Children and adolescents develop life skills beyond academic achievement as part of healthy development during the transition into adulthood. Children acquire these skills – whether they are called positive youth development or developmental asset building – through the environments in which they live. The late elementary years through early high school years are particularly important for shaping children’s future risks and opportunities. During this period, children are learning how to function independently from their families and their academic environments.

**Assets That Are Especially Important For Children and Teens**

- Support in their families and their wider community; safety; clear boundaries; and positive role models.¹
- Internal assets building, such as engagement with school; personal responsibility for their behavior; and a positive view of their future.¹ (To learn more about developmental assets, visit Search Institute at [www.search-institute.org/](http://www.search-institute.org/))

**The Value of Structured Choice in Youth Development**

- Youth development programs aim to harness adolescent development in a wide variety of domains, such as resilience, social and emotional competence, self-efficacy and positive identity.²
- Structured voluntary activities can play a key role in helping children develop these assets. During school, youth report high levels of concentration but low levels of internal motivation, while during unstructured time with friends, they report high levels of internal motivation but low levels of concentration.³ Structured but voluntary activities, like sports teams, afterschool arts programs, or civic engagement, provide children with the combination of high levels of internal motivation as well as high levels of concentration.³

**Outcomes of Effective Youth Development Programs**

- Developmental outcomes include improvements in children’s interpersonal skills; peer and adult relationships; self control; problem solving; cognitive ability; self-efficacy; commitment to school; and, academic achievement.³
- Fewer competencies/assets have been associated with greater risk behavior, such as violence, drug and alcohol use, and sexual activity.³ Positive youth development programs can play a key role in reducing risk behavior such as alcohol and drug use, aggressive behavior, and truancy.³

**“Out-of-School Time” as a Critical Window of Opportunity**

High quality care and programs are especially important during periods when children are out-of-school, such as the late afternoon during the school year and the summer.

- A wide variety of risk behaviors are more likely to happen between 3 and 6 p.m. than any other time of the day.⁵ Nationally, 1 in 4 schoolchildren are unsupervised in the afternoon.⁶
- In Ohio, more than 700,000 children are unsupervised afterschool, and more than 290,000 report they would participate in afterschool programs if they were available.⁶
- Nearly half of students in urban areas report that they would participate in an afterschool program if one were available.⁷ School breaks during the school year and over the summer are another out-of-school period with both risks and opportunities. Many children, especially those from low-income households, fall behind academically during the summer months.⁸ Finding quality care for children during school breaks and the summer months can be especially challenging for low-income parents, although a majority of parents from all income levels describe summer as the most challenging time to find productive activities for their children.⁹

**Qualities of Successful Youth Development Programs**

Not all out-of-school youth development programs are created equally. Researchers have identified a number of qualities that are found in effective youth development programs; nevertheless, more outcome-based research would be useful. One review of program evaluations found that successful programs:

- address multiple domains of adolescent development, measure their outcomes, and have a structured curriculum; and,
- length and frequency of programs have an effect on their success.³
The Ohio Afterschool Network (OAN) provides guidelines and a self-assessment tool for Ohio afterschool programs to meet best practices for high quality programs. More information is available at http://ohioafterschoolnetwork.org/resources.php

Supporting Youth During “Out of School Time” in Northeast Ohio

In Northeast Ohio, several successful programs are working to improve out of school time for children. These include programs that are child care center based, community-based, school based and other areas of focus, such as culturally specific. Some examples of local programs include: America SCORES Cleveland (urban public school based and summer programs combining soccer, poetry and service-learning for youth); The Boys and Girls Club of Cleveland (summer and afterschool programs, both school and community-based); Esperanza (afterschool, weekend and leadership programs focused on improving the academic achievement of Hispanic students); Open Doors Academy (afterschool, summer programs and college counseling to students at 10 sites throughout the Cleveland area); and Youth Opportunities Unlimited (employment and entrepreneurship focus on youth development). OAN has also identified MyCom and Starting Point as innovative strategies to advancing afterschool programs connected to their communities.

Ohio was recently ranked in the top 10 states in satisfaction with afterschool care but, looking forward, more can be done to improve access to quality out of school programming for all children. Further research, in addition to training and support to improve standards of care would be positive steps. Increasing awareness of the importance of out of school time has driven the creation of 21st Century Community Learning Centers, a federally funded program to support out of school time programs for students in high-poverty, low-performing schools. In 2014, $1.15 billion was allocated to support 21st Century Community Learning Centers. More information about other funding sources for out-of-school time programs can be found at the OAN website.

Sources