



SHAPING SUMMERTIME EXPERIENCES

Opportunities to Promote Healthy Development and Well-Being for Children and Youth

Issue Brief

Designing Structured Summertime Programs to Improve Children's Well-Being: Considerations for Program Providers

Summer programs can be designed to promote children's and youth's safety, physical and mental health, social and emotional development, and academic learning, but they must be targeted to the needs of participants, have programming linked to desired outcomes, be of sufficient duration, and promote strong attendance.

Summers in the United States, generally from June through August, mean children and youth in grades K–12 have a break from their normal school attendance. Some may travel with their families, enjoy the free time with friends, or work summer jobs, but many of them use that time to take part in organized activities, from summer camps and programs to various remedial or supplemental academic courses. These experiences can benefit children and youth in a number of ways, from helping them catch up or get ahead in particular academic areas to more general advantages, such as encouraging the development of positive cognitive, social, emotional, and physical skills and by promoting the youths' safety and their physical and mental health.

A recent publication by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, *Shaping Summertime Experiences: Opportunities to Promote Healthy Development and Well-Being for Children and Youth* (2019) explores what is known about the value of summertime experiences for children in grades K–12 in four domains of well-being: (1) academic learning; (2) social and emotional development; (3) physical and mental health and behaviors; and (4) safety, risk-taking, and anti- and pro-social behavior. In particular, the *Summertime* study committee, consisting of 13 diverse members with expertise in sociology, education, medicine, public health, nutrition and obesity, developmental psychology, positive youth development, public policy, juvenile justice, business, workforce development, and urban planning, examined the effectiveness of structured summertime programs in improving the well-being of children and youth in these four areas. They found that while the research base demonstrates that summer programming can measurably benefit youth across multiple domains, it is not guaranteed to do so. Because the overall evidence base is fragmented and not representative of all programs available to children and youth over the summer, it is particularly important to understand what factors increase the quality and effectiveness of summer programs. The committee examined the existing literature and accessible relevant data sources on demography, outcomes of interest, access, disparities, measurement, and developmental trajectories. An open session with multisectoral stakeholders was conducted and commissioned papers were secured to fill gaps in evidence and information. The *Summertime* committee drew out the following key themes that emerged from the literature reviewed and the testimony heard that may guide program providers.

Intentional Design to Meet Student Needs and Desired Outcomes

Programs are most effective when they are designed to meet specific students' needs and when they shape their content to desired outcomes. There is evidence, that voluntary reading programs targeted at students who perform below grade level or at low-income students are successful in improving reading achievement. Similarly, a number of programs designed to address the social and emotional needs of children and youth with various disabilities have also been found to be effective. For instance, one six-week summer camp used a socio-dramatic affective-relational intervention to help 11- to 17-year-olds with Asperger syndrome and high-functioning autism become more assertive and improve their understanding of adults' tone of voice (Learner et al., 2011). And a week-long day camp for girls aged 7 to 12 with separation anxiety disorder used cognitive behavioral therapy, repeated exposure to separation, and opportunities for social interaction to decrease separation anxiety and increase levels of global functioning (Santucci and Ehrenreich-May, 2013).

The success of such programs suggests that it is important to intentionally target a program to a population whose needs are matched by the goals of the program. Conversely, research has shown that programs that do not intentionally target particular skills, such as social and emotional skills, are generally not effective in developing those skills. The most successful programs are those that have specific goals for a specific group with specific needs and that are designed with those populations, needs, and goals in mind.

Based on information gathered during its public workshops, the *Summertime* committee identified cultural responsiveness as a key component of intentional programming. Programs that are not responsive to students' cultural values, beliefs, and backgrounds are, at a minimum, unlikely to attract and retain youth, while at worst they could do harm by inflicting offensive beliefs or actions on students. Conversely, culturally relevant programs can be particularly effective with the youth of minority cultures. For example, one writing program aimed at Latina adolescents was able to increase their engagement in the program by having the girls read stories written by Latino authors.

Ensuring cultural responsiveness in a summer program requires taking into account both the staff practices that influence youth experiences (e.g., expectations for youth and interaction styles) and the program's organizational structures that influence youth access to and experiences in the programs (e.g., written rules and policies and communications with the youth). For example, in interacting with the youth, staff should support opportunities to explore the youth's cultural identities, and the program's structures should connect to content that is relevant to the youth's lives in culturally meaningful ways.

Sufficient Duration to Meet Program Goals

Finally, if summer programs are to be effective, they must be long enough in duration to meet the goals that were set for the program. The committee found that duration seems particularly important for academic programs. For instance, of the academic programs reviewed for the *Summertime* report, none of them that lasted 3 weeks or less resulted in significant benefits for the children and youth attending them. In the case of voluntary academic programs, the *Summertime* committee found that programs needed to last at least 5 weeks if they are to provide sufficient content to demonstrably improve student achievement (Augustine et al., 2016), and programs can be even more beneficial by stretching across several summers. For example, the Horizons National Student Enrichment Program offers 6-week summer programs on college campuses to low-income students in pre-K through grade 12, with the students coming back year after year. Long-term Horizons participants have been found to have better attendance in school, score higher on standardized assessments of math and science, and be significantly less likely to repeat a grade or receive disciplinary referrals than similar students from the same school who did not participate in the program (Concentric Research and Evaluation, 2018).

Sustained Attendance

No matter how effective a program may be in theory, in practice its effectiveness will depend strongly on whether students actually attend. Unlike the regular school year, attendance at most summer programs is voluntary, and experience has shown that even students who chose to sign up may attend only sporadically or not at all.

Research clearly demonstrates that students need to *attend* summer programs if they are to benefit from them (Augustine et al., 2016; Borman et al., 2005; Borman and Dowling, 2006; Kilanowski and Gordon, 2015; McCombs et al., 2009). Some of the most compelling evidence comes from an analysis of voluntary summer programs offered over the course of two summers by five different school districts (Boston, Dallas, Duval County in Florida, Pittsburgh, and Rochester, New York) which were attended by approximately 5,000 elementary school students (Augustine et al. 2016). The students, who were in third grade before the first of the two summers of the program, were given instruction in mathematics and language arts. The full-day, five-days-a-week programs were at least five weeks long, combined academics with enrichment activities and focused on low-income children in urban school districts.

One of the most striking findings concerning these programs was the relatively low rates of attendance among children whose parents had signed them up voluntarily for the program, which were designed to stretch over two consecutive summers. During the first summer, only about half of the students had what the researchers called high attendance showing up for at least 20 days during the summer. More than one in five did not show up for a single day. The second summer was worse. Only 31 percent of the students had high attendance during that summer, and nearly half did not show up a single day. Part of the drop-off was due to the fact that 11 percent of the students had left the district by the second summer, but a much larger part was due to students choosing to do something else during that second summer other than the program.

The other striking finding was what a difference consistent attendance made to the students. Not surprisingly, there were no significant improvements seen in the no-shows for any of the assessments used in the study—mathematics performance, language arts performance, or social and emotional assessments. The high-attendance students, on the other hand, showed significant improvement in mathematics when tested in the following fall semester, and much of the improvement was still there the next spring. The low-attenders, by contrast, had a smaller improvement in math scores measured in the fall, and no improvement the following spring. Moreover, the effects were more pronounced after the second summer of the program. The high-attenders showed significant improvements in both math and language arts and retained the improvements through the following spring, and they also had improved scores on the social and emotional assessments in the following fall semester, although not the next spring. The low-attenders in the second summer of the program did not have improvements on any measure (Augustine et al., 2016).

Augustine et al. (2016) commented that while it can be difficult to maintain high attendance for such summer programs—none of the districts in the study had much success at increasing attendance—it is worth the effort to try, and they offered several suggestions for how to encourage attendance, including:

- Offer engaging programs that will excite students, for example.
- Offer programs to many grade levels so that older siblings won't have to stay at home to care for younger ones.
- Develop personal connections with families of children who have poor school attendance or low grades during the school year, as these are the ones most likely to have low or no attendance at a summer program.
- Make the summer programs mandatory for those children who are least likely to attend, particularly the lowest-performing students.

Summer programming can present youth with opportunities for academic, physical, and social and emotional growth. While summer programming does not guarantee benefits there are factors that can increase the quality and effectiveness of summer programs.



Shaping Summertime Experiences: Opportunities to Promote Healthy Development and Well-Being for Children and Youth (2019)

Available:

<https://nationalacademies.org/summertimeopportunities>

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