

Afterschool: the time of a child's life



Boys & Girls Clubs
of Canada

400-2005 Sheppard avenue E.
Toronto, ON M2J 5B4
Tel 905-477-7272
Fax 905-477-2056
www.bgccan.com

Great futures start here

Structured community programs are critical for healthy development and provide powerful benefits to children, youth and their communities – children who attend for the most hours over the most years, benefit the most.¹ This is especially true in rural and low-income communities and for children who have had adverse childhood experiences.

Afterschool recreation based programs are extremely well suited to meeting the distinct developmental needs of children in their middle years and to increasing protective factors for resilience.

Boys & Girls Clubs are the leading providers of quality afterschool programs. As the largest youth-serving agency in Canada, our Clubs reach 200,000 children and their families in 700 communities across the country.

Boys & Girls Clubs are located in vulnerable communities where the need for accessible and affordable services for children is high. Over half of the children we serve live in single-parent families, 18 per cent are Indigenous, 14 per cent are newcomers, 18 per cent have special needs, 4 per cent live in foster care and 3 per cent have interacted with the justice system.

Afterschool programs are not a luxury. They are an essential part of children's healthy development.

Kids need Boys & Girls Clubs

Middle childhood is a “powerful predictor of adolescent adjustment”, and thus a critical “opportunity to optimize health and promote development”.² Programs and services for this age group need to take into account their specific developmental needs and their fundamental cognitive, physical, social and emotional changes, especially as they enter puberty.³

Unfortunately, afterschool programs for children in their middle years, those aged 6-12, have been overshadowed by the prioritization of political, public and private sector investments in early years and adolescence.

DEVELOPING BRAINS

Children have distinct social, emotional, cognitive and physical needs in their middle years. This is when they begin to consolidate their “personalities, behaviours, and competencies”.^{4,5} Because children are forming the practices they will carry into later life, the middle years are a key period for prevention and intervention, setting the foundation of healthy adulthood.

During the middle years, “the brain undergoes its most rapid acceleration of development since infancy”, especially areas responsible for decision-making and emotional regulation.⁶ It's also a time when children can start to experience the onset of mental health problems. Addressing challenges early on and boosting protective measures such as healthy

relationships, good nutrition habits, and coping skills, can prevent problems becoming exacerbated in adolescence and adulthood.⁷

EXPANDED SOCIAL NETWORKS

The middle years are a time of rapid change when relationships outside the home, with peers and adults in the community, become more important and form the basis of a child's positive social and emotional growth.⁸ "At this time, children's developmental pathways are impacted by an increasing influence and exposure to out-of-home environments".⁹ "Children begin to exercise more agency and independence in how and with whom they spend their time."¹⁰ They expand their social worlds and explore their relationship to their community.

INCREASED ISOLATION AND SEDENTARY BEHAVIOUR

Young people today have fewer supports than they did in previous decades – more parents are working and there is decreased family and community involvement in children's lives. This is especially true in low-income communities where parents may be holding multiple jobs to get by and where there are fewer services and programs. Many children are spending time alone, sedentary and with few opportunities to participate in enriching activities.¹¹

Afterschool hours – the time before and after school, weekends and evenings, and school breaks – represent the largest block of discretionary time in a child's typical day. The average child in their middle years has approximately 67 hours of free time each week, which is more than they spend in school. It is estimated that as many as 60% of children under 12 are at home without supervision.

Most of that time is spent being sedentary. 84 per cent of screen-based sedentary behaviours occur during the after school period.¹² Children spend 25 minutes per hour being sedentary after school. Teens spend 42 minutes of every hour being sedentary.¹³

Having a great deal of largely unstructured, unsupervised, and unproductive time can undermine positive development. Many children experience loneliness, fear and worry while at home alone, especially if they live in unsafe communities.

Compared to children in grades four and five, children in grades six and seven feel less connected and less belonging at school, they have lower confidence in their academic ability. The social-emotional well-being of children decreased over time – more so for girls than boys.¹⁴

SOME CHILDREN NEED US MORE

Children who have lived through adverse childhood experiences – including neglect, abuse, and growing up with domestic violence, substance abuse, parental loss and other adversity in the home – are more likely to lead unhealthy lifestyles and have poor health decades later.

At its core, trauma is a deeply distressful and emotionally painful experience that leaves a lasting physical and mental imprint on the person or people involved. Trauma has been found to disrupt normal child development in profound ways, in the brain, the body and in social and behavioural interactions.

The Adverse Childhood Experiences Study found trauma to be much more common than previously thought. Trauma crosses all socio-demographic groups, but Statistics Canada reports that rates of children exposed to violence is highest when parents are unemployed, when children live in single parent families, when the family structure has undergone change over the previous two-year period, and when children live in households that fall below the low-income cut-off level. Indigenous and newcomer children and children who identify as LGBTQ2S are more likely to have experienced trauma and adversity.

Adverse childhood experiences can be overcome if children have access to healthy relationships, opportunities to build social and emotional skills, self-esteem and confidence, and if they get support to master school. Afterschool programs provide these supports – helping children be more resilient by increasing protective factors.

When school is out Clubs are in

Boys & Girls Clubs are the largest provider of afterschool programs in Canada. Our approach to working with children and youth is grounded in the latest research and meets the developmental needs of children at a very important time in their lives.

Every child deserves a chance at a great future. Our afterschool programs bring out the best in children. Clubs provide safe, caring and healthy environments that inspire, challenge and support vulnerable children to succeed.

Club programs offer children the opportunity to exercise autonomy and choice, build healthy relationships with peers and mentors, and explore and develop positive life skills that extend beyond formal education and last into adulthood. By offering diverse services and resources for children and youth, we help ensure that they have a strong sense of place in their community, that is experienced as “a source of security, belonging, meaning and identity”.¹⁵

With over a century of experience, Boys & Girls Clubs of Canada are leaders in creating enriching afterschool environments, helping counter the effects of childhood trauma, social and material deprivation.

Boys & Girls Clubs adapt to local needs, but they all share three common features that are at the core of evidence based afterschool programs.

RESPECTFUL, INCLUSIVE AND ENGAGING ENVIRONMENTS

Kids need a safe place to go when school is out where they can play, be with friends and make choices about how to spend their time.¹⁶ That need is even greater among low-income families and in rural communities.^{17,18}

Afterschool programs provide children with ample opportunity for choice – an important developmental task that promotes autonomy and self-determination.^{19,20} Such programs allow young people to try out activities and roles, thereby broadening their self-concept. Child relevant environments that provide consistency and a supportive structure are positively associated with physical health, well-being and social competence.²¹ Most importantly, a physically, emotionally and culturally safe environment is at the heart of

trauma informed practice. Safe spaces are imperative in helping children become resilient in the face of trauma and adversity.

RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING AND MENTORING

Peer belonging and relationships with adults are strong predictors of life satisfaction. They are of central importance to children in their middle years and are “positively associated with physical activity, healthy eating, and avoidance of health risks.”²²

Group mentoring has long been the hallmark of Boys & Girls Clubs of Canada. Distinct from the traditional one-to-one model, group mentoring provides a social environment for children to interact, see that their problems are not unique, and forge closer friendships with peers.

Community support in the form of caring interactions between non-parental adults, children and youth is a highly recognized protective factor for resilience.²³ Mentoring relationships with caring adults provide young people with a sense of belonging, competence and well-being and connection.²⁴ They balance encouragement with clear and consistent rules, structures, boundaries and expectations that reinforce positive and responsible behaviours.

The more supportive relationships a young person has with non-parental adults, the fewer the behaviour problems they display.²⁵ The sustained presence of caring adults in the lives of young people has particularly positive effects on a young person’s healthy development.²⁶

COMMUNITIES AND FAMILIES

Community connections are a “non-negotiable element of supporting learning and development across all the contexts in which children learn and grow”.²⁷ Boys & Girls Clubs programs exhibit high quality, in that they “effectively develop, utilize, and leverage partnerships with a variety of stakeholders, especially families, schools, and communities.”²⁸

Clubs are leaders and role models in the community and are critical catalysts that enable schools, local business, community volunteers and leaders to work collaboratively in the best interest of young people and their families.

Boys & Girls Clubs are often situated in neighbourhoods that have few or no recreational facilities offering programs during afterschool hours. We’re filling a widening gap in young people’s access to extracurricular activities and programs that help them succeed and improve their life outcomes.

Club programs promote social inclusion. All children are welcomed, accepted and celebrated.

If a kid needs it, Clubs provide it

There is a huge mismatch between what children report to be doing and what they want to be doing.²⁹ When asked how they would like to spend their discretionary time, the vast majority (49 per cent) of children and youth wanted to spend more time engaging in

physical activities; 12 per cent wanted to hang out with friends and 10 per cent wanted to participate in arts related activities such as music and drama.³⁰

Children who attend a Boys & Girls Club think of it as a place where they belong, a home away from home. It is a place they can go to play and learn where they feel welcomed, cared for, safe, accepted, and included.

So much more happens at a Boys & Girls Club. We're also meeting children's developmental needs at a crucial time in their lives and helping children build resilience in the face of adversity.³¹

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY, HEALTH AND SAFETY

Boys & Girls Clubs' afterschool programs provide opportunities for physical activity including team and adventure sports, recreation, and dance. Clubs offer nutritious snacks and meals, and food literacy programs. Equally important, Clubs provide valuable face-to-face time with peers and caring adults, fostering a sense of belonging that underpins a positive sense of self and well-being.

Club kids are healthy, active and safe

Children who regularly participate in afterschool programs make considerable health and well-being gains.³² They exercise regularly, eat well and are protected from injuries and threats. They have a sense of well-being, choose safe activities, and are able to get the resources they need for good health. Because these behaviours are learned in childhood, they are more likely to affect children's lifestyle and health status into adulthood.³³

Afterschool programs make a significant contribution to reducing children's daily sedentary behaviour. "Frequent participation (1-2 times per week) in sports in the afterschool period during adolescence has been associated with high levels of physical activity during adulthood".³⁴

Play and physical activity are also central to healing from trauma. It helps young people develop an "island of competence," a powerful way to build skills and self-confidence.³⁵

LEADERSHIP, GROWTH AND EMPOWERMENT

Through group mentoring, Boys & Girls Clubs activities support feelings of community belonging and engagement, self-worth, and confidence. Children learn how to participate in group processes, build consensus, and listen to others' ideas – leadership skills that will serve them for life. This is especially important for children who have experienced trauma, and who are more likely to see themselves from a deficit perspective.

Club kids are connected to peers, parents, school and community

Children thrive when they are engaged and given the opportunity to give back. When they take on active roles in afterschool programs, young people gain skills and build confidence in their ability to make positive contributions. "Young people who take active roles in organizations and communities have fewer problems, are better skilled" and more likely to be active citizens.³⁶ Boys & Girls Clubs participants who frequently attend programs report "higher levels of community service involvement and increased integrity".³⁷

Children who have access to “relevant neighborhood destinations” such as recreational clubs have stronger developmental outcomes, greater social competence and better well-being.³⁸

The presence of positive relationships with adults and a sense of one’s place in the community have been correlated with decreased rates of risky behaviour, violence, and adolescent depression.³⁹ Children who benefit from an adult mentoring relationship show greater academic success, less risk-taking behaviour and better life satisfaction.⁴⁰

Boys & Girls Club staff and volunteers make a considerable impact on the lives of children in their care. 93 per cent of alumni credit a particular staff member for developing, helping and supporting them. Alumni acknowledge that Club leaders played a very important role in the following areas:

- helping members to have fun (89 per cent)
- learning leadership skills (73 per cent)
- developing self-confidence (67 per cent) and self-esteem as a child (65 per cent)
- teaching them how to get along with others (65 per cent)
- knowing right from wrong (64 per cent)
- being someone to talk to (61 per cent).⁴¹

A comprehensive evaluation of Boys & Girls Clubs’ group mentoring approach concluded that the majority of mentees had respect for adults, positive attitudes towards school, acceptable social skills, and little if any proclivity toward anti-social or delinquent behaviour.⁴²

LEARNING AND CAREER DEVELOPMENT

Boys & Girls Clubs offer homework and reading clubs, tutoring, scholarships, and our signature Raise the Grade academic achievement program. Through specialized and hands-on STEM, coding, and skilled trades programs, we expose children to a wide spectrum of interests and career options. And when children get inspired, we point out the multiple pathways they have for reaching their goals.

Afterschool programs are excellent vehicles for experiential learning. By offering a range of academic supports and hands-on learning experiences, Boys & Girls Club participants build the workforce competencies and foundational skills that will help them finish high school, enter postsecondary education and become employed. Club programs and interactions also build children’s skills in communications, teamwork, critical thinking, and problem solving.

Club kids have key academic, vocational and recreational skills

Children who regularly attend quality afterschool programs have more positive attitudes and behaviours toward school, and improved school grades and test scores.^{43, 44} Kids who participated in Boys & Girls Clubs were found to have reduced delinquent behaviours, increased academic achievement; increased access to and safe utilization of technology, and increased career goals and improved attitudes toward school.⁴⁵

A longitudinal study of 719 second grade through eighth grade students who participated in Boys & Girls Clubs programs found increased GPA and decreased absences from school.⁴⁶ Another longitudinal evaluation involving 322 Boys & Girls Clubs members from 10 Clubs found that those who attended the program more often reported “increased academic confidence, decreased aggression, decreased truancy and decreased number of times stopped by the police”.⁴⁷

Compared to those who did not attend afterschool programs, participants had better work habits, higher test scores, better social skills with peers and pro-social behaviours, and fewer reports of misconduct.⁴⁸

FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES

The benefits of afterschool programs extend to families and entire communities. Pulling the community together around children’s needs can have a positive impact on their development.⁴⁹ A safe, cohesive neighbourhood is a known protective factor for resilience.⁵⁰

Club kids have confidence in their aspirations

Afterschool programs help children and youth develop the social competencies they need to become community leaders. They have been shown to improve young people’s “feelings of self-confidence and self-esteem”.⁵¹ Young people who regularly participate in afterschool programs gain the ability to see potential in the world around them, and to take advantage of opportunities. They develop confidence in their own aspirations and gain the leadership skills to reach their goals.

More than 9 out of 10 Boys & Girls Clubs of Canada alumni agree that their involvement with the Clubs has made them better off today, provided them with valuable life skills (95 per cent), and helped them learn to be a leader (96 per cent). Two thirds (66 per cent) say their experiences continue to have a lasting positive impact on their lives.⁵²

When they attend a high quality program that meets their needs over a significant period of time, children increase their social competence and civic engagement.⁵³ Participants in afterschool programs report “feeling more optimistic, more satisfied with life, and better about themselves than children who did not engage in these activities.”⁵⁴

Help us make kids resilient

Government and child care advocates are increasingly discussing how to meet the needs of children in their early years, but recreation based afterschool programs are being overlooked. Such programs represent a distinct, developmentally appropriate and trauma-informed approach for children in their middle years, especially those who have had adverse childhood experiences.

“Initiatives that promote children’s social relationships, well-being, and health are only going to be effective and sustainable to the extent that our society creates the social, cultural, and political environments and resources that support the implementation and sustainability of such initiatives.”⁵⁵ Children’s lives are not always easy. Help us ensure that every child can be resilient in the face of adversity by protecting and supporting afterschool programs.

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