

HOW OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME PROGRAM QUALITY IS RELATED TO ADOLESCENT OUTCOMES

By Kristin Anderson Moore, Ph.D. and Kathleen Hamilton, M.A.

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OVERVIEW

In this brief, we examine the association between out-of-school time (OST) program quality and adolescent outcomes. Research is sparse on what constitutes a quality program. However, several elements of program quality are frequently identified. Three of these are programs that support youth in forming positive relationships, making decisions, and encouraging learning. In addition, safety—or fostering a safe physical and emotional environment—is often identified as a key element in program quality. We examine the hypothesis that adolescents in high-quality and safe programs tend to engage in fewer risky behaviors, to have greater social competency, and to have better school performance than adolescents not in a program. The data strongly support the expected associations, even when social and economic factors are taken into account. Importantly, we find no significant differences between adolescents in a low- or medium-quality program and those not in a program, except for one instance where participation in a medium-quality program is associated with positive school performance when compared with no program participation. Participating in a low-quality program was never different than not being in a program at all. In every case, programs rated by parents and their adolescents (averaged together) as highly safe were associated with significantly more positive outcomes compared with participation in medium- or low-safety programs, or not being in a program at all. These results suggest the importance of high-quality OST programs, that is, programs that promote a sense of physical and emotional safety, enable youth to build positive relationships, allow youth a role in decisions, and support development of social skills, like conflict resolution, leadership, and teamwork.

BACKGROUND

Although it is widely assumed that program quality leads to positive child and youth outcomes,^{e.g. 2,5,8} rigorous research concerning the effect of out-of-school time (OST) program quality on outcomes for children and youth is surprisingly sparse, and aside from some program-specific examinations of program quality and adolescent outcomes, a research-based consensus on the elements of program quality is lacking.^{3,4,6,7} Nevertheless, individual efforts to identify quality itself have arrived at similar conclusions. For example, Roth and Brooks-Gunn¹³ elicited themes from the youth development literature that have resulted in three aspects of program quality and the additional aspect of safety.⁹

They include the opportunity to do the following:

- develop positive relationships,
- encourage learning,
- allow some decision-making on the part of the young participants, and
- experience emotional and physical safety.⁹

These aspects of program quality¹³ as well as a measure of safety were included in the *Every Child Every Promise* survey, commissioned by the America's Promise Alliance in 2005. The survey includes the following measures of program quality:

- youth report that they develop warm and trusting relationships;
- youth report that they acquire life skills, such as teamwork, leadership, and conflict resolution; and
- youth report that they have some decision-making power in the program; and
- youth and their parents report feeling that the program is safe.

We expect, and find, that these elements of quality are significantly related to adolescent outcomes.

DATA AND ANALYSES

For more detailed information about the *Every Child Every Promise* survey methodology and measures, see the box on page 6. Briefly, 2,000 adolescents aged 12-17 and 2,000 parents of these adolescents were interviewed in 2005 to assess the degree to which children and youth experience the Five Promises, as well as other varied topics, including out-of-school time program participation in an average week.

Bivariate and multivariate analyses were conducted to assess the relationship of out-of-school time program quality and program safety with three adolescent outcomes:

- risky behaviors,
- school performance, and
- social competence.

Program quality was assessed by a scale based on the three constructs, noted above, as well as a separate measure of safety (also see the box on page 6). In addition, a measure of hours of program participation was developed based on the adolescent's report to explore the possibility that the quantity of participation is related to better outcomes.

To remove the confounding effects of social and economic differences that may be correlated with program quality, the following control variables were included in multivariate analyses: child gender, race/ethnicity, family structure (two-parent biological family versus other), household income, and parent education. Bivariate associations are reported only for those variables that remain statistically significant when controls are included in multivariate models. The statistical significance level used for this brief is 0.05.

RESULTS

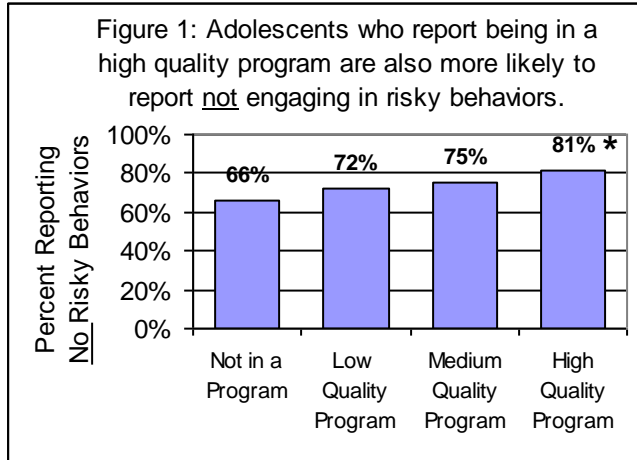
Program Quality

Being in a high-quality program was positively, consistently, and significantly correlated with all three adolescent outcomes. Specifically, adolescents in high-quality programs were more likely to avoid risky behaviors, to have better performance in school, and to have greater social competence, over and above the control variables, than those in no program.

Moreover, we consistently found that adolescents in a low-quality program have similar outcomes to adolescents not in a program at all. The results for medium-quality program were less consistent when controlling for background factors. An adolescent in a medium-quality

program tended to have better school performance than an adolescent not in a program. However, an adolescent in a medium-quality program did not experience significantly fewer risky behaviors and did not experience significantly greater social competence compared with an adolescent not in a program.

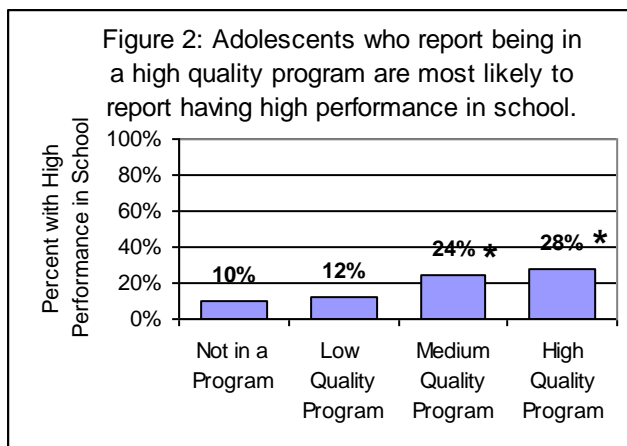
Several findings are depicted below, to illustrate the overall pattern.



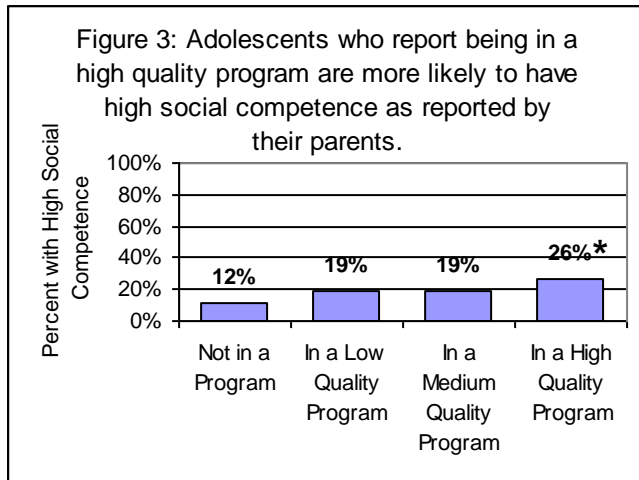
Note: Asterisk indicates a statistically significant difference compared with not being in a program.

As shown in Figure 1, adolescents who reported being in a high-quality OST program were the most likely to report not engaging in risky behaviors (81 versus 66 percent). However, adolescents in a low- or medium-quality program were not significantly different from adolescents who were not in a program at all.

For school performance, being in a high quality program is also significantly better than being in no program. As shown in Figure 2, 28 percent of adolescents in a high-quality program have high performance in school, which is nearly three times the proportion found for those not in a program (10 percent). As noted, the data indicate that adolescents in a medium-quality program also have better performance in school compared with adolescents not in a program. Specifically, among adolescents who report that their program is medium-quality, 24 percent have high performance in school; this makes them more than two times as likely to report such performance as those not in a program (10 percent). This finding is the only instance where being in a medium-quality program differs from being in no program. However, like the other two outcomes, school performance for adolescents in a low-quality program did not significantly differ from those in no program (12 vs 10 percent had high performance in school).



Note: Asterisk indicates a statistically significant difference compared with not being in a program.



Note: Asterisk indicates a statistically significant difference compared with not being in a program.

Similar to findings for risky behavior and school performance, Figure 3 shows that adolescents who report being in a high-quality program are much more likely to have high social competence, as reported by their parents. Among adolescents who report being in a high-quality program, 26 percent have high social competence. This makes them more than twice as likely to have high social competence as adolescents not in a program (12 percent). The data from multivariate models indicate that, net of controls, adolescents in a medium or low-quality program did not differ significantly on social competence compared with adolescents in no program.

Program Safety as Reported by the Teen and by the Parent

As reported by parents and teens, most OST programs were seen as safe, especially by parents. Those adolescents in a program that they and their parents felt to be highly safe were more likely to be doing well on all three outcomes compared with those in less safe programs or no program. This pattern is found net of program quality and the control variables. Specifically, compared with adolescents not in a highly safe program, adolescents in a program they and their parents reported as highly safe were more likely to report the following:

- that they do not engage in risky behaviors (80 percent versus 66 percent);
- that they have high school performance (27 percent versus 10 percent); and
- that they have high social competence (26 percent versus 12 percent).

Additional Analyses¹

In additional analyses (not reported in this brief), we examined the association between each separate quality element (learning skills; building relationships; helping make decisions; and feeling safe) and each of the three adolescent outcomes. Each individual quality element was found related to each of the adolescent outcomes. Therefore, these analyses confirm that all four of these elements (and perhaps others as well) of program quality are associated with better outcomes for adolescents.

¹ Two other indicators regarding out-of-school time programs were examined – perceived program availability (*available activities*) and amount of participation. The measure of *available activities* in the community, as perceived by the parent and the adolescent, was significantly related to social competence and school performance, but not to risky behaviors, when taking into account the control variables. The measure of *hours of participation* was also significantly related to social competence and school performance, but not to risky behaviors, when taking into account the control variables. These measures were not included here because they are not measures of quality.

CONCLUSION

Overall, we find that being in an OST program is related to child outcomes primarily when the program is high quality. High-quality program participation resulted in consistently better outcomes, compared with being in no program. Specifically, we found that high program quality and high program safety are both positively correlated with all three important adolescent outcomes: fewer risk-taking behaviors, higher levels of school performance, and higher levels of social competence. Also, one positive outcome – school performance – was associated with participation in a medium-quality program. In addition to the consistent finding for high quality, we consistently found that being in a low-quality program does not differ from not being in a program.

Our particular age group, 12- to 17-year-olds, might benefit from better quality programs on the three outcomes of social competence, school performance, and risky behaviors. Many teens are in medium quality programs, which are not associated with higher social competence or fewer risky behaviors. Among 12-17 year olds, 11.5 percent are not in a program, 11.4 percent are in a low quality program, 45.4 percent are in a medium quality program, and 31.7 percent are in a high quality program. Of those who are in programs, most teens are in those of medium quality. Of 12-17 year olds who are in programs, 12.9 percent are in low quality, 51.3 percent are in medium, and 35.8 percent are in high quality programs. Better quality programs would mean that perhaps more teens would be in high quality programs, which is associated with better outcomes in all three cases. Even teens in low quality programs may have higher school performance if their programs become medium quality.

Our findings on the importance of quality in out-of-school time programs are consistent with research on child care quality, which finds that the *quality* of child care affects outcomes more than being in a program per se.^{1,10-12,14} As found for younger children, we find that the quality of an out-of-school time program in which they participate appears to matter a great deal for adolescents, even over the effects of parent characteristics and family situation (education, income, and family structure). Developing caring, warm *relationships* with others, learning life *skills*, and participating in *decision-making* in out-of-school time programs are associated with positive outcomes for adolescents.

In this brief, the significant associations that are reported are all adjusted for social and economic factors, yet similar analyses with longitudinal data are needed to inform causal associations. In other words, the current study is correlational, rather than predictive. Also, the data come from a national survey rather than a program evaluation, meaning that the findings cover a range of programs not identified by the participants. Furthermore, other measures of program quality, such as recorded observations rather than self-report measures, might provide a more objective look at whether program quality affects adolescent outcomes. With these caveats, the analyses strongly suggest the importance of program safety, positive relationships with adults, adolescent involvement in decision-making, and learning skills in out-of-school time programs.

Exhibit One: Data and Measures

About America's Promise Data

The data used for this analysis are from the *Every Child Every Promise Study* (ECEP) poll conducted for the America's Promise Alliance by Gallup in the fall of 2005. Respondents include more than 6,000 individuals – 2,000 adolescents 12 to 17 years old, their parents, and the parents of 2,000 children 6 to 11 years old. The purpose of the study was to determine the extent to which American youth experience the developmental resources – Promises – that they need for their successful adulthood. The Five Promises are the following: caring adults, safe places, a healthy start, an effective education, and opportunities to help others. The measures were developed collaboratively by staff at America's Promise Alliance, the Search Institute, and Child Trends.

The analyses here are based on interviews with 2,000 adolescents aged 12 through 17 and their parent. Note that these data are not from an evaluation of one particular program or even one particular program approach, such as positive youth development. Rather, the data reflect the experiences reported by a representative sample of U.S. adolescents involved in varied programs in diverse communities across the nation.

Measures of Out-of-School Time Program Characteristics

Program Quality The measure of program quality used for this brief comes from three items asked of adolescents aged 12 to 17 in the America's Promise survey: "How often are you developing warm and trusting relationships with people?"; "How often are you allowed to help make decisions?"; and "How often are you learning skills like teamwork, leadership, or how to resolve conflicts without violence?" Responses were added and the cut points were determined as follows: low (three through six), medium (seven through nine), and high (ten through 12).

Parent versus Adolescent Report of Program Quality In the analyses, we use the adolescent's report of quality. Notably, these reports are related to the outcome measures, while the parent report of quality is not. However, the parent's report of quality is a single question, not a combination of the three aspects of quality noted by Roth and Brooks-Gunn.¹³

Safety This consists of an average of the teen report and parent report of safety:

"How often do you feel safe in the after-school programs you are in?" (teen); and

"How often do you think your child is safe in the after-school programs she/he is in?" (parent).

Participation *Participation, or hours/dosage*, consists of two teen-report variables for a typical week: hours in clubs, teams, or organizations and hours performing or practicing art, music, or drama.

Available Activities *Available activities* is based on two teen-report variables and two parent-report variables. Both teens and parents were asked about "clubs, teams, or organizations" and "art, music or drama" availability with the question, "In an average week, including weekends, are ___ available, either in or outside of school for you/your child to participate in if she or he wanted to?"

Outcome Measures

School performance index: Teens reported on their grades; school attendance; and computer knowledge

Risky behaviors index: Adolescents reported on their sexual activity and contraception use; alcohol use; smoking; and getting drunk.

Social competency index: Parents reported on the extent to which their child gives, lends and shares; shows respect for teachers and neighbors; understands other people's feelings; and tries to resolve conflicts with family and friends.

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Table 1. Summary of Results. Findings are illustrated in Figures 1, 2, and 3.

Participation:	Less Risky Behavior			High School Performance			High Social Competence				
	Bivariate	Multivariate		Bivariate	Multivariate		Bivariate	Multivariate			
PROGRAM QUALITY											
No Program	66%	-	-	-	10%	-	-	-	12%	-	-
Low Quality Program	72%		1.2		12%	*	0.9		19%	*	1.3
Medium Quality Program	75%		1.4	*	24%	*	2.0	*	19%		1.2
High Quality Program	81%	*	1.9	*	28%	*	2.3	*	26%	*	1.8
PROGRAM SAFETY											
Safe Program	66%	*	1.2	+	27%	*	1.1	*	26%	*	1.5
Not Highly Safe Program or No Program	80%		-	-	10%		-	-	12%		-

Notes:

For the bivariate column, percentages of children ages 12 to 17 with a certain outcome are shown by participation characteristic, and bivariate regression significance is shown. It is important to note that the significance for children in a low quality program indicates that those children have lower school performance and lower social competence compared with children in no, a medium quality, or a high quality program.

For the multivariate column, odds ratios are presented, and control variables taken into account are gender, race, income, family structure, and parent education.

+ indicates marginal significance

* indicates statistical significance, $p < 0.05$

no + or * indicates nonsignificance

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