimes take place on weekdays between the hours of 2:00 p.m. and 8:00 p.m. [25].
- The U.S. General Accounting Office estimates that by 2002 the supply of school-age programming will meet barely one-quarter of the need in many urban areas.
- The cost of providing after-school care runs between \$2,000 and \$4,000 per child per 12-month year. Current revenues (parent fees, public and private funding, and in-kind contributions) typically cover only two-thirds of program costs [13], and many low-income parents cannot afford to pay their portion of the costs.

The habits and expectations that surround out-of-school time today were shaped by patterns of family life that existed in earlier eras. The school day and school year were planned around the needs of farming families, but now schools release children to empty houses and neighborhoods. After-school activities that grew in popularity during the prosperous, family-oriented 1950s and 1960s (such as Scouts, religious classes, and Little League) now find that few parents are available to serve as volunteer leaders or to provide transportation. New programs and policies that reflect current social conditions are needed.

## What is the Nature of After-School Care?

During the school years, children acquire and consolidate basic academic and social skills, dispositions toward achievement, expectations for behavior, and goals for the future. After-school programs can play a vital role in this process. They can support and supplement families and schools in nurturing children's well-rounded development.

Programs typically focus on one or more of the following goals:

- Providing safe, supervised care for children
- Preventing gang and drug involvement and other types of delinquent behavior
- Improving academic achievement
- Offering recreational opportunities.

Currently, after-school care is a highly diverse network of programs that vary dramatically in focus, sponsorship, structure, activities, intensity, and frequency of operation. Programs range from full-time year-round child care to drop-in centers and after-school clubs. Therefore, the omnibus term "after-school program" may mean anything from an extended-day program at school, to a dance group, to a YMCA basketball league. Such imprecision confuses efforts to document supply and demand, to plan new initiatives, to target program improvement efforts, and to create appropriate expectations for program impact.

One reason for the variability in after-school programs is that constituent groups have different views of the meaning of out-of-school time:

- For **children**, time out of school means freedom to be with friends, to explore their surroundings, to pursue their own interests, and to retreat with their private thoughts. As they grow older, children want both "voice and choice" in places where they can gather and interact with

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adults on a relatively equal footing, and make choices about what they will do and how they will do it.

- For **parents**, out-of-school time is a source of anxiety, concern, and expense. One single mother who has to leave her 8-year-old home alone while she works commented, “All I do after 3:00 is worry” (quoted in [3]). Parents who are trying to protect and encourage their children by “remote control” as they work outside the home seek safe, supervised, goal-directed programs.
- The **public** wants a safe environment that discourages risky behaviors and criminal activities and that facilitates the development of young people. Voters and policymakers see the value in programs that prevent problem behaviors, promote learning, and provide guidance to young people.

Thus, communities need an array of diverse programs and services that are carefully planned and adequately funded. They also need to make informed decisions regarding the purpose of and rationales for selecting a particular program focus (e.g., sports and recreation versus “down time” with peers versus academic enhancement).

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## What Benefits Can We Expect from After-School Care?

Some studies have found that, when compared with children who do not participate in after-school programs, the youngsters who do participate achieve higher grades in school, exhibit more positive work habits in school, engage in fewer high-risk behaviors, and show more social competence with peers at school and at home [51]. These results must be interpreted with some caution, however, because the programs studied are voluntary and their participants are self-selected.

Still, it is clear that some children gain more than others. Research suggests that the greatest benefits occur for younger children (ages 5 to 9), and those in low-income neighborhoods [25]. Children in these groups show improvements in behavior with peers and adults, work habits, and performance in school [52].

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## Who Uses After-School Care?

The National Child Care Survey (1990) on child care arrangements reported that the percentage of children enrolled in after-school care decreased steadily with age (Figure 1), from 22% in kindergarten, to 14% in third grade, to 6% in fifth grade, to 1% in seventh grade [17].

Dramatic differences separate the choices available to children, depending on where they live. For example:

- Nearly one-half the schools in suburban areas and in central cities offer extended-day programs to fourth graders, whereas only one-fourth of rural schools do so [50].
- The low-income neighborhoods where children are most in need of safe, interesting, challenging activities offer few after-school options, and the programs that do exist tend to address risks and problems rather than cultivating children’s skills and talents [7].

The utilization of programs is affected by cost and ease of access, as well as need and interest. The 1991 *National Study of Before- and After-School Programs* [44] found that 41% of the spaces that existed in licensed programs were unfilled. One study of low-income families with children ages 5 to 7 asked parents about barriers that kept them from using their preferred after-school options. Nearly half (43%) of the parents cited cost,

and 16% cited transportation problems [30]. As a result, long waiting lists at free programs exist alongside empty spaces in programs that charge fees.

## What Are the Elements of Successful After School Programs for Children?

As with early child care, research findings indicate that staff-child ratios, level of staff training, the nature of staff-child interactions, and the diversity and flexibility of program activities all are related to children's adjustment and satisfaction with programs. Children respond more positively to programs when:

- Staff-child ratios are smaller
- Staff have more formal training
- Programs are more flexible
- Activities are developmentally appropriate.

Children do not fare well in rigidly structured programs where staff members have a harsh style of interacting, but benefit from attending flexible programs with varied activities and supportive staff [40].

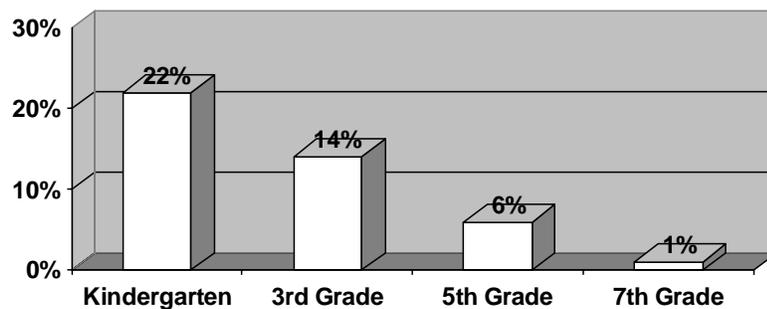
***There is no agreed-upon credential for work with school-age children. Moreover, appropriate training is scarce, staff salaries average less than \$10 per hour, and staff turnover exceeds 40% per year.***

## What are the Barriers to Program Success?

The 1999 volume of *The Future of Children*, "When School is Out" [25] reported four major hurdles that impede successful delivery of after-school programs:

1. **Finding ongoing operating funds.** Government and foundation grants are a key source of start-up funding and project support, but little public funding is available for operations over the long term.

**% of Children in After-School Care by Grade**



*Figure 1. Percentage of Children Enrolled in After-School Care by Grade Level*

2. **Maintaining qualified staff.** There is no agreed-upon credential for work with school-age children. Moreover, appropriate training is scarce, staff salaries average less than \$10 per hour, and staff turnover exceeds 40% per year.
3. **Securing appropriate space.** Many programs operate in shared spaces that they do not control. They often lack access to libraries, computer labs, art rooms, and playgrounds.
4. **Developing an accurate understanding of program potential.** Strong, long-term evaluations of after-school and youth development programs are scarce [25].

In general, programs are less likely to succeed when:

- Program focus is unclear
- A developmental perspective is absent from programming and activities
- Staff are poorly trained and supported
- Planning time and curricular supports are lacking or uneven
- Children's attendance is irregular
- Funding is inadequate.

While an infusion of new funds would resolve some difficulties, problems of staffing, space, and supporting institutions will remain. There is no cadre of trained youth professionals ready to take up positions in new after-school programs, nor do most communities have facilities designed for children that are currently available for use. Long-term investments are needed to improve individual programs and to establish an infrastructure of facilities and training supports to uphold the quality of after-school programs in future years. The time is now ripe to think strategically and begin making those investments in programs, infrastructure and evaluation.

## Why is After-School Care a Key Investment for State and Local Policymakers?

A consensus now is emerging that the wider society should share with parents the responsibility for providing programs and activities, safe places, and transportation options to make out-of-school time productive for children and teens. A poll of 2,000 adults taken in 1997 found that the majority held negative views of American children, but 60% of those polled endorsed the idea that more after-school programs would provide an effective way of addressing the problems of "kids these days" [51]. After-school programs increasingly are seen as relevant to two broad policy agendas: (1) preventing crime, substance abuse, and teen pregnancy, and (2) promoting school achievement.

Recent polls show that most voters believe there should be organized activities for children and teens after school, and they are willing to pay more in taxes to increase the availability of after-school programs. For instance, 72% of the parents in a national poll taken in 1996 commented that they would like schools to be kept open longer for classes, supervised homework, or extracurricular activities [16]. Two 1998 surveys, one of more than 1,000 California adults [47] and one of a national sample of 800 voters [48], found that nearly 80% of those surveyed said they were willing to pay more taxes to support after-school mentoring, educational, and prevention programs for youths.

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State and federal budgets for education, public safety, crime prevention, and child care provide some funding for after-school programs. For example, in 2000, \$450 million in federal grants is available through the Department of Education to enable schools to establish after-school programs called "21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers." The Centers are school-based programs offering varied activities for children and community members after regular school hours in a safe, drug-free, supervised environment.

Funding increases are important, but they constitute only the first step. New and established programs need to be evaluated so that quality problems can be addressed. In addition, we need to cultivate creative means for making high quality after-school programs more affordable and accessible, especially for low-income families.

From a policy perspective, this is a time to concentrate substantial evaluation resources in a few ambitious and careful studies of important programs to gain the knowledge needed to guide subsequent policy and funding decisions. When they measure a broad spectrum of important life outcomes (such as the avoidance of delinquency or early pregnancy, and increases in high school graduation rates and improvements in career and college choices), evaluations can help to sustain and justify public support for the afterschool programs that children need and parents want.