

Leave Them Wanting More!: Engaging Youth in Afterschool

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It is 3:30 p.m. on a weekday at the Everett Boys and Girls Club in Massachusetts. The club is home to an afterschool program for 200 youth ages 13–18. Teens sit at the front desk, checking in students as they arrive; couches are arranged in semicircles; a mural created by youth depicts the main street in Everett, with rays of sun bursting from the horizon and birds flying outward, as if they're about to soar above your head. Two boys run to the club's director. One of them announces, "I just turned 13 today! Can I have an application?"

[Read: "This Is Their House, Too": An Afterschool Space Designed for and by Teenagers](#)



Afterschool staff at the Everett Boys & Girls Club, in Everett, Massachusetts, develop spaces with teenagers so that youth have room to be themselves and pursue their learning interests.

Afterschool programs are a powerful influence in the lives of young people. They offer safe spaces where youth receive personal attention, find academic support, form friendships, discover their passions, and develop new talents. Research confirms that high-quality afterschool programs show positive outcomes for young people, including academic achievement, civic and social development, and reduced risk-taking behaviors.¹ By offering enrichment activities that accommodate different learning styles and cultural preferences, afterschool programs play a key role in nurturing the mindset and skills that youth need to succeed in a global, connected world. The research also shows that students who are the furthest behind in school tend to gain the most from afterschool academic services such as tutoring and homework help,² with afterschool contributing to reducing the achievement gap.³

Youth Engagement in Afterschool

The benefits of afterschool programs can only be realized if youth are engaged and take full advantage of the opportunities before them. This commentary attempts to explore youth engagement in afterschool by applying what we know from research about youth engagement in the school setting to the afterschool context.⁴

Engagement encompasses the way an individual thinks, feels, and behaves. It also takes account of the interaction of an individual and the learning environment.⁶ Engagement involves the ways that youth connect and build relationships. In the afterschool setting, relationships exist at multiple levels: youth and the center or organization; youth and afterschool staff; youth and peers; and youth and programs or activities.

AT A GLANCE: Afterschool Programs

Who participates in afterschool?⁵

- Children participating in an afterschool program number 10.2 million.
- Participants are primarily in elementary school (5.7 million), but middle school and high school student participation increased between 2009 and 2014.
- Hispanic (29%) and African American (24%) children are more likely to participate in an afterschool program than Caucasian children (12%).
- An additional 19.4 million children would be enrolled in a program if one were available to them.

In afterschool, engagement is often understood in terms of behaviors such as attendance and participation. But engagement goes beyond these behaviors to include the ways that youth eagerly connect with learning activities and curriculum. At its best, engagement is akin to what psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi called “flow,” a state of involvement in an activity that is so powerful that nothing else seems to matter.⁷ When in flow, an individual feels a sense of control and experiences enjoyment even in the face of challenge.

Engagement has different dimensions: cognitive, behavioral, social, and emotional.⁸ Although these dimensions often overlap, it is helpful to think about them separately in order to create the environments that attract youth and keep them wanting more afterschool programming. These dimensions take the following forms in afterschool settings, although they can also be applied to other non-school settings like summer camps and summer learning programs:⁹

- **cognitive engagement:** the investment of youth to learn and put effort into acquiring information, practicing skills, developing critical thinking, and creating a product like a painting or a robot, or acting in a play;
- **behavioral engagement:** the attendance, conduct, and participation of youth in afterschool;
- **social engagement:** the actions of youth that make them part of a community; and
- **emotional engagement:** the feelings that youth develop through activity participation and relationships, especially with staff, that can make them feel accepted and cared for.

Engagement Is Important for Families

Beyond afterschool supervision and recreation, families recognize the value of afterschool for whole youth development and engagement in learning. They have high expectations of how afterschool programs can prepare youth for workforce participation and social life. A survey conducted by the Afterschool Alliance reports that¹⁰

- **70% of parents** agree that afterschool should provide workforce skills such as teamwork, leadership, and critical thinking;
- **50% of parents** say that STEM learning opportunities were very important in selecting their child’s afterschool programs; and
- **80% of parents** agree that afterschool programs can help children develop social skills through interaction with their peers.

Practices That Engage Youth in Afterschool

Afterschool programs can make youth engagement happen. While afterschool programs do experience attendance and retention issues, they have also designed promising practices that are relevant for a more comprehensive view of engagement.¹¹ By paying attention to the quality of physical spaces, activities, and interactions, afterschool programs are expanding youth interests, knowledge, and skills. They are also helping youth shape their identities in the transition to adolescence, and for older youth, to adulthood.

More than a decade of research on afterschool has contributed to an emerging knowledge base about youth participation in these programs. We know that the academic, personal, and social outcomes for youth depend on the quality of afterschool programs available to them.¹² Quality consists of the synergy among activities, youth–staff relationships, and the culture of the afterschool program as they form a wholesome environment.¹³ When afterschool programs follow evidence-based training practices, youth are more likely to develop personal and social skills such as problem solving, responsible decision making, and self-confidence.¹⁴

A review of the Harvard Family Research Project studies about attendance and participation of middle and high school youth in afterschool programs identifies promising practices that afterschool programs can adopt in cognitive, behavioral, social, and emotional engagement.¹⁵ (See Figure 1.) Although engagement is important across different age groups, we pay particular attention to the practices that engage older youth, as this is the population that is the most difficult to recruit into afterschool programs. We describe these promising practices in the sections that follow.

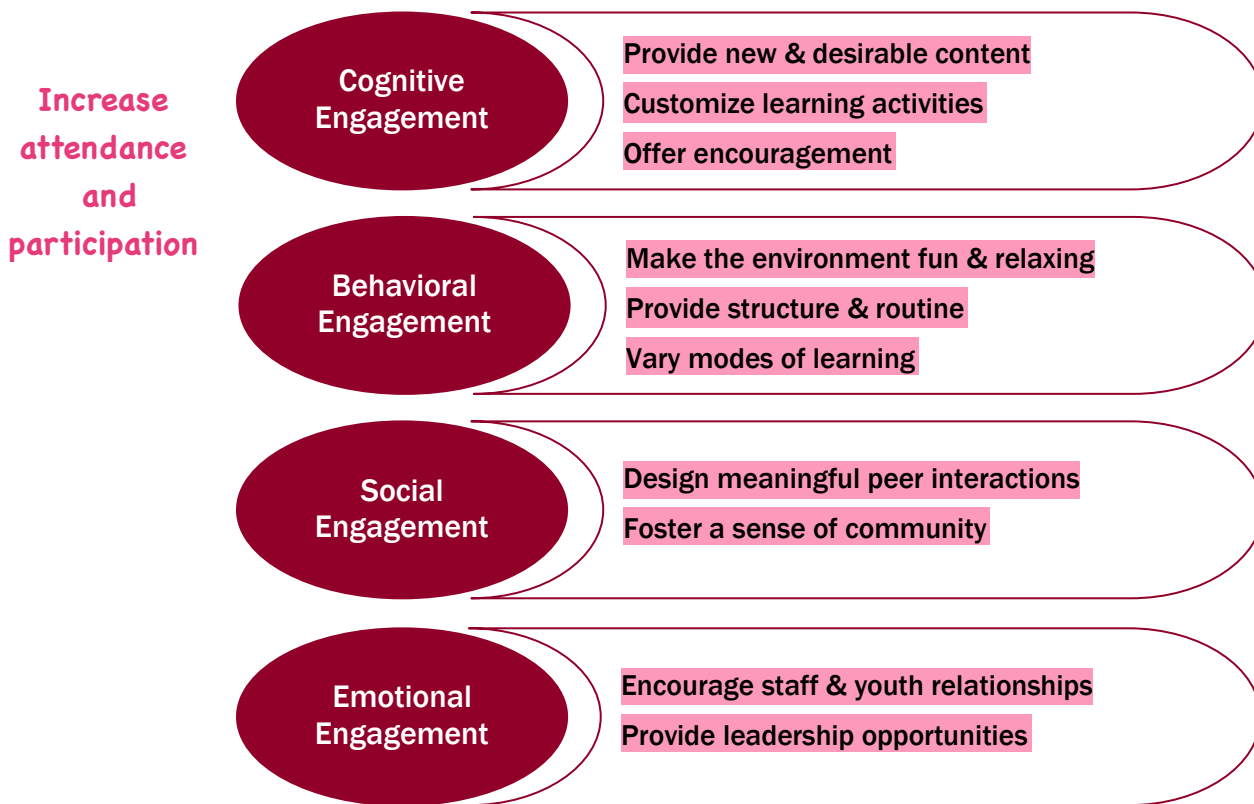


Figure 1. Afterschool program practices that promote youth engagement.

Cognitive Engagement

Through varied activities, afterschool programs encourage youth to explore new interests, make choices, and develop problem-solving and critical-thinking skills. Here are steps that afterschool programs can take to achieve this goal.

- **Offer new and desirable content.** Variety is important because youth come to programs with differing interests. Youth also want to participate in a variety of activities. They are attracted to new experiences and activities that are not available during the regular school day or elsewhere in the community. Many youth seek practical and community-based activities such as mentorships, apprenticeships, and community service opportunities. By being offered varied activities, youth are empowered to make choices and exercise some control over their learning.
- **Customize learning activities.** Activities that relate to personal interests and that are relevant to everyday lives create strong connections between youth and afterschool programs. They also help youth “ladder up”; in other words, customized learning activities help youth master skills and develop expertise in specific content areas. High school youth, for example, are interested in activities and skill building geared toward college and post–high school employment opportunities. Programs that are successful in engaging girls in STEM match activities with girls’ developmental needs, including age, interest in particular STEM subjects, preferred mode of learning (e.g., discussion or hands-on learning), and ability level.
- **Offer encouragement.** Youth need staff support when they face challenging activities. Staff can serve as coaches or “learning facilitators” to demonstrate the know-how of using materials and practicing new skills. Letting youth know that effort matters and that persistence can make them succeed helps maintain their interest and participation in program activities.

TIPS FOR AND FROM LEARNING FACILITATORS—ADAPTED FROM MAKESHOP



MAKESHOP provides families and youth with a wide range of physical and digital making materials, and a large space to construct the projects that they dream up.

[Makeshop](#) is a permanent, hands-on exhibit at the Children’s Museum of Pittsburgh that invites children and families to explore the process of making. Makeshop offers activities that:

- use observation and dialogue to find out what youth want to learn and which activities are geared to their experience level;
- lead by example when introducing unfamiliar activities, tools, and techniques;
- learn from youth and invite new ideas based on their experiences; and
- use volunteers and community partners to cover specific content areas that interest youth.

Behavioral Engagement

Informal yet structured activities that address youth interests foster attendance and participation in afterschool programs. Here are ideas that afterschool programs can consider for addressing this dimension.

- **Make the environment fun and relaxing.** Youth are attracted to a place where they can be by themselves and can do interesting things with their friends in a safe environment. Some programs offer teen-only spaces, equipped with couches and a television. Afterschool programs located in schools rearrange classrooms and make spaces distinct from the school-day environment.
- **Provide structure and routine.** As middle school youth transition to adolescence, a consistent routine provides stability in the context of change. Afterschool providers recognize that routines—from sign-up to program activities to transportation—help youth feel safe and support a smooth integration into the program. Youth are then free to explore new interests and friendships within an intentionally structured environment.
- **Vary modes of learning.** Maker spaces, field trips, design challenges, technology training, and opportunities to interact with minority role models are just some of the ways that afterschool programs have tried to offer creative, challenging, and genuinely satisfying learning experiences.

YOUMEDIA AT THE CHICAGO PUBLIC LIBRARY¹⁶



YOUmedia Chicago is an innovative, 21st century teen learning space at 11 Chicago Public Library locations where youth can explore their creative passions.

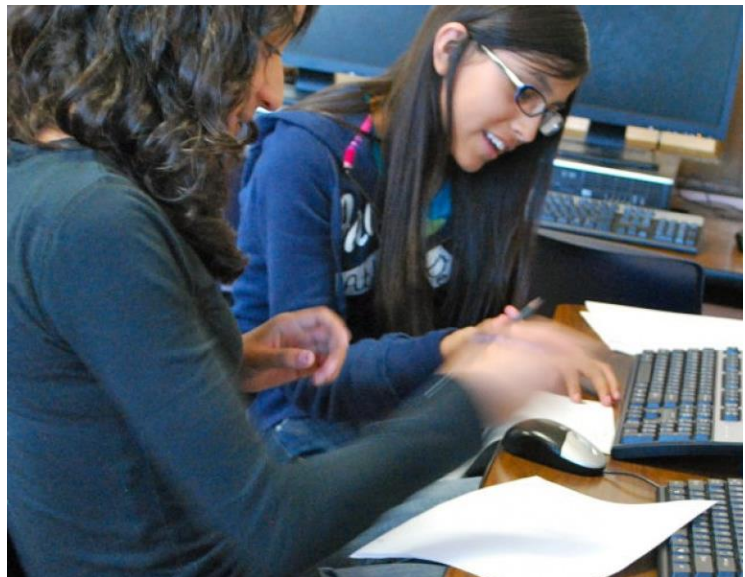
[YOUmedia](#) is a digital learning space for youth. It consists of a physical location—a library—and a virtual space—a website. Launched by the Chicago Public Library in 2009, YOUmedia began as a 5,550-square-foot area at the Harold Washington Library Center in downtown Chicago. YOUmedia attracts African American teens, especially males. As the program has expanded beyond its original site to branch libraries, it is serving middle school students in Puerto Rican and Mexican communities as well.

YOUmedia combines elements of an unstructured space and a structured afterschool program. The space—open only to teenagers—offers access to laptops, a young-adult book collection, video games, and a gaming console. It also contains a small recording studio and a work area with digital equipment where youth can make digital media products. Youth interact with peers and adults, including on-site mentors who offer guidance in developing projects. Through immersion in this environment, young people can become active learners and producers of blogs, websites, music, stories, poetry, and videos.

Social Engagement

Through well-designed opportunities for peer interaction and interesting activities within a safe and welcoming environment, afterschool programs help youth develop a sense of belonging to a community. Here are suggestions for ways to make these activities attractive to youth.

- **Design meaningful peer interactions.** Peer relationships and friendships are particularly important and motivating for youth. Accordingly, programs design group work so that youth are with friends. They recognize that youth want to socialize and leverage this desire to support youth development. Peer networks help to recruit other youth, and they encourage youth to try out new activities together and to help one another to build skills. When positive interactions exist, youth gain valuable experience in teamwork and collaboration.
- **Form interest-driven interactions with staff and peers.** Digital media are particularly successful in attracting youth to afterschool programs. Social network sites, online games, and video production are new modes of expressing youth identity, communicating with others, and taking part in civic engagement.¹⁷ Libraries, for example, are serving as afterschool venues and creating youth-only spaces equipped with traditional and new media. Youth use these spaces to hang out and experiment with media among peers and adults. In addition to the technology, staff members build interest-based communities: they connect positively with youth and redesign activities to encourage participation, deep learning, and digital production.¹⁸
- **Foster a sense of community.** Creating shared norms and a safe environment and being a consistent presence for youth all contribute to a sense of community. Afterschool programs nurture community by connecting youth with peers and by offering a wide range of activities in which they can participate. They keep youth at the center of their programming and address their interests, even connecting youth with resources outside the program so that they form relationships with the larger community.



Watsonville Tecnología-Educación-Comunidad is an afterschool program that gives kids a basic education in computers, then builds those skills into video game design abilities and beyond.

BEYOND STRAWBERRY FIELDS¹⁹

Watsonville [Tecnología-Educación-Comunidad](#) (TEC) is an afterschool program for fifth graders and middle school students that educates them in basic computer skills and then inspires them to use those skills in video-game design. The program works to build a foundation for encouraging more women and Latinos to enter the 21st-century technology workforce. Begun as an all-girls program in 2003, TEC has now expanded to include video-game programming classes for middle school boys and separate computer skills tutorials for fifth graders and for parents.

The Watsonville TEC program appeals to tweens through Kodu Game Lab, a Microsoft program that lets them create games using a video-game controller. The program eliminates code writing and makes it easier for students to create games, which helps boost their confidence and skills. The program is eye-opening to many of these middle school youth who live in a strawberry-growing California community and may not have computers at home. They are now envisioning careers in fields where technology is key. As teenager Daisy Ramirez says, “Watsonville has been known as a place for strawberries and now I want it to be known as a place with girls and guys doing tech.”

To provide home support for these budding scientists and engineers, Watsonville TEC offers an IT parent workshop series to educate parents on the importance of technology and higher education. Parents can access and learn how to use technology in order to remove fears and create more comfort with it.

Watsonville TEC is a project of ETR Associates, a nonprofit organization.

Emotional Engagement

Relationships with caring adults matter for youth to feel connected to afterschool programs and to form their own identities. Emotional engagement also develops when programming connects youth to their cultural heritage and fosters cultural appreciation. Offered here are specific actions that the programs can take to make this connection possible.

- **Encourage staff relationships with youth.** During adolescence, youth need opportunities to form their own identities, engage in autonomous self-expression, and take part in challenging experiences that will develop their competence and self-esteem. Adolescents desire autonomy, independence, and time with peers, but at the same time they continue to rely on guidance from parents and other adults. Youth are likely to feel connected to an afterschool program and remain in it when they form meaningful relationships with staff. Staff members show that they care when they take time to get to know youth, learn about their interests, and communicate regularly with their families. They act as mentors who help youth by enhancing self-esteem and guiding them with peer relationships.²⁰ Staff meetings are particularly important to help staff understand youth and allow them to collectively support these participants.
- **Provide leadership opportunities.** Leadership opportunities let teens know that they are important to the organization. When youth have opportunities to choose and help lead activities, have their voices heard in program decision making, and volunteer, they tend to stay connected to afterschool programs.

“IT ROCKS”: THE 4-H BLOCO DRUM AND DANCE²¹



The 4-H Bloco Drum and Dance program teaches students basic music concepts, techniques of playing various instruments, and basic dance steps.

[4-H Bloco Drum and Dance](#) is an afterschool program that teaches adolescents drumming, dancing, and theater arts. Concerned by increased gang activity and youth crime in the town of Windsor, California, a community coalition composed of the Sonoma County 4-H Club in California, other youth programs, and the school district developed this creative approach to teen programming. Arts professionals from the San Francisco Bay Area with expertise in Latino culture offer lessons in drumming, playing percussion instruments, and dance. Youth create their own music and dance routines inspired by the rich traditions of Brazilian Carnival. They perform locally—in Cinco de Mayo celebrations, and in fairs and events in other communities.

CONCLUSION

Afterschool programs are important vehicles for providing learning opportunities that keep youth engaged. Engagement in afterschool can lead to positive outcomes for youth as they explore new interests, develop identities, and collaborate with peers and adults. By paying attention to engagement, policymakers and practitioners are more likely to effectively connect afterschool access, programming, and funding with the interests and needs of youth today. This holds promise for leaving youth wanting more. We invite you to read more about engaging youth in afterschool learning opportunities in our current [FINE Newsletter](#).

ACCESS THIS COMMENTARY ONLINE AT:
<http://www.hfrp.org/publications-resources/browse-our-publications/leave-them-wanting-more!-engaging-youth-in-afterschool>

ABOUT HFRP

Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP) is a leading national organization whose purpose is to shape 21st-century education by connecting the critical areas of student learning. Our focus is on anywhere, anytime learning approaches that extend from early childhood through college and connect families, schools, out-of-school time programs, and digital media. We build strategic partnerships with policymakers, practitioners, and community leaders to generate new thinking, stimulate innovation, and promote continuous improvement in education policy, practice, and evaluation. Our research and tools provide timely, relevant, and practical information for decision making. Addressing issues of access and equity in children’s learning and identifying meaningful, effective family engagement practices that reinforce success for all children are central to our work.

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