

Parent Engagement: Going Straight to the Source

National Afterschool Matters Initiative Practitioner Fellowship

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There is little argument regarding the positive impact that parent involvement has on a youth's academic achievement and overall wellbeing (*The American Youth Policy Forum, 2003*). As discussed in an issue brief, "Afterschool: A Key to Successful Parent Engagement", legislators and school staff are constantly working to encourage more parent involvement in their child's education and overall daily living; however, their endeavors are often met with barriers. The pressure has been placed upon after-school programs to be another warrior in the fight to improve parent engagement (MetLife Foundation, 2012). Whether you want to or not, it is a reality that programs need to include some sort of parent involvement activities into programming. These types of activities are required for many youth program funding streams due to No Child Left Behind (*The American Youth Policy Forum, 2003*).

Even though this may sound like a natural step, feelings of frustration and helplessness often arise in the staff of program providers when efforts to increase parent engagement are introduced into program activities and culture. As after-school programs, we provide an environment where parents feel more comfortable, offer parent-related activities and services during more convenient times, and share resources and tools to help parents feel empowered. Yet many of us are still throwing up our arms in disbelief when only a handful of parents take advantage. As a result, we review the latest research and participate in endless amounts of conferences, seminars, webinars, and meetings hoping to discover that "magic bullet" to successful parent engagement in programming.

While we are exhausting all of this energy and time, has anyone asked the parents directly if there is an overwhelming need in the program for parent engagement, or are they already actively involved in their children's lives in other ways? The main focus of my work was to discover how parents of the Human Services Center Corporation's (HSCC) Youth LIFE

(Learning In a Fun Environment) After-School Program engage in their children's lives and to what degree they engage in their families. Based on the findings, if and how can the Program assist parents in enhancing their parent engagement and provide support in areas of need for their families?

If you are at all familiar with parent engagement endeavors you can imagine the internal research into my inquiry topic was not an easy task! While I did external research, most of my work was focused on personal interviews and surveys conducted with the parents that currently had children enrolled in the Youth LIFE After-School Program. As a result, I was extremely apprehensive about receiving enough participation from parents to make this effort truly legitimate and meaningful. Fortunately, I am pleased to report that I had an excellent response from our Program's parents. I carried out interviews with select parents who had varying degrees of involvement in the Youth LIFE Program and I received 36 out of 84 parent surveys, yielding a 43% return!

Before designing the interview questions and the parent survey, I consulted outside research to help identify the most common forms of parent engagement. I quickly had the revelation that there are very meaningful ways in which parents can be involved both in and outside of Program hours and the Youth LIFE Program seems to be hitting a lot of those points. Perhaps over time it has been ingrained in providers that all parent involvement must occur during program hours in traditional ways for our efforts to be impactful? According to Harvard Family Research Project's Priscilla Little (2012) involving parents in their child's activities after-school entails an assortment of strategies. Often after-school providers only include the activities that are located at the site during program hours. Little's most common response to programs looking to enhance their parent engagement work was to "...widen your notion of family

engagement.” The habit of having families at the program for all involvement efforts is “almost antithetical” to after-school programming, which is designed so parents can work during after-school hours. After researching the various examples it became clear that parent engagement activities as a whole need to be broadened in the after-school arena. As a result, the survey I distributed to parents included a range of ways they could be engaged in their children’s lives from morning, noon, to night.

Before starting this venture I made a major assumption about the level of involvement parents had with the youth based solely on their direct engagement or lack thereof at the Youth LIFE Program. Apparently I was not alone in my presumption as Focus on Families (Kakli, Kreider, Little, Buck, & Coffrey, 2006) confers, “Staff may assume that if parents are not visible in the program that they are uninvolved or don’t care about their children’s learning.” Despite assumptions, overall my internal research has shown that our program parents seem to be very active in various aspects of their children’s everyday lives and do not necessarily need or want the after-school program to serve as a place to engage parents anymore than is already occurring.

By solely reviewing the raw survey results, my assumption about the level of engagement for parents in Youth LIFE changed instantly. Even though parents may not be engaging with their children during program activities it absolutely does not mean they are not involved parents in other aspects. The following are a few examples that really hit it home for me. It is important to note that the participants of the Youth LIFE Program are in first-fifth grades. Of the respondents:

- About two thirds read to their children either daily or at least a few times per week.

- 64% of parents and children eat at least one meal daily together. Moreover, almost all of the survey respondents eat with their children at least a few times per week.
- More than half “always” attend school events when their children are participants, such as a concert, talent show, etc.
- Approximately 80% pick up their children from the after-school program daily.
- Almost all assist their youth with their bed time routines.
- 94% talk to their children about their day, while all of the respondents discuss their children’s day with them at least a few times per week.
- Three quarters help their children with homework assignments daily.

It is apparent the statistics indicate the Youth LIFE After-School parents are engaged in many avenues of their youth’s lives.

Another major theme that emerged from my internal research is how parents classify their degree of engagement. When asked whether they were “...an involved parent,” “...sort of an involved parent,” or “...not an active parent” in three separate aspects, the following statistics emerged: Every respondent said they were involved parents at home, almost all reported they were involved parents in their children’s education as well as in their children’s extracurricular activities, and nearly 70% felt they were engaged parents in their children’s after-school program life. Clearly the Youth LIFE After-School Program parents believe they are highly engaged in the lives of their children.

After analyzing the data it is evident that our parents are involved both in the Program and outside of the Program; however they are engaged to the best of their ability due to their schedules and/or other responsibilities. Although almost every respondent thought it necessary

to be involved with the after-school activities and/or events, a little less than half said they would not like to be more involved than they already are in the Program. The majority of parents commented that the hours interfered with their work schedules. My survey and interview results indicated that the main reason that keeps more than half of them from being more active as parents is the fact they are working. Being a single parent with a lot of responsibilities was the second highest rated reason they could not be more involved. My internal research seems to coincide with the findings in the article “Focus on Families: How to Build and Support Family Centered Practices.” The lack of time was identified as a huge barrier to engagement, bringing to the forefront the reality that many parents seek out after-school programming because they work, are students themselves, or have other responsibilities beyond school hours (Kakli, Kreider, Little, Buck, & Coffrey, 2006).

With the identification of how parents are involved and the extent, this leads to the other piece of my research: Based on how they are involved and regularity, how, if at all, can the HSCC’s Youth LIFE After-School Program support parents in enhancing their parent involvement? According to “Focus on Families: How to Build and Support Family Centered Practices,” which reviewed a hundred programs’ evaluations, the Youth LIFE Program may be above average compared to other after-school agencies in regards to parent involvement. It was determined that less than a third of after-school programs in the evaluation study mentioned family engagement as a component of programming (Kakli, Kreider, Little, Buck, & Coffrey, 2006). In contrast, our parent involvement efforts are woven into our daily operation of the Program.

Over ten years with the HSCC’s Youth Programs I have spoken with numerous after-school providers and analyzed our internal programming concerning parent engagement. From the start, I have felt that the Youth LIFE After-School Program provides a plethora of ways for

parents to be engaged. We orient each parent and child to all aspects of the Program and its' policies before enrollment and parents are required to pick up their children from Youth LIFE and speak with staff about the child's day. Additionally, they are welcome to volunteer to help chaperone field trips. We send out a monthly newsletter to families to update them about events and activities that are happening at the Program and in the surrounding communities. Various dinners and participant-driven events are organized such as talent shows, award ceremonies, etc. and are always well attended by parents. Lastly, our organization coordinates several events and/or seminars throughout the year that are geared to support parents. Events include an annual family resource fair, a seminar on preparing for career success, housing seminars, and free tax preparation, just to name a few. Parents led the committee to design and construct our KaBOOM! playground. Even with all these efforts in place, I still was not completely confident that we were meeting the needs of our families for the simple fact that we never asked the families themselves how they are engaged with their children and if the Program can support their efforts of involvement.

Based on my findings, my initial prediction that the Youth LIFE After-School Program is doing its due diligence regarding parent engagement has been validated. According to Youth LIFE parents, we are supporting them in their engagement efforts and beyond. If they felt they needed help to be more involved parents, approximately half of the respondents did not feel the after-school program could do more than we already offer, while a third of respondents did not need additional support in general. When asked specifically in the surveys and interviews how the Youth LIFE After-School Program could be more supportive and/or help them to be more engaged parents 71% that answered had only positive comments about their satisfaction with the program in its current role. One parent stated, "They do an awesome job 'as is'", while another

went into more detail by saying that his/her child is happy to attend the after-school program where it is safe and the child is being productive. The parent added that because Youth LIFE is free it helps his/her “meet other means”. It is important to note that almost all suggestions I did receive were not realistic to budget and/or operations. For example, someone suggested running the Youth LIFE Program when school is closed. Due to transportation constraints we are unable to fulfill this request. Based on the data, I can now confidently say that not only are parents engaged, we are also supporting them to the best of our abilities.

In an environment where the goal is to support the families and children we serve it only makes sense for after-school providers to address the parents first hand. Often we as after-school providers get wrapped up in the daily functions of program management, sometimes making quick judgments and assumptions along the way, without directly addressing those impacted by our services. This inquiry process has not only affirmed that the Youth LIFE After-School Program is a source of support for parent engagement, it has brought to the forefront how crucial it is to involve consumers when considering program changes to ensure all needs are being met within reason. It is reassuring to learn that our youth participants have parents that are engaged in their daily living. Moreover, it is encouraging to have definitive affirmation that the Youth LIFE After-School Program provides ample parent engagement opportunities and is a support to all involved.

References

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