

# Eighth Grade Students' Attitudes toward School and Peer Relationships as a Function of After-School Program Quality and Attendance

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The past decade has seen a shift in the approach researchers, practitioners and policy-makers take when addressing youth issues. The field is moving from a focus on intervention and crisis to one that views adolescent development in terms of positive youth development, assets and supports (Catalano, *et al.*, 1998; Larson, 2000; Quinn, 1999; Scales & Leffert, 1999). However, few studies of after-school programs have identified specific program features that contribute to positive youth development. This study uses a developmental approach to examine students' perceptions of support at school-based after-school programs. We consider four aspects of after-school program quality: supportive relationships with adults, supportive relationships with peers, opportunities for autonomy and leadership, and interest in after-school program activities. These dimensions of program quality were selected after a review of the literature and reflect core features that have been posited to promote positive youth development

Previous research suggests that attendance in extracurricular activities is associated with students staying in school and developing positive relationships with their peers (Mahoney, *et al.*, 2003). We hypothesized that adolescents who experienced their after-school programs as more supportive would have more positive attitudes toward school and positive peer relationships relative to adolescents who experienced their programs as less supportive.

## Method

A group of 172 eighth grade students (46% male, 38% white non-Hispanic; 36% single parent households) who attended eight school-based after-school programs in three states reported their after-school program experiences in the fall (Time 1) and again in the late spring (Time 2). Adolescents also reported how often they attended the after-school program, with students typically attending 2-4 times per week. At Time 1, parents provided demographic information. Students and parents reported on students' attitudes towards school and peer relationships.

### *Measures*

*Developmental Supports Rating Scale (DSRS):* The DSRS assesses students' experiences in after-school programs on four broad areas of support posited to foster positive youth development (Dadisman, 2003; Dadisman, 2005; Dadisman & Vandell, 2005):

Supportive Relationships with Adults	(5 items, $\alpha = .81$ )
Supportive Relationships with Peers	(3 items, $\alpha = .66$ )
Interest in Activities	(3 items, $\alpha = .75$ )
Opportunities for Autonomy and Leadership	(5 items, $\alpha = .75$ )

*Program Attendance:* Adolescents reported on how often they attended the after-school program, with students typically attending 2 – 4 times per week.

*Positive Attitudes toward School:* Students rated their attitude toward school on a 4 point scale (1 = Not at all true; 4 = Very true). Items included a) I learn interesting things at my school, b) I learn a lot at my school, and c) I like to go to my school. Time 1  $\alpha = .78$  / Time 2  $\alpha = .73$

Parents rated their child's attitude toward school on a 5-point scale (1 = Strongly disagree; 5 = Strong agree). Items included a) my child likes school and b) my child works hard at school. Time 1  $\alpha = .74$  / Time 2  $\alpha = .59$

*Positive Peer Relationships:* Students rated their relationships with peers on a 4-point scale (1 = Not at all true, 4 = Very true). Items included a) I have friends to hang around with, b) I am lonely (reversed), c) I get along with others my age, d) It is easy for me to make new friends, and e) I feel left out of things (reversed). Time 1  $\alpha = .68$  / Time 2  $\alpha = .77$

Parent report of their child's relationship with peers is a single item, My child gets along well with others, rated on a 5-point scale (1=Strong disagree; 5=Strongly agree).

Descriptive statistics for the measures can be found in Table 1.

## Results

Multiple regression models were tested in which program quality and attendance (averaged across Time 1 and Time 2) were used to predict positive attitudes toward school and positive peer relationships. Covariates in the models were child gender, child ethnicity, income, family structure, and child functioning (attitudes toward school and peer relationships) at Time 1.

Our findings indicate that supportive peer and program staff relationships in after-school programs and activities are associated with positive attitudes toward school (Table 2). Program attendance, supportive relationships with program staff and with peers were positively associated with student reports of their peer relationships at school (Table 3).

Taken together, these findings suggest that students who attend their after-school programs more often and experience positive relationships with program staff and peers have positive attitudes toward school and positive relationships with their friends at school. Our results point to *relationships* within the after-school program, with staff and with peers, as being salient program quality features associated with positive developmental outcomes.

The negative relationship between students' reports of their interest in program activities and their peer relations was an unexpected finding. Upon consideration, we believe this may represent a group of students for whom the after-school program is a refuge. It may be that these

students don't relate well to their peers during the school day, but find the after-school environment to be supportive.

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Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

	Mean (SD)	Range
Developmental Supports Rating Scale:		
Supportive relationships with adults	3.76 (.77)	1.40 – 5.00
Supportive relationships with peers	3.76 (.72)	2.00 – 5.00
Interest in activities	3.43 (.85)	1.33 – 5.00
Opportunities for autonomy and leadership	2.98 (.82)	1.10 – 4.80
Intensity of program attendance	4.00 (.77)	1.00 – 5.00
Student report:		
Positive attitude toward school	2.96 (.69)	1.00 – 4.00
Positive peer relationships	3.44 (.56)	1.00 – 4.00
Parent report:		
Positive attitude toward school	4.09 (.84)	1.00 – 5.00
Positive peer relationships	4.46 (.74)	1.00 – 5.00

Table 2. Positive Attitudes toward School

	Student Report		Parent Report	
	Model I	Model II	Model I	Model II
Block I	F <sub>(5,123)</sub> =6.15***		F <sub>(5,106)</sub> =17.76***	
Child gender (1=boys)	.076	.093	.033	-.063
Child race/ethnicity (1=non-White)	-.042	-.060	-.058	-.084
Family structure (1=single parent)	-.059	-.048	-.125	-.117
Household income	-.019	-.039	-.131	-.141
Time 1 attitude toward school	.425***	.407***	.663***	.641***
Block II		F <sub>(5,118)</sub> =2.35* ΔR <sup>2</sup> =.072		F <sub>(5,101)</sub> =3.37** ΔR <sup>2</sup> =.078
Program Quality:				
Supportive relations with adults		.202		.310**
Supportive relations with peers		.210*		-.049
Interests in activities		-.042		.006
Opportunities of autonomy and leadership		-.132		-.083
Program Attendance				
Intensity		-.001		.129+
Overall		F <sub>(10,118)</sub> =4.42*** Adj. R <sup>2</sup> =.211		F <sub>(10,101)</sub> =11.56*** Adj. R <sup>2</sup> =.487

\*\*\* p<.001 \*\* p<.01 \* p<.05 + p<.10

Table 3. Positive Peer Relationships

	Student Report		Parent Report	
	Model I	Model II	Model I	Model II
Block I	F <sub>(5,124)</sub> =10.38***		F <sub>(5,106)</sub> =7.35***	
Child gender (1=boys)	-.067	-.087	-.040	-.049
Child race/ethnicity (1=non-White)	.094	.066	.018	.038
Family structure (1=single parent)	.026	.004	-.107	-.040
Household income	.061	.107	.177+	.219*
Time 1 peer relationships	.514***	.456***	.435***	.409***
Block II		F <sub>(5,119)</sub> =2.79* ΔR <sup>2</sup> =.074		F <sub>(4,101)</sub> =1.06 <i>ns</i> ΔR <sup>2</sup> =.037
Program Quality:				
Supportive relations with adults		.228+		.060
Supportive relations with peers		.193+		.132
Interests in activities		-.303*		.116
Opportunities of autonomy and leadership		-.105		-.226+
Program Attendance				
Intensity		.169*		-.077
Overall		F <sub>(10,119)</sub> =6.96*** Adj. R <sup>2</sup> =.316		F <sub>(10,101)</sub> =4.21*** Adj. R <sup>2</sup> =.224

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