

Evidence Brief

Eight Promising Practices for Engaging Black Youth & Families in Homework Clubs / Afterschool Programming

How Did We Compile This Evidence?

We searched YouthREX's Library for Youth Work, and searched in online databases using the following key terms: "homework club," "afterschool," "tutoring," "best practices," "evidence-based," and "Black youth." We then used the 'related articles' function on Google Scholar to find additional resources. Some of the resources we included are specifically about homework clubs, while others address afterschool programs more generally (but could inform afterschool homework clubs as well).

Key Message: SAFE

A useful acronym to remember some of the promising practices that have been shown to have a positive effect on outcomes for young people is **SAFE**.

Programs that offer **Structured/Sequenced, Active, Focused, and Explicit** activities have been linked to improved academic outcomes (Smith & Bradshaw, 2017; Watt-Charley & Darroch, 2016; Afterschool Alliance, 2014; Vandell et al., 2005). The presence of **all four components** together is what researchers have found has the **greatest impact** (Afterschool Alliance, 2014). More information on each of the SAFE practices can be found throughout the rest of this Evidence Brief, but a short explanation of each is provided below:

- **Structured/Sequenced:** a predictable routine; also, breaking down activities into smaller parts and sequencing them so youth can build specific skills.
- **Active:** using engaging, hands-on, active strategies to help young people learn, rather than relying on rote learning.
- **Focused:** sufficient time is focused on skill-building and instruction.
- **Explicit:** clear goals about what the program will achieve that are communicated to participants in plain and understandable language.

Summary of Evidence: Eight Promising Practices

- 1) **Having an appropriate structure** was identified as a key factor contributing to program success (Smith & Bradshaw, 2017; Smith, Witherspoon & Wayne Osgood, 2017; Watt-Charley & Darroch, 2016; Leos-Urbel, 2015; Afterschool Alliance, 2014; Pierce, Bolt & Vandell, 2010; Smith, Peck, Denault, Blazeovski & Akiva, 2010; Eccles & Gootman, 2002).

Examples of appropriate structure include **having a predictable routine schedule, giving children clear instructions about what they should be doing, providing continuous monitoring by staff** (Smith & Bradshaw, 2017; Heuhn, 2007), and **using positive reinforcement** (sometimes called “rewarding contingencies”) to manage children’s behaviour (Smith & Bradshaw, 2017).

Other specific practices that have been found to **support appropriate structure** include:

- Make sure participants are **close in age**, or, if young people across a wide range of ages are attending the program, create age-specific subgroups within the larger program to ensure **activities are age appropriate** (Watt-Charley & Darroch, 2016; Afterschool Alliance, 2014; Pierce, Bolt & Vandell, 2010; Heuhn, 2007).
- Offer participants and staff **a healthy snack** to make sure everyone can concentrate and maintain energy and motivation (Watt-Charley & Darroch, 2016; Gómez-Pinilla, 2008; Heuhn, 2007). Be sure that **food allergies and cultural or religious food restrictions** are adequately accommodated (Centre for Multicultural Youth, n.d.).
- Break up the time spent in homework clubs into **smaller segments with active breaks** and a **variety of types of activities**, during which young people can take a pause from academics; this could even be a physical fitness break (Afterschool Alliance, 2014; Reisner, White, Russell & Birmingham, 2004). Breaking things up in this way helps make homework clubs more **enjoyable**, and gives young people’s brains an **opportunity to process and store the information they are studying**. Without breaks, the young brain (under the age of 25) may actually retain less (Watt-Charley & Darroch, 2016)!
- Make room for **stress relieving activities/games** so that participants and staff can take a break and then get back to homework (Watt-Charley & Darroch, 2016). Young people and/or staff may need **unscheduled breaks when things get stressful or frustrating**.
- Keep in mind that older (high school) students may be able to **concentrate** for longer periods of time (80-90 minutes), while younger (elementary) students may only be able

to **concentrate** for 30-40 minutes; be sure to **plan programs accordingly**.

- **Start the day with a group check-in** and **end the day with a group activity or check-out**; this is a useful way to build relationships and develop social skills (Watt-Charley & Darroch, 2016).
- Consider offering participants **tangible rewards for good behaviour** (Watt-Charley & Darroch, 2016). This could take the form of a field trip, a special snack, or whatever else the young people you work with would appreciate. It's important to make sure that the reward is **attainable and that participants are clear about how it works**. Using tangible rewards has been shown to improve academic outcomes (Leung, 2015).

- 2) **An environment that supports positive relationships with peers and adults** has been shown to promote **positive youth development** in afterschool programs (Smith & Bradshaw, 2017; Smith, Witherspoon & Wayne Osgood, 2017; Watt-Charley & Darroch, 2016; Leos-Urbel, 2015; Huang, La Torre Matrondola & Leon, 2014; Vandell, 2013; Sanzone, Vaden, Russell & Sinclair, 2011; Heuhn, 2007; Eccles & Gootman, 2002).

Positive relationships with staff have been linked to **improved academic achievement** (Miller, 2005; Pierce, Hamm & Vandell, 1999), **higher aspirations** (Little, Wimer & Weiss, 2008), and the **development of social skills**, while negative interactions with staff (e.g. staff impatience, being harsh with participants, etc.) have been linked to lower grades for children (Pierce, Bolt & Vandell, 2010), as well as negative impacts in the development of prosocial behaviours in participants (e.g. helping, sharing, listening) (Smith, Witherspoon & Wayne Osgood, 2017). One study found that staff speaking a second language and being close in age to participants had positive effects, underlining the importance of staff being able to connect with young people (Reisner, White, Russell & Birmingham, 2004).

Although staff need to offer sufficient guidance, monitoring, and structure, young people also benefit from being given opportunities to make **autonomous decisions** (Deutsch & Jones, 2008) and **provide feedback** about the program (Smith, Peck, Denault, Blazevski & Akiva, 2010). One way to demonstrate that young people's feedback is valued is to have an **open-door policy** so that youth know their concerns are important and staff are always available to listen (Watt-Charley & Darroch, 2016).

- 3) **Programs should aim to create opportunities for youth to feel a sense of belonging and engagement** (Smith, Witherspoon & Wayne Osgood, 2017; Smith, Peck, Denault, Blazevski & Akiva, 2010; Eccles & Gootman, 2002). Participants should feel **connected to program**

staff and to each other. In order to foster this connection, **programs need to create a safe space** (both physically and emotionally) where young people have opportunities to grow socially as well as academically (Watt-Charley & Darroch, 2016; Afterschool Alliance, 2014; Huang, La Torre Matrundola & Leon, 2014; Sanzone, Vaden, Russell & Sinclair, 2011).

Part of a safe space includes **low staff turnover**, which can be achieved by ensuring staff are satisfied with work conditions and are offered opportunities for professional development (Huang, La Torre Matrundola & Leon, 2014; Jordan, Parker, Donnelly & Rudo, 2009; Wright, 2005).

A safe space also means that young people and staff should **feel comfortable to fully express themselves without fear of being made fun of, excluded or feeling unsafe.** When working with young people, creating a safe environment often means frequently **interrupting inappropriate comments** (e.g. classist, sexist, transphobic, racist, etc.); taking an **educational – rather than shaming or confrontational – approach** in addressing these comments can be helpful (Watt-Charley & Darroch, 2016).

- 4) Organizations providing homework clubs or other afterschool programs benefit from **building and maintaining strong partnerships with parents, caregivers or families** (Leung, 2015; Afterschool Alliance, 2014; Huang, La Torre Matrundola & Leon, 2014) **and schools** (Bandy & Moore, 2011). Engaging parents, caregivers or families can help **improve children’s attendance and academic achievement**, as well as improving afterschool program quality (Jeynes, 2012; Kreider & Westmoreland, 2011). Moreover, once a relationship has been developed, organizations can also support parents, caregivers or families to **access other supports from which they may benefit** (e.g. counselling, etc.) (Afterschool Alliance, 2014). Partnerships with schools have been shown to improve student engagement, and can lead to better targeting of resources and collaboration (Little, Wimer & Weiss, 2008). In order to maintain a strong relationship with schools, program directors may want to meet frequently with school principals, and staff may consider being in weekly contact with school staff (Vandell et al., 2004).
- 5) **Programs that run frequently, and that participants attend consistently,** seem to result in better outcomes for young people (Vandell, 2013; Bandy & Moore, 2011). Moreover, the **longer participants are engaged, the more they benefit** (Afterschool Alliance, 2014; Sanzone, Vaden, Russell, & Sinclair, 2011).
- 6) **Ask young people about their interests and needs** to make sure your program is addressing them in meaningful ways (Watt-Charley & Darroch, 2016; Heuhn, 2007).

- 7) Whether your homework club tutors are volunteers or paid staff, make sure to **check-in with them regularly to make sure they have the support they need** (Heuhn, 2007). Tutors should have basic competence in the main academic areas young people are studying. They should also have some **awareness about the community they are working in** and the social influences that may be at play in students' lives; the more **staff reflect the demographics of the community they work in, the easier it may be for them to also act as role models and mentors** (Huang, La Torre Matrundola & Leon, 2014).

- 8) **Time for reflection and evaluation should be built into programming** to ensure high-quality service is being offered and to help build knowledge around afterschool programming best practices (Afterschool Alliance, 2014; Huang, La Torre Matrundola & Leon, 2014).

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