

Access in Out-of-School Time

What Do We Mean by Access in Out-of-School Time?

Ensuring that Boston's out-of-school time (OST) programs are accessible to *all* children and youth regardless of their economic status, mental health or physical disabilities has been a cornerstone of BOSTnet's work for 20 years. We understand that accessibility and quality are inherently linked. When programs develop their skills in fostering positive human relationships, when they train their staff to create supportive learning environments, and when they create structured and engaging programs that address the needs of all children and youth, their programs will improve and contribute to positive child and youth development.

Effective group management skills, especially those related to behavior, are consistently seen as critical in promoting regular participation, engagement and learning in out-of-school time activities. Unfortunately, most programs do not have integrated behavior management systems in place, and even when they do, these systems are often ineffective. This is due to a variety of challenges programs face every day: high staff turnover rates and insufficient training; children who are both physically and emotionally tired after their school day; and constantly changing conditions, including the number and mix of kids or limitations of space. OST workers need proper training and referral information to work with families when a child needs to be assessed for mental health supports. Developing staff competencies in addressing these problems has a lasting effect on children and has real benefits on the quality and sustainability of out-of-school time providers. Moreover, research-based models for inclusion and promoting positive behavior have a community value that must be recognized by policymakers and funders who decide on whether or not to invest in afterschool programs.

Assessing Needs:

There is a very real social cost when afterschool programs struggle with behavior management. Often, youth are expelled, voluntarily withdrawn or referred to another program if available. In our experience, many programs view behavior management as intervention for youth who are "at-risk" rather than a program-wide approach. "Get tough" strategies, including punishment, exclusion and containment, are ineffective and reduce the ability of a child to benefit from positive social interaction with staff and other children. These outcomes are not only destructive they are unnecessary. Research suggests that children and youth, including those who need mental health services, will show measurable improvement in areas of behavioral adjustment when they are in supportive environments that promote positive social behavior. The need for effective behavioral support models in out-of-school time is evident:

- Expulsion rates in 16 OST programs in Boston and eastern Massachusetts were more than 3 times higher than in the Boston Public School system (1.5% in OST compared to 0.4% in BPS).
- BOSTnet's roundtables and trainings on Promoting Positive Behavior and Inclusion are the most heavily attended.
- Without a statewide professional development system, programs are less able to sustain progress in promoting positive behavior because of staff turnover and low-trained youth workers.
- Age-appropriate behavioral management techniques and positive reinforcement are cited as two of the most important staff practices in the recent *Quality Time After School* study.
- The 2005 *Massachusetts Afterschool Research Study* (MARS) reported that program directors view behavior issues as one of the top five challenges facing their programs. Program staff, moreover, did not regularly use positive reinforcement to promote acceptable behavior.

Afterschool Access Project—Preparing the OST Workforce for Promoting Positive Behavior:

BOSTnet designed the *Afterschool Access* program through a grant from the Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care (EEC). It builds the capacity of OST staff to address the social and emotional needs of children exhibiting significant behavioral difficulties to reduce the need for expulsion from EEC programs. BOSTnet coordinated local consultation from behavioral health experts, and delivered training on promoting positive behavior. Behavioral specialists from North Shore ARC, Judge Baker’s Children Center, Wediko Children’s Services, and The May Institute worked with 16 programs in Boston, Cambridge, Winthrop, Lynn, Revere, Peabody, Brockton, and New Bedford. Specialists engaged in on-site training, including coaching, modeling and case review, to train staff in site-specific strategies to promote positive behavior. BOSTnet worked with key partners, the Program in Education, Afterschool & Resiliency (PEAR) and the Massachusetts Afterschool Partnership (MAP), to capture and disseminate best practices from the *Afterschool Access* project.

What Did We Learn?

The most promising development from the *Afterschool Access* project is that basic strategies and tools work. Within a few months of working with the behavioral specialists, most programs recognized noticeable positive changes and many noticed “significant” changes within 6 months. For many programs, there was marked improvement in the ratio of praise to behavior correction and the overall emphasis on preventative strategies over reactive approaches. Providing children and youth the tools and skills to communicate their needs in positive and constructive ways is empowering. While the value of working directly with a behavioral specialist on site was seen as most beneficial, a number of practices emerged that proved effective in fostering supportive, pro-social learning environments:

- Program quality indicators, including supportive relationships, well-trained staff, low child-to-staff ratios, well-structured and engaging age-appropriate activities, and room for autonomy and skill mastery, all promote positive behavior.
- It is important to have well-communicated ground rules and expectations. If appropriate, children and youth should be allowed to take ownership of the program rules.
- Consistent staff responses to behavioral problems are critical. Staff must model the behaviors they want to see.
- Family engagement helps promote positive behavior through stronger family relationships.
- Program leaders must support the design and implementation of strategies to promote positive behavior to ensure success.
- There is real benefit in building networks and strong relationships between programs and community-based specialists in child development.

Perhaps most rewarding and most important in sustaining these gains was the emergence of a team-based planning and problem solving system within some programs for addressing behavior issues when they arise. There is value in being reflective and considering things that worked and things that didn’t work within a particular environment or with an individual child. The goal is to give staff the confidence to address these issues in a positive way when they come up, leading to greater job satisfaction and, hopefully, greater staff retention rates. When these systems are in place and promoting positive behavior is a long-term strategy, programs are better positioned to sustain quality programming for our children and youth.

Moving Forward:

According to the *Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning*, the evidence is clear. Programs that use research-based training and strategies for teaching and promoting positive behavior have measurably improved results. We need to develop models of teaching positive behavior that rely on set, sequenced activities and active learning. Done properly, promoting positive behavior transcends staff training and becomes part of a program’s culture. Through the *Afterschool Access* program, BOSTnet,

MAP and PEAR are developing a research-based Best Practices Tool Kit and the Promoting Positive Behavior and Resiliency in Out-of-School Time Assessment Tool. These resources will provide real support and guidance for out-of-school time programs statewide.

Looking forward, it is clear that there are very real challenges. We need strong policies that support consistent funding to provide opportunities for staff development in behavioral training, more appropriate staff-to-child ratios and better systems for addressing children's mental health issues. Sustained technical assistance is critical to foster long-term benefits for all children in out-of-school time programs. We need to support efforts to define and nurture a statewide professional workforce development system that identifies core competencies every youth worker needs to succeed and establishes well-defined pathways for career advancement. We need to continue to promote accreditation as a viable and sustainable path for organizations seeking to enhance the quality of their programs. We need to work with funders and programs to replicate the *Afterschool Access* model of providing under-resourced OST programs access to behavioral experts. Developing strong networks enables individual programs to leverage resources through collective power. We need to create capacity within the field to promote mentoring and support structures between programs so that the knowledge being generated in the field is shared. When we truly utilize the power of our community and networks to address these common issues, we will be better able to create lasting change.

Lastly, we need to think of all out-of-school time quality initiatives as an integrated system of program and staff development. We cannot separate a program's ability to engage families from its skill in including children with disabilities, its use of space, or its efforts to promote positive behavior. All of these competencies are linked to broader systemic issues that need to be continually reinforced so that quality programming can be sustained for *all* children.

All Means All Conference:

To learn more, please join us at the 3rd Annual *All Means All Conference* on Friday, September 21, 2007 at Northeastern University. The conference will focus on Promoting Positive Behavior in out-of-school time programs through sharing of best practices, workshops, and panel discussions.

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