

Engagement is a key aspect of participation in afterschool programs. This chapter describes different methods for assessing engagement and features of engaging afterschool programs.

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Moving beyond attendance: Lessons learned from assessing engagement in afterschool contexts

*Jennifer A. Fredricks, Amy M. Bohnert,
Kimberly Burdette*

PARTICIPATION IN AFTERSCHOOL programs and other organized out-of-school contexts is associated with favorable academic adjustment, psychological functioning, and lower risk behaviors.¹ Only recently, however, have researchers moved beyond comparing participants with nonparticipants to consider important differences in the nature of this involvement. In a recent review, Bohnert, Fredricks, and Randall outlined distinct indicators of organized activity involvement, including intensity, breadth, duration, and engagement.² The first three indicators reflect the quantity of youth's involvement. Intensity captures the frequency of youth involvement, breadth depicts a youth's range of involvement in different types of activities, and duration describes the length of involvement. Although related to these other three indicators, engagement is focused on the quality of youth's experience while involved in activities that we describe in more detail next. Of the four areas of involvement, engagement is the least

researched but potentially most important aspect of participation. In this chapter, we outline reasons why engagement is an important dimension of afterschool programming, different methods for assessing engagement, features of engaging afterschool programs, and implications for practice.

Why is engagement important?

There are several reasons why engagement is an important dimension of afterschool program participation. First, there is considerable variability in youth's experiences within afterschool settings. Youth who are more engaged experience more positive academic outcomes, such as higher grades and motivation, than youth who have casual or irregular participation.³ Second, engagement plays a key role in recruiting and retaining participants, which is especially important with older youth who have more choices about how to spend their time. Third, levels of engagement differ across settings, with youth reporting higher levels of engagement in organized afterschool settings than in any other contexts in which they spend their time.⁴ Thus, engagement is a critical feature of afterschool programming because it has a double effect—it is central not only to the positive outcomes that may come from involvement, but also to keeping youth involved over time.

What is engagement?

There has been considerable variability in how engagement in afterschool settings has been defined by both practitioners and researchers. Practitioners' conceptualization of engagement largely reflects how well a program is designed, implemented, and received by youth. Therefore, practitioners generally view engagement as a key indicator of program quality. That is, if youth are engaged in activities, the quality of programming must be high. In contrast, researchers tend to conceptualize engagement from an

individual perspective as a potential mechanism that may explain how afterschool involvement promotes better outcomes. From the researcher's perspective, engagement is conceptualized as a subjective state that varies from person to person, as a function of different activities and interactions with different individuals. These varying perspectives on engagement in part reflect the unique goals of the various parties. Practitioners place greater emphasis on having a program that youth will enjoy and come back for, whereas researchers tend to be more concerned with demonstrating if and how a program "worked" and for whom.

The most extensive conceptualizations of engagement come from research in school-based settings, where engagement is regarded as a multidimensional construct that includes behavior, emotion, and cognition. Behavioral engagement includes aspects of participation, effort, concentration, attendance, and compliance. Emotional engagement is defined in terms of positive and negative reactions to teachers, peers, and activities, as well as feelings of belonging and valuing of learning. Finally, cognitive engagement is defined as a psychological investment in learning and a willingness to go beyond the requirements of the task.⁵ Both researchers and practitioners can benefit from embracing this more differentiated conceptualization of engagement outlined in the school literature.

How is engagement assessed?

Using ERIC and Psychinfo databases, we conducted a comprehensive search of measures that have been used to assess engagement in afterschool settings serving children in grades K–12. Additionally, websites and publications by organizations providing resources for out-of-school time programs (for example, National Institute on Out-of-School Time, Harvard Family Research Project, Afterschool Alliance, and National Youth Development Information Center) were referenced for tools that assess engagement. As shown in Table 3.1, results indicate that engagement is typically assessed at either the individual or program level. In the next

Table 3.1. Methods for assessing afterschool program/organized activity engagement

<i>Individual-Level Method</i>	<i>Name/Author</i>	<i>Conceptualization</i>	<i>Operationalization</i>
Youth self-report: Survey	Akiva et al. 2013. ⁶	Concentration Challenge Use of skills Enjoyment Interest Challenge	3 items on Likert scale. Ex. "I really had to concentrate."
	Akiva et al. 2011. ⁶	Enjoyment Interest Challenge	8 items on Likert scale. Ex. "I wished I was doing something else."
	Greene et al. 2013. ⁶	Enjoyment Interest Challenge	6 items on Likert scale Adapted from the Youth Program Quality Assessment (YPQA; Smith et al. 2012).
	Grossman et al. 2007. ⁶	Concentration Challenge Psychological engagement in a service activity	Ex. "I enjoy the time I spend at this program." 3 items on Likert scale. Ex. "Is this activity challenging?"
	McGuire & Gamble 2006. ⁶	Use of talents and skills Psychological engagement in a service activity	7 items on Likert scale. Ex. "I enjoyed teaching the material?" 3 items on Likert scale. Ex. "How hard were you concentrating?"
Youth self-report: ESM	Shermoff 2010 ³ ; Shermoff & Vandell 2007. ⁸	Enjoyment Interest Concentration Concentration Importance	3 items on Likert scale Ex. "How well were you paying attention?"
	Bohnert et al. 2008. ⁸	Interest Concentration Importance	7 items on Likert scale. Ex. "Are you using your skills?"
Staff report	Vandell et al. 2005. ⁸	Intrinsic motivation (enjoyment, choice, interest) Concerted effort (challenge, skills, concentration) Importance	
	Mahoney et al. 2005. ³	Enjoyment Interest Effort	10 items on Likert scale Ex. "The child tries hard at the activity."

Table 3.1. Continued

Program-Level Method	Name/Author	Conceptualization	Operationalization
Observational tool	Cross et al. 2010. ⁹	On-task	Youth categorized as “engaged” or “unengaged” during five-minute interval. Program engagement calculated by proportion of engaged students.
	Mahoney et al. 2007. ¹⁵	See <i>PPRS next</i>	PPRS (see next) modified to a 7-point Likert scale from <i>Highly Uncharacteristic</i> to <i>Highly Characteristic</i> of program youth.
	Assessment of Afterschool Program Practices Tool—Research Version (APT-R; Miller & Surr 2005 ¹⁰ ; Grades K–8) <i>A more user-friendly self-assessment version is available (APT-Observation Version, APT-O; Tracey, Surr, & Richer. 2012.¹⁶)</i>	Are respectful of each other Are responsive to staff Display positive behavior Are relaxed Listen to and cooperate with each other Interact positively with staff On-task/participating	Six items on 4-point scale from <i>Not True</i> to <i>Very True</i> .
	After-School Activity Observation Instrument (AOI; Pechman & Marzke 2003 ¹⁰)	Interested/focused	Two items in yes/no format
	Out-of-School Time (OST) Observation Instrument (Pechman et al. 2008. ¹⁰)	On-task	One item on a 7-point Likert scale from <i>Not Evident</i> to <i>Highly Evident and Consistent</i>
	Promising Practices Rating System (PPRS; Vandell et al. 2005 ¹⁰ ; Grades K–8)	Concentration Interest	One item on 4-point scale <i>Most students are not engaged appropriately and may appear bored to Students are concentrating on activities, focused, interacting pleasantly when appropriate, and are effectively involved in the activity.</i>
	Youth Program Quality Assessment (YPQA; Smith & Hohmann 2005 ¹⁰) (Grades 4–12)	Set goals and make plans Make choices Reflect	Composite score created from average of three items rated on 5-point scale from <i>None Present</i> to <i>All Present</i> .

section, we review the most frequently used assessment techniques, outlining strengths and weaknesses of each approach.

Survey methods

One way researchers have assessed individual engagement is to ask either youth or staff to fill out surveys with a series of questions about youth's level of engagement in program activities. We identified five self-report surveys from research studies that include items about interest, enjoyment, perceptions of value, and challenge of the activity (see Table 3.1 for examples).⁶ We also found one example of a staff survey developed to assess engagement, which included questions about enjoyment, effort, and interest in academic and nonacademic activities.⁷ Self-report methods are a practical and cost-effective means of assessing engagement because they can be administered by program staff and given to large samples of youth. However, information on the validity, or whether the results obtained using the instrument actually measure what was intended and not something else, is quite limited. Additionally, there are concerns about students and staff responding in socially desirable ways. Finally, none of the survey measures included items to address all three dimensions of engagement (that is, behavioral, emotional, and cognitive) or the diversity of programs to which they may apply.

Experience sampling methods

Another way researchers have assessed individual engagement is using experience sampling methods (ESM). In this methodology, individuals are signaled intermittently throughout the day using alarm watches, beepers, and more recently mobile phones. When signaled, participants report on various dimensions of engagement, such as their effort, concentration, intrinsic motivation, perceptions of importance, and emotional state.⁸ ESM techniques are used by researchers because of the ability to collect information on variations in engagement in the moment rather than retrospectively, and across time and situations. Researchers have demonstrated the strong validity and reliability (that is, the degree to

which an instrument produces consistent results) of ESM techniques. Despite these advantages, this methodology requires a large time investment for respondents, can be costly, and may require training for practitioners to implement and utilize.

Observational measures

Program engagement has primarily been assessed with observational measures, which include global ratings of the extent to which youth appear to be engaged in the setting. In these measures, the observed level of youth's engagement has been characterized as a key component of program quality.⁹ Practitioners have tended to choose observational measures because they are more accessible. Many are available online, and some are free (see Table 3.1).¹⁰ However, our review indicates some concerns with this assessment technique. In particular, many use the term "engagement" colloquially, to refer to participation or satisfaction with the program. These measures tend to assess engagement by examining whether the youth is on task and how positively they interact with others during the activity. Additionally, these measures differ in the extent to which developers have tested the reliability and validity of the instrument.¹¹ Finally, observational measures can be burdensome for programs to administer given their labor- and time-intensive nature, and they only give a snapshot of engagement.

What features of afterschool programs are essential to engagement?

In the next section, we outline some of the features of engaging afterschool programs that have been identified in the research.

Relations with staff and peers

One of the most important features of an engaging program is the social environment. It is important that youth are in a safe environment where they feel respected and valued. Interviews with adolescents in afterschool settings reveal that many youth attend programs because they have developed supporting and trusting

relationships with the staff and perceive that the staff members care about them.¹² In a recent study of the predictors of engagement, researchers found that youth who thought that the staff was caring and competent had higher engagement.¹³ Opportunities to interact with peers in smaller groups and develop a sense of belonging are also important components of engaging environments.

Activities

The type of content and activities also impacts on youth's engagement. Several scholars have suggested that engagement will be higher in programs that provide a diversity of developmentally appropriate learning experiences and activities that are interactive and challenging. Youth should also have opportunities to learn skills that are valuable to their future. For example, a recent study found that opportunities to learn new skills, learn about jobs through activities, and learn about college were correlated with higher engagement.¹⁴ Finally, opportunities for youth to have autonomy and make meaningful decisions about program content and policies are a key component of engaging programs, and are especially important for programs that serve older youth (age 10–18).

Implications for practice

It is essential that afterschool activities complement rather than just extend the learning day. Instead of simply doing more schoolwork, programs that are most engaging provide youth with opportunities to participate in interesting and challenging activities where they can learn skills that they do not have the opportunity to learn in other settings. Middle and high school youth should also have opportunities to have input in programming and policies, as well as sharing decision-making responsibilities with adult leaders as they work to give youth a voice. Our findings also have implications for training staff. Afterschool programs should provide staff the opportunities to attend professional developments at universities and afterschool advocacy organizations about

developmentally appropriate practices and strategies to provide youth a “voice,” build a supportive social environment where youth feel like they belong, and develop and establish positive relationships with youth and other program staff. Interconnections between different programs can also be useful in developing curricula, pooling resources, and furthering professional development.

Another implication of our findings is the importance of strengthening the collaborations between practitioners and researchers to address relevant unresolved issues for program engagement. One issue is how engagement is and should be assessed. Although several instruments have been developed, there is little information about whether the existing engagement measures actually assess what they intend to (that is, validity) or are capturing some other aspect of youth’s experience in programming. In this area, both practitioners and researchers could benefit from adapting measures of engagement that have been developed for school-based settings for use in afterschool contexts. Although there are important differences between school and out-of-school contexts, school-based measures have more extensive psychometric support and include indicators of behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement.

Another important area for collaboration is on the features of engaging afterschool programs. Although researchers have identified key features of engaging contexts, there is less information about how these features are manifested in the “real world.” In addition, there is limited research on which features are most important for various subpopulations, such as different cultural groups and high-risk groups. Empirical studies testing whether these features are associated with higher engagement among diverse groups are limited. Studies of afterschool programs that differ in participant characteristics and background, program resources, the supportive or opposing community settings and features in which programs and youth are embedded (for example, what can a diverse program accomplish for youth residing in segregated neighborhoods?), and level of family support and parent engagement represent areas where a greater understanding is needed.

Finally, practitioners and researchers could benefit from more discussion of individual differences in engagement. It is still not clear if youth who get more engaged in afterschool programs differ in important ways from those who are less engaged, and whether those youth who get more engaged in activities are also the ones who are most likely to benefit from that engagement. Longitudinal studies that control for the individual, family, and demographic characteristics that underlie both engagement and positive development can begin to address this question. In sum, although considerable effort has been made to understand and measure engagement in afterschool programs by both researchers and practitioners, there is more collaborative work to be done to optimize youth's experience in out-of-school settings.

Notes

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JENNIFER A. FREDRICKS *is a professor of human development and director of the Holleran Center for Community Action and Public Policy at Connecticut College.*

AMY M. BOHNERT *is an associate professor of Clinical Psychology at Loyola University.*

KIMBERLY BURDETTE *is a doctoral student in psychology at Loyola University.*

Commentary

Dale A. Blyth

FREDRICKS, BOHNERT, AND Burdette provide an excellent review of what engagement is, why it is important, how it is measured, and the direction both practice and research need to move. Particularly important are the notions that engagement is distinct from various aspects of participation (intensity, breadth, and duration) and that it has a “double effect”—on both participation and impact.

In previous work, I have referred to development as the accumulation of experiences over time and the value of using a “diet and exercise” analogy.¹ This involves seeing development as a function of the young person’s “developmental diet” of caring people, constructive places, and challenging possibilities and the ways youth “exercise” skills through practice over time and across settings. Just as in healthy nutrition and exercise, the person’s engagement—behavioral, emotional, and cognitive—is critical. Engagement involves helping young people feel challenged, make choices, and own what they are doing. When youth are engaged, the multiplication starts. That is, the person’s engagement not only contributes to possible impact, but it also multiplies the effect of access, participation, relationships, and quality.

Engagement does this in part because as youth become engaged they are more likely to: (1) have relationships with caring people that build a sense of belonging, (2) have challenging possibilities that gradually build competence and a growing sense of mastery, and (3) reinforce their ownership of learning that builds a sense of agency or self-efficacy (an understanding that one’s own efforts matter and are important to whether and how they learn). Engagement does not just add to the equation for success, it multiplies the power of other elements.

Previous work on the meaning, impact, and ways to improve youth engagement resulted in defining four “rings of engagement” for youth: participation (that leads to connections), passion (that leads to commitment), voice (that leads to input), and collective action (that leads to shared power).² Each ring is driven by relationships and differences in approaches used that are likely to vary according to the “diet and exercise” of the program and participants therein.

Engagement has two important implications for practice. First, engagement helps our field get beyond just counting participation. It forces us to deal with behavior, emotions, and thinking in ways that are more constructive, less likely to blame disengaged youth, and actually make better use of youth workers’ competencies.

Second, understanding engagement can tell one about both program quality and the likelihood of positive impacts. Actively monitoring engagement, which unfortunately does not typically happen, can help programs think about access, participation, and quality while assuring funders that a factor needed for impact is present. Reflecting on periodic assessments of engagement can improve what is happening—enhancing access, encouraging participation, raising quality, and ultimately impact.

In the end, engagement is helpful because it helps all of us focus on what matters—those with whom youth are engaged (caring people), how youth are engaged (challenging possibilities), and the ways they are “exercising” ownership of their learning.

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DALE A. BLYTH is an extension professor and Howland Endowed Chair for Youth Leadership Development at the University of Minnesota College of Education and Human Development.