



Harvard Family Research Project

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Joining Forces: Families and Out-of-School Programs as Partners in Supporting Children's Learning and Development

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Issue Topic: Family–Afterschool Partnerships for Learning

Commentary

In this Commentary, Harvard Family Research Project's Senior Research Analysts Heidi Rosenberg, Erin Harris, and Shani Wilkes explore the increasing importance of family engagement in afterschool programs.

Family engagement in afterschool learning can contribute to children's education in significant ways. For example, children who receive support from parents or other caregivers in using library resources during the summer spend more time reading and using computers for learning activities than those without such support.¹ In addition, low-income children whose parents or other caregivers expose them to enrichment experiences through "community bridging" strategies with other adults or programs outside their community have a considerable advantage over children who are not able to have such experiences.²

Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP) has long been a leader in the family engagement and afterschool fields, championing each as key components of children's learning and development. We are intensifying our focus on the intersection of these two sectors to address a growing recognition among afterschool providers of the importance of family engagement. The 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21st CCLC) initiative, the only federal funding source for afterschool, is building the capacity of afterschool intermediaries and programs to engage families. In addition, the Expanded Learning and Afterschool Project, a national network of expanded learning and afterschool stakeholders, has family engagement in children's learning as a central principle.

This increasing focus on family engagement in afterschool has also led to a shift in the relationship between parents and afterschool programs, from a focus on increasing afterschool program participation (*program-centered*) toward a focus on parents' supporting children's learning and development in afterschool settings (*learning-centered*). Likewise, whereas afterschool programs used to take the lead in supporting children's learning in their programming, they are now working with families as equal partners in this effort. This *FINE*

Newsletter issue highlights HFRP's recent brief, *Families and Expanded Learning Opportunities: Working Together to Support Children's Learning*. Completed in collaboration with the National Conference of State Legislatures, the brief explores this learning-centered concept and offers examples of program approaches and strategies. Learning-centered partnerships are still in the developmental stages, but both families and afterschool programs can take steps to ensure that children have the most positive learning experience possible.

Specifically, parents can best support afterschool learning experiences by developing a solid understanding of their children's specific interests, strengths, and areas requiring attention; identifying high-quality afterschool programming and other educational opportunities that can best promote their children's whole development; and brokering a network of learning supports for their children—including peers, family members, afterschool programs, libraries, museums, parks, books, and digital learning media—that build on children's interest areas and support their learning needs.

Similarly, afterschool programs can partner with families through such means as supporting regular, two-way communication about children's learning progress and ways in which families can extend afterschool learning at home and in the larger community; facilitating parents' communication with other settings (e.g., schools) in order to link and enhance children's learning experiences; and sharing key data and results with families regarding children's learning progress.

This *FINE Newsletter* provides a fresh perspective on the relationship between families and afterschool programs as that relationship continues to evolve. The articles in this issue highlight several key themes that support strong connections between families and afterschool programs:

- **Families play numerous important roles in supporting their children's learning.**³ Families are *learning brokers* who provide access to the people and places that nurture their children's interests. They are *cheerleaders* who recognize their children's accomplishments. And families are *advocates* who seek to provide the best opportunities for their children. Writing from a parent's perspective, Samantha Grant encourages parents to identify and seek out high-quality afterschool experiences that best meet their children's interests and needs.
- **Children benefit from learning experiences shared alongside their family members.** This co-learning has value far beyond the family's on-site program engagement: The more families know about what their children are learning and the more competent they feel in helping to support that learning, the better able they are to engage with their children's overall growth and development. In this issue, Jane Werner and Lisa Brahms from the Children's Museum of Pittsburgh discuss the Museum's innovative MAKESHOP studio space, which invites children and families to co-create projects and transforms the traditional museum visit experience.
- **Children need 21st century skills, in addition to traditional academic skills, to succeed in school, progress to graduation, and become successful adults.** These 21st century skills are defined in a number of different ways, including the idea of *entrepreneurial learning*, which addresses the need to continually process and use information in the midst of rapid knowledge change.⁴ To best adapt to this changing landscape, learners must exhibit *curiosity* that pulls information from diverse sources; *questing*, which engages the mind in seeking, uncovering, and probing; and *connecting*, or listening to and engaging with others. A variety of educational supports—including those provided by afterschool programs, digital media, and other non-school environments—provide the experiences that enhance entrepreneurial learning. Children who are

best able to access and benefit from these learning experiences are those whose families are engaged in their children's education. The MAKESHOP program mentioned above provides parent-child opportunities for creative "tinkering," which helps support the entrepreneurial learning skills of curiosity, questing, and connecting.

- **Families can be involved in afterschool programs in a variety of different ways, including, but not limited to, volunteering at their children's program.** Busy families, for example, can reinforce what their children are learning in the program by suggesting interesting projects, activities, and games that complement their afterschool activities, and that they can use with their children at home, on the internet, and in the community. In the article "[A Field is Born: Reflections on a Decade of Afterschool](#)," HFRP's former associate director, Priscilla Little, suggests a number of strategies by which afterschool programs can engage families beyond just having families present on site, at the program. For example, programs can work to connect families not only to their afterschool offerings, but also to other families, to schools, and to other community institutions.

Finally, this issue features new resources from HFRP, including our [Afterschool Evaluation 101: How to Evaluate an Expanded Learning Program](#), which assists afterschool programs in evaluating their work, and the most recent [Research Update](#) from HFRP's OST Program Bibliography and Database, [21st Century Community Learning Centers—Stable Funding for Innovation and Continuous Improvement](#), which showcases innovations in afterschool programs supported by the 21st CCLC initiative.

¹ Neuman, S., & Celano, D. (2006). The knowledge gap: Implications of leveling the playing field for low-income and middle-income children. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 41(2), 176–201.

² Jarrett, R. L. (1999). Successful parenting in high-risk neighborhoods. *The Future of Children*, 9(2), 45–50.

³ Barron, B. (2006). Interest and self-sustained learning as catalysts of development: A learning ecology perspective. *Human Development*, 49(4), 193–224; and Barron, B. Martin, C. K., Takeuchi, L. & Fithian, R. (2009). Parents as learning partners in the development of technological fluency. *International Journal of Learning and Media*, 1(2), 55–77.

⁴ Seely Brown, J. (2011, October). *Information & Learning for the Future*. Opening Keynote at the Internet Conference and Exhibition for Librarians and Information Managers, Monterey CA. Retrieved from <http://librarianinblack.net/librarianinblack/2011/10/ilopeningkeynote.html>

This resource is part of the June 2012 FINE Newsletter. The FINE Newsletter shares the newest and best family involvement research and resources from Harvard Family Research Project and other field leaders. To access the archive of past issues, please visit www.hfrp.org/FINENewsletter