

# Afterschool Supports Children's Well-Being and Healthy Development

Afterschool and summer programs play an essential role in supporting the healthy development of young people by serving as a safe space that fosters belonging, develops supportive relationships with peers and adult mentors, encourages healthy behaviors, and helps young people build and cultivate the skills necessary to navigate through the struggles and challenges they may come up against in life.

## The challenge and opportunity facing young people today

Recent studies describe the rise in young people across the country experiencing anxiety, depression, anger, fear, loneliness, stress, hostility, and aggression.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, research has found that this time period—from birth

through young adulthood—is “the second most critical period of development” in a person’s life and is shaped by the environments that they move through.<sup>2</sup>

### THE CHALLENGE<sup>3</sup>



**More than 2 in 5** high schoolers report feeling sad or hopeless.

↑ by 50% since 2011



**Nearly 3 in 10** high schoolers say that they've experienced poor mental health in the past 30 days.



**More than 3 in 4** parents are worried about their child struggling with anxiety or depression.

### THE OPPORTUNITY<sup>4</sup>



During adolescence, **children and young people's neural pathways grow stronger**, allowing for faster processing of information and more complex thinking.



The **settings young people are in and the relationships they form** strongly influence how they learn and develop.



Adolescence is a **malleable time for young people**, a time of growth, and holds the potential to help young people recover from negative experiences.

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We are called to build a movement to mend the social fabric of our nation. It will take all of us...working together to destigmatize loneliness and change our cultural and policy response to it. It will require reimagining the structures, policies, and programs that shape a community to best support the development of healthy relationships.”

— **U.S. SURGEON GENERAL VIVEK MURTHY**

**Our Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation: The U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on the Healing Effects of Social Connection and Community**

# Afterschool and summer learning programs provide the supports young people need

Young people in afterschool and summer programs are surrounded by caring mentors who help them feel a sense of belonging and that what they do and say matters.

In programs, young people develop important life skills like the ability to work collaboratively, cope with stress, form healthy relationships, and make responsible decisions, all while engaging in academically enriching activities.

Regular participation in quality afterschool and summer learning programs improves students' self-confidence, self-awareness, and positive social behaviors, as well as decreases problem behaviors.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, state Youth Risk Behavior Surveys have found positive correlations between participation in afterschool programs and young people's mental and physical health. For example, in Wisconsin, students involved in at least one hour of extracurricular activities report lower rates of anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts,<sup>6</sup> while in Alaska, students participating in afterschool programs at least two days a week were 18% less likely to use alcohol, 39% less likely to use marijuana, and 28% less likely to have an unexcused absence.<sup>7</sup>



## EXAMPLES OF STATE-LEVEL INVESTMENTS IN AFTERSCHOOL AND MENTAL HEALTH

As states grapple with ways to reengage students, student mental health has come to the forefront in many state legislatures, including the role for afterschool and summer programs in reengagement and recovery efforts. For example:

**VERMONT** Vermont's legislature, with the assistance of Vermont Afterschool, passed a bill including an investment of \$2.5 million in COVID-relief funds to provide grants to expand school-based counseling services and create school or community-based afterschool programs that support the mental health and wellness needs of students, families, and staff.

**WASHINGTON STATE** School's Out Washington is part of a pilot program, funded through a \$1 million grant from the Washington State legislature, that will reach more than 250,000 young people across the state by providing behavioral health staff in out-of-school time programs, as well as support and trauma-informed, culturally responsive mental-health related training for staff.

## Providing a spectrum of care

Afterschool and summer programs provide a spectrum of supports for young people's mental well-being, from the basics of a safe space with caring adults to the more intensive supports of dedicated staff to address students' physical and mental health.



### UNIVERSAL

- A safe space
- Caring and supportive staff
- Time to interact with peers
- Promoting a sense of belonging
- Fun and engaging activities
- Building self-confidence
- Supporting youth voice and expression
- Physical activity and nutritious foods



### TARGETED

- Time to talk with peers and staff about feelings and emotions
- Intentional time to practice positive skill development
- Leadership opportunities for youth
- Making referrals or connections to social services and mental health professionals in the community



### INTENSIVE

- Offering support group sessions facilitated by a school counselor or a community-based mental health professional
- Funding a position dedicated to support students' well-being, such as a clinical social worker

# Seizing the moment

The need for families, communities, schools, and federal, state, and local governments to work together and take action to support young people's mental health and well-being is more important than ever.

Afterschool and summer programs are critical partners to address the urgent needs of youth today. And, parents and voters agree. In a poll of registered voters, more than 8 in 10 voters (84%) and nearly 9 in 10 parents (89%) agree that afterschool programs support young people's social and emotional well-being.<sup>8</sup> Yet, for every child in an afterschool program, four more are waiting to get in. Greater investment in afterschool and summer programs is needed to ensure that all young people have access to the supports that they need to reach their full potential.



## SUPPORTING STAFF WELL-BEING SUPPORTS STUDENT WELL-BEING

Recognizing the pivotal role staff play in providing quality afterschool programming, as well as the trauma and stress youth development professionals have experienced through the pandemic, the Lilly Endowment Inc. funded a four-year, \$20 million initiative to support the well-being of Indiana youth workers. The grant funds a coalition of youth-serving organizations, including the Indiana Afterschool Network and the Indiana Youth Institute, to provide supports such as increasing access to mental health counseling, facilitating peer learning groups, and offer convenings to share information on how to improve working conditions and business practices in order to promote staff well-being.

## Afterschool helping young people thrive



Having an afterschool program can get kids out of their comfort zone and help them make new friends. Meeting people in these programs not only feels great but also allows students to show their true self."



**AVERY**  
**Puyallup, WA**  
Kids Rank Illinois  
Afterschool Club, Summer Club,  
Youth Advisory Board



My afterschool program impacted me not only with learning social skills but helped me grow strong friendships that are loyal and trustworthy."



**SPENCER**  
**Pryor, Oklahoma**  
Tiger Pride Clubs

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