Practice Brief

Lessons from the Field:
Three Evidence-Informed Strategies to Improve Afterschool Quality

Advancing Collaborative Research in Out-of-School Settings
ACROSS

This practice brief is informed by research in urban afterschools. It may be used as a reflective tool to spark conversation about (1) three specific strategies to improve afterschool quality, (2) challenges in implementing these strategies, and (3) ways to overcome these challenges.

1 Develop and Maintain a Structured Environment

What: To maintain a safe and fun environment, have clear and positive expectations for behavior, structured use of time, and consistent reinforcement of rules.

How:

1. Develop 3-4 specific and positive rules that youth understand and agree to follow. It's best to create these rules with youth.
2. Provide specific praise for rule following and redirect minor infractions using short command spoken in a soft, calm voice when close to child — *Short, Soft, Close, and Calm*.
3. Provide whole group rewards for following rules, such as a quick dance party or fun games (inspired by the *Good Behavior Game*).
4. Prepare engaging activities, transition, and routines so time is used productively.

2 Model and Promote Warm Interactions

What: To create an enjoyable and inclusive community, provide many opportunities for respectful communication and supportive relationships.

How:

1. Create routine greetings and goodbyes that include the youth's name and a kind remark.
2. Give specific praise for helpful, supportive acts ("Thank you for loaning your pencil!").
3. Pair youth across different strengths to complete activities and allow new relationships to form (inspired by the *Peers as Leaders* mindset).
4. Set aside time for youth to give one another verbal or written compliments or "*tootles*" (vs "tattles").

3 Use Responsive and Engaging Instruction

What: To increase youth engagement and competence, use instructional practices that respond to their strengths, needs, and interests.

How:

1. Get to know youth as individuals and align practices and instruction to youths' experiences in their families, schools, and communities.
2. Plan activities and communicate in age-responsive ways. (For example, middle school youth are motivated by peers, autonomy, and opportunities to build competence.)
3. Give verbal praise for extra effort or mastery. This includes giving a "shout-out" when a student learns a new skill or sending home a "*Good News Note*" to share the accomplishment with families.

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How Can I Strengthen My Practice?

1. What do you already do to promote these best practices?

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2. What gets in the way of doing more?

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3. What additional supports can you put in place in response?

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Where Can I Learn More?

To access this practice brief and the resources below electronically, please go to:
http://bit.ly/ACROSS-practice-brief

- Making Caring Common– Resources for Educators: https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/resources-for-educators/
- Navigating SEL from the Inside Out: A Practical Resource for Schools and OST Providers: https://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/Documents/Navigating-Social-and-Emotional-Learning-from-the-Inside-Out.pdf
- American Institutes of Research's Beyond the Bell: https://beyondthebell.org/
- A Practitioner's Guide: Building and Managing Quality Afterschool Programs: http://www.sedl.org/afterschool/practitioners_guide_to_afterschool_programs.pdf
- The Afterschool Guide for Creating Outstanding Team-Building Games: https://goodshepherds.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Team_Building_Games.pd-copy.pdf
- Publications by the National Afterschool Association: https://naaweb.org/resources/publications
- Issue briefs from the Afterschool Alliance: http://www.afterschoolalliance.org/researchIssueBriefs.cfm
- Global Family Research Project: https://globalfrp.org/Articles
- Youth Work Methods Guidebooks from The David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality: https://store.cypq.org/collections/guidebooks

Background and Context:

This practice brief represents a collaboration between Good Shepherd Services and New York University's Institute of Human Development and Social Change to document best practices in afterschool care and education. This practice brief is informed by youth development leaders, the research literature, and an empirical study involving five afterschool programs in New York City (participants were predominately Latino and African American, and in 3rd to 8th grade). Multimethod data were collected to understand relations among classroom quality, social-behavioral risk, and academic outcomes. The resulting research article and research brief document three afterschool classroom practices that, when maintained over time, relate to positive outcomes for youth. In response, this practice brief was created in an effort to give back to the field of effective afterschool practitioners.