The Qualities of Excellent School-Age Care

Something Cool After School

STATE OF NEW JERSEY

For generations, children nearing the end of their school day have found their minds wandering from their classroom books and their teachers' voices. With delicious tension they have rustled in their seats and eyed the minute hand of the big round wall clock, waiting for that last mechanical *clink*, followed by the *r-r-r-ring* of the day's-end bell. Then, like Fred Flintstone surfing down his rockasaurus's back, they've dashed out of the classroom into what they consider to be their "real" lives. Riding bikes and writing poems. Playing house and playing ball. Splashing through a puddle. Diving into a pile of leaves. Making angels in the new-fallen snow. All the things they usually can't do in school.

But in recent years, economic and cultural changes have affected children. Just to make ends meet, the vast majority of two-parent households require both parents to work outside the home. Nearly half of all households with children are run by a single parent. For many children, family social structures that once created safe and constructive recreational opportunities have evaporated.

School-age care programs seek to redress these concerns. The term "school-age care" encompasses a gamut of services offered before and after school operating hours for children between ages 5 and 14. Although they may use different names—extended day, school's out, latchkey, kid's club, or after-school, to list a few—all school-age care programs seek to offer safe and secure places children can go when schools are not in session.

Some programs operate in schools, some in community centers, some in park and recreation centers, some in activity or child care centers. Some cater to children up to age 10; others provide environments specifically designed for older children. While some focus all their activities on a central theme such as the arts, athletics, or community building, others develop highly varied agendas that take into account the full range of children's interests and characteristics.

Typically, an enrolled child spends anywhere from 15 to 20 hours a week— the equivalent of two full working days—in a school-age care program. A successful after school program comes about as the result of an effective partnership of school administrators, program directors, parents, caregivers, children, and members of the local community. Success depends on recognizing the importance of helping children make

photo by Sarah E. Round

the most of this substantial block of time.

As with any partnership, success also depends on the active efforts of each partner. After school is frequently the only time some children have to relax, stretch their bodies as well as their minds, and develop productive leisure interests. To create these opportunities requires your heartfelt answers to questions such as:

• Exactly what do we wish to accomplish with our school-age program?

• Who will join us in this endeavor, and in what capacity?

• How much money will it take to do justice to our ideas?

• What about the kinds of things that money just can't buy?

• In what physical environment will children benefit most from our efforts?

• What kinds of experiences do we want to bring to children's lives?

The Technical Assistance paper seeks to frame the general considerations that make up the process of planning and implementing a successful school-age program. You need to determine your long-term goals for the program and then figure out how to get there, step-by-step. Along the way, always keep in mind who your allies and partners are and that the "best interests" of the children should prevail.

Who Is a School-Age Child?

Even when children belong to the same age group, very specific characteristics distinguish one child from another. At various times each has his or her own intellectual, abilities, physical capacities, and levels of emotional maturity. Although patterns of development do vary, a school-age child generally possesses a completely different set of interests and characteristics from a preschooler. Each has his or her own cognitive, social, physical, and emotional characteristics, (see Figure 1).

Figure 1
Characteristics of School-Age Children*

Cognitive

"Rule-bound"; may spend more time deciding and debating the rules than playing the game
Learn quickly, memorize easily
Can concentrate for increasingly long periods of time on activities that interest them
Need time and space to explore ideas, develop interests
Have lots of enthusiasm for learning, but may be turned off by school
Enjoy playing games: surprising capacity to memorize and strategize
Need to categorize and classify everything
Not particularly interested in abstract symbols or ideas
Music is a major part of their development

Social

Influenced more and more by peer groups
Often form intimate attachments to one or two best friends
Attribute increasing importance to adults other than parents
Have strong desire to make and keep friends
Develop greater sensitivity to the needs and desires of others
Desire increasing responsibility and opportunities to try out adult roles
May have strong likes and dislikes, ideas about whom they want to be with and what they are interested in doing

Physical

Have lots of energy
Like physical challenges
Need to build skills
Gain a sense of independence from physical prowess
Practice and develop new skills to build self- esteem

Emotional

Are usually resilient; get upset easily and get over it just as readily
Need to feel that adults are in control
Become increasingly self- conscious and self- critical
May have difficulty verbalizing feelings, especially difficult ones like rejection and sadness
Are very concerned with fairness and have extreme sense of justice and morality
See right and wrong as absolutes
Gain self-confidence through successful completion of concrete tasks
Gain self-esteem by being good at something; need to build skills
Tend to work out anxieties, fears, and feelings by "acting out" or withdrawing
Often honestly answer "I don't know" when asked why they did something
Need adult support, nurturing, reassurance, encouragement, and limit setting to help them feel safe and secure
Need to be valued as special, accepted as part of a group

*By definition school- age children are five (5) to fourteen (14) years of age. Since this is such a wide range, and since each child's growth and development is so individual, the characteristics listed will not necessarily describe each child.

In surveys, school-age children frequently cite recess, physical education, and lunch as their favorite times in the school day. Why? One reason is that school curricula often address only the cognitive aspect of their lives. During these nonacademic times, the other developmental characteristics finally receive some attention.

School-age children begin to develop their sense of social identity by comparing themselves to others. Being able or unable to join a group can add to or detract from the sense of security they associate with that identity. Perhaps with clothing, choice of activities, or specific behaviors, school-age children seek to gain the acceptance of those peers whom they desire as friends.

Like a preschooler, a school-age child continues to develop this sense of social identity through experiences with adults. When not immersed in television and video games, school-age children try to make sense of the world around them and attempt to figure out their place in that world. They exhibit great interest in most adults, especially those who share their gender, race, and ethnic identity. Those who demonstrate what appear to be admirable ways of coping with the world can be treasured role models.

A school-age child's first efforts at understanding an overwhelming world are generally characterized by stereotypes. One child may categorize and classify, one may test boundaries, while another will invent secret codes, all in order to define their position in that world. It's common for school-agers to spend more time arguing about whose turn it is than they do playing the game.

As the resounding success of educational computer games demonstrates, children learn most easily and have the most fun with exploratory activities that challenge them to acquire new skills. Creating opportunities for school-age children to perform real tasks with real tools helps build their sense of competency. It also reduces the frequency of the complaint "There's nothing to do around here."

Basics of Excellence in

Tips on Sharing Space

1. Purchase or build adaptable equipment: portable room dividers; storage closets; tables, chairs, cabinets, and even sofas on wheels.

2. Include setup and takedown time in the daily routine, for instance hanging pictures on the wall, putting materials out on tables, rolling out rugs, and rolling in "soft" furniture.

3. Make sure there is a definite arrangement about where each program will store equipment and supplies, who will clean the space, and the process for working out any conflicts that may arise. Regularly scheduled meetings, perhaps at the beginning and end of the school year, can help clarify issues before they arise as problems.

4. Develop "learning centers on wheels" for art, library, dramatic play, and so on. Small rugs will help establish boundaries between activity centers.

School-Age Child Care

What would you expect to see when you walk into an excellent after school program? Would you find children engrossed in a variety of projects? A sense of energy and productivity in the air? Would you expect caregivers to use respectful language and an understanding tone of voice with the children? Art, sports, science, construction, board games, creative dramatics areas, easily accessible at all times to all children?

The school-age care field has developed its own standards for quality and methods for programs to use in measuring how well they meet these standards. The National School-Age Care Alliance (NSACA) offers opportunities for school-age care programs to be eligible for national accreditation, a formal process that will validate a program's efforts to improve its service to children and families.

All programs exhibit qualities which may influence your opinion of them. What you observe about the relationship between a caregiver and a child, or the impression you get when you see an airless gymnasium or a windowless basement room are all things you can feel, see, smell, and *do something about*. So, along with learning how to meet the field's new standards for quality with a capital Q, concentrate on the down-to-earth objectives of program qualities. This is where excellence begins.

Excellent programs exhibit basic administrative and aesthetic qualities that other programs have not yet found the will or the way to finance.

• Qualified, trained, and caring staff;

• The potential for small supervised groups;

• Functionally-designed, well-lit, warm space;

• Developmentally appropriate activities.

Excellent programs also exhibit other basic qualities that have nothing to do with their budgets. In these programs:

• Children find a home away from home that offers them safety and dignity.

• Children can express themselves freely, without fear of adult punishment or ridicule.

• Children are given simple and fair rules that are firmly, consistently, yet lovingly.

1. Caregivers

Project SAFE

Morris Area Girl Scout Council Randolph, New Jersey

In the early 1980s the Morris Area Girl Scout Council responded to a need in its community for after-school care. It worked with other community groups and area churches to open a small SAC program. With assistance from the Hispanic Affairs Office, it was able to provide transportation from three area elementary schools to a local church which provided space for the program. In 1991 the local school board offered additional space for the program in one of the elementary schools, and provided transportation from the third school to one of the other sites.

The growth and success of the program are attributable to its involvement with the community and its responsiveness to the needs of the diverse parent population. Parents call the program often for assistance with family-related problems. The program has provided opportunities for parents to be involved in the daily activities and to participate in parenting workshops on a variety of topics. Involvement of the Girl Scouts has given a unique focus to the program from on-site scouting activities to the use of Girl Scout-trained field aides from local high schools and colleges. Tutoring is assisted by volunteers from local organizations such as the Retired Teachers Association. Community involvement and a sensitivity to the needs of the children and their parents make **Project SAFE** an outstanding program.

The myth is that almost anyone, if friendly, warm and breathing, can develop and carry out a good program that meets the unique, complex, individual, and group day care needs of school-age children... Children need people who are interested in, feel responsible for [sic], seeing that their day-to-day experiences take place in an environment that promotes growth and learning.

– **Docia Zavitkovsky**, "Children First: A Look at the Needs of School-Age Children." *(School-Age Child Care Programs and Issues ERIC/EECE. 1980)*

As the old saying goes, "A house does not make a home." Similarly, a multipurpose room does not make an after-school program. What really makes a program worth attending is the daily

presence of competent, dependable, well-trained caregivers.

Excellent after school programs employ only caregivers who have authentic confidence in their interpersonal abilities. These caregivers have few or no problems of self-esteem. They have no need to boss children around or shout them down. They command attention and respect not with threats, but with empathy, patience, and understanding.

The best caregivers possess other personal characteristics that set them apart from the warm-body crowd. They can make commitments. They have a talent for gentle organization. They communicate well. They accent the positive side of life. Most important, they put a premium on spontaneity and flexibility. See "The Right Staff," Technical Assistance Paper No. 4 in this series, for more about hiring and retaining excellent caregivers.

2. Indoor Facilities

While the younger children may enjoy the make-believe of *Chutes and Ladders*, you and your staff face the real-world challenges of walls, floor, and ceilings. Physical site management presents some of the most inflexible obstacles to school-age program excellence. Budget, insurance, transportation limitations, and licensing requirements can compel you to locate your program activities in school classrooms, converted closets, windowless basements, and other places where excellence will try to elude you.

By definition, an after school program is a part-time proposition. This fact leads many programs into the trade-off of sharing space. Agencies that operate their facilities on a full-time basis may not be utilizing all of their space all of the time, giving you an opportunity to insert your school-age child care services into that space. Partnering with a community center, youth-serving agency, or full-time day care center may make more desirable quarters available. See Figure 2 for basic strategies in dealing with shared spaces.

Obviously, sharing quarters also has its drawbacks. School districts that administer their own programs have a natural interest in maximizing the use of existing classrooms. However, in what amounts to temporary-use rental space, children and staff can end up feeling like intruders or unwelcomed guests. At the

outset, the lower cost of shared space can help programs get started on the road to excellence —but keep your sights set on eventually moving into areas dedicated solely to your program. Aside from saving time on setup and cleanup, children and caregivers can design and decorate dedicated space to make their after-school experience more rewarding. For a closer look at using space in school buildings, see Technical Assistance Paper No. 8 in this series.

3. Outdoor Facilities

Planning, designing, and dedicating space for excellent school-age child care involves recognizing the things that make children Some kids prefer to spend much of their afternoon indoors, some benefit from more outdoor activities, and others like it best when they can choose freely between the two.

In the event of bad weather, an indoor gym or multipurpose room can give children the chance to let loose some of their seemingly boundless energy. In neighborhoods marred by frequent street violence, conditions may call for keeping children out of open yards. The search for excellence demands that children have daily access to safe and challenging outdoor activity.

4. Schedule

A typical after school program operates Monday through Friday, from 2:30 p.m. to perhaps 6:00 p.m., or 17.5 hours a week. During school vacations it can expand to all-day service, or a full 40-hour week. That's a sizable block of time. How do you effectively divide and use that time in worthwhile ways? Creating a daily activity schedule is another part of the school-age child care challenge, (see Figure 3).

When planning this schedule, the fewer the deadlines the better. Keep your time flexible. Allow for the casual explorations and conversations that you'd expect to find in an excellent program. Establish a recurring pattern that allows for people's natural tendency to take longer than they expect. Note

Figure 3

A Daily Activity Schedule

2:30 to 3:00 PM
Arrival of children, time to talk to teachers about the school day one-on-one or in small groups. Free play with three or more activities set out, (varied daily), and access to the activity areas such as art, creative dramatics, and table games. Outdoor free play.

3:00 to 3:15 PM
Group meeting, time to make activity choices for the afternoon, share ideas and experiences.

3:15 to 3:45 PM
Snack. Depending on your philosophy (and maybe your space arrangements as well), this can be a family-style sit-down affair at small tables, or a more informal arrangement where children simply move to a central area to pick up juice and crackers as they finish with other activities.

3:45 to 4:45 PM
Small-group activities. In accordance with your schedule, the activities will vary each day. Children should be given the opportunity to make choices about what they do with their afternoon time; activities appropriate to their age and abilities build on their interests and encourage exploration of new materials and topics. Both long-term and shortterm projects should be offered; participating in a theater production will require a bigger commitment than, say, making pancakes, which will be finished (and consumed) by the end of the day.

4:45 to 5:30 PM
Cleanup and quiet activities, such as table games, puzzles, personal reading, and headset listening.

that the schedule in Figure 3 allocates time for both planned and unplanned events.

To stabilize your schedule, develop a weekly or monthly listing of optional activities and make the list available well in advance of the proposed dates. Parents and children will enjoy the preview of what's ahead, and caregivers will appreciate the advance notice so they can prepare.

Always keep in mind that everyone has to live with the schedule. To fulfill your program's role as a service business, regularly invite suggestions from children and parents. To encourage employee commitment, invite caregivers' suggestions. Also, at least once a week, site directors should meet with caregivers and children to discuss what is working well and what is not.

5. Activity Planning and Materials

Most of the time, children want to create and control their play with a minimum of adult interference or "guidance." Children play wherever they are and create games and situations out of whatever is at hand,

in spite of elaborate or no adult planning.

–Andrew Scott, "What is an Adventure Playground?" (CSAC Review, Fall 1988)

Planning a set of activities for children in school-age child care does not mean simply writing down a list of things to do and times to do them. Making that list is= only the last step. The planning process involves examining, thinking about, and realizing what any event, experience, or environment may mean to children.

For purposes of convenience or cost, group care settings frequently lead planners to flatten the potential range of experiences, to set an agenda for continuous group activity. This "herding" approach devalues both the children and their experience of the world. In the course of planning activities, the specific interests of each child deserve priority consideration. This means molding the program experience around the children's natural interests, encouraging their creativity, affording them the opportunities for both group activities and more solitary interests (see Figure 4). Note the connections

between area design and activity: different areas are arranged to afford children a variety of experiences at the same time.

Excellent school-age care creates daily opportunities for:

• choices and decision-making

• participation in personal and small group activities

• use of various manipulatives and materials

• relative privacy

• quiet relaxing activity

• noisy, vigorous activity

• structured adult-guided activities

• unstructured child-directed play

• nutritious snacks.

Themes can also weave together the many facets of excellent school-age child care. Activity planners might choose to expand on simple school-style themes such as "What's the Weather?" with daily measurements of temperature and precipitation (science),

an excursion to a local meteorological station (field trip/career exploration), hand-drawn or computer generated weather maps (graphic design), and stories and poems about big storms and beautiful days (creative writing).

Some young children may content themselves with sandboxes, building blocks, and easel painting. However, changes in information technology and social structures have lowered the age at which children can maintain interest in these pursuits. Now accustomed to channel surfing, VCRs, video games, and personal stereos, children as young as age 7 may require increasingly complex

Figure 4

Activities for School-Age Children

Creative Dramatics
A room or area stocked with costumes, puppets, and props, for activities ranging from free (and silly) play to organized productions presented at "family night." A single area may be altered weekly or monthly, serving as a store, post office, pizza parlor, fix-it shop, zoo, or school.

Nature and Science
Magnifying glasses, microscopes, ant farms, plant experiments, hamsters, magnets, and more can all be part of a science curriculum. Simple experiments that children can do themselves—such as using eyedroppers filled with food coloring to explore the properties of color and water—can be changed regularly. Nature and environmental activities can be integrated into the program with neighborhood walks, scavenger hunts, trips to state parks and conservation areas. Special projects might include gardening, a cleanup day at a nearby park, or recycling.

Creative Arts
Have materials on hand that children can explore on their own, and a separate closet or shelf of items for use in teacher-supervised activities. Paint, glue, paper, felt, material scraps, wood pieces, clay, plaster of Paris, markers, crayons, and so on, should all be available. "Recycled" items are great fun; research the resources available in your community.

Quiet and Homework Area
Stock with books of interest to the children in the program. Regular trips to the library can provide a changing collection. Comfortable furniture—a cushioned recliner, floor pillows (products of a sewing project?), beanbag chairs, a big old sofa—will add much to the creation of a soft, informal, cozy corner. Tables and chairs provide some structure for completing homework assignments. Children should be encouraged to do "peer tutoring" and have access to grown-up help when needed.

Small-Group Games
Appropriately sized tables and chairs, with easy access to a variety of games, puzzles, and manipulative materials, will be used well and frequently. It is important that materials build on children's wide range of capabilities.

Active, Large-Group Space
An indoor space, such as a gym, should be available to the program on a regular basis. School- age children need sufficient outdoor space as well, preferably with climbing equipment, basketball hoops, and areas for large-group games. School-age children love active group games, from the old standbys, such as kickball and freeze tag, to "new games," a form of cooperative sports (see Further Readings).

Special Events
Songfests, backwards day, multicultural festivals, crazy Olympics, treasure hunts, drama and dance performances, and spaghetti dinners are all possibilities for activities that children can help plan and carry out.

Other Areas
Use of a kitchen is a real boon to any program, as cooking is one of school-age children's most popular pastimes. A "life skills" area might include cooking, as well as career exploration, health and safety education, and activities focused on current events. If the program is in school, access to the library, art room, and other areas can expand its horizons. Programs located in or near high schools, community recreation centers, or youth- serving locations may even be able to add a swimming pool to the mix.

activities to sustain their interest. For more about activity planning for older children, see "The Wonder Years", Technical Assistance Paper No. 7 in this series.

6. Involvement in the Real World

Like **Project Safe** in Dover, New Jersey, excellent school-age child care helps children become involved with what's really going on in the world. The best programs use their primary site not as a locked facility but as a base of operations, a meeting place for children and for those who care about them, an organized hub of interaction between the children and the community at large. Programs that reach out to their community enjoy many benefits that more isolated programs do not. These benefits range from donations of books, games, and toys to the type of positive publicity that encourages outside financial support, direct parent participation, caregiver commitment, and volunteer assistance.

No matter what type of location, budget, or transportation scheme your program has, you can always find a way to get up and out into the world. In addition to parks, destinations such as libraries, non-for-profit play centers, museums, pools, and pick-your-own fruit farms frequently lie within walking or short driving distance of various program-based sites.

In your role as a school-age program administrator, participation in the real world means creative collaboration with other child care and human service programs. In one city, an after-school program joined with three local day care centers to write a funding proposal to the local arts council. The council approved the joint proposal, making it possible for children to enjoy visits by a puppeteer, a musician, a dancer, a craftsperson, a storyteller, and a kite maker. In some neighborhoods where the real world can be a rather ugly sight, a school-age program may have an even more protective purpose than most. Living in a real world of gang activity obviously requires a different approach. It means setting aside specific times during the week to discuss children's feelings about lost friends and loved ones. It means appropriate collaborations with human service agencies to develop special training in intervention techniques for caregivers. It also means making the program's policies responsive to radical challenges in the local situation. Remember that any school-age child care program can achieve excellence when it provides children with safe opportunities to learn about life.

7. Direct Parent Participation

Time is money. Everyone's in a hurry, and there's always another destination to reach. Because of the current nature of urban society, service workers often find it difficult to establish personal relations with their clients. When so many of your clients are working parents trying to meet both job and family responsibilities, establishing direct personal relations is not easy. In places where group transportation or busing makes it unnecessary for parents to stop by at the end of the day, face-to-face contact may never take place.

When parents enroll their children in school-age care, they enter into a personal contract with you and the other parents. They agree to abide by your registration procedures, your health regulations, and your payment or voucher schedule. For the program to function adequately as a service to all the children, it is vital to obtain parents' cooperation in these bottom-line matters.

However, if excellence is what you're after, you don't want parents thinking that their involvement begins and ends with the minimum. What finally distinguishes excellent after school programs from a run-ofthe-mill program is the degree to which parents participate in planning, design, and activities. This converts your service from a substitute for parental care into an extension of parental care. To achieve this, you'll welcome and even encourage more direct parent participation. To try to get parents more involved, you can:

• prepare and distribute biweekly or monthly newsletters;

• encourage parents to sit on the program's board of directors or parent advisory council;

• maintain a bulletin board with notices and reminders for parents;

• encourage parent visits at any time, and send out special invitations for field trips and events;

• sponsor parent-teacher conferences once or twice a year;

• schedule family-oriented events, such as picnics, camping trips, or dramatic presentations by the children;

• regularly schedule general get-together for parents;

• invite parents with appropriate skills and experiences to share them with the children as a scheduled activity;

• go on an annual camping trip.

— Adapted from Shelly Bokman, "Encouraging Parent Participation in School-Age Programs," (School-Age NOTES, March/April 1984)

Further Readings

Allen, Judy, et al. 1992. **Cultural Awareness for Children.** Menlo Park, Calif.: Addison-Wesley.

Bergman, Abby Barry, and William Greene. **The Complete School-Age Child Care Resource Kit: Practical Guidelines, Materials and Activities for Implementing a Quality SACC Program.** Available from Redleaf Press, 450 N. Syndicate Suite 5, St.Paul, MN 55104-4125.

Bergstorm, Joan M. **School's Out - Now What?** 1990. Berkeley, Calif.: Ten Speed Press.

Blakely, Barbara, et al. **Activities for School-Age Child Care, rev.ed.** 1991. Washington, D.C.: National Association for the Education of Young Children. Available from NAEYC, 1834 Connecticut Ave., N.W., Washington, DC 20009-5786.

Cech, Maureen. **Globalchild, Multi-Cultural Resources for Young Children.** 1991. Menlo Park, CA: Addison-Wesley.

Gestwicki, Carol. **Developmentally Appropriate Practice: Curriculum and Development in Early Education.** Available from Redleaf Press, 450 N. Syndicate Suite 5, St. Paul, MN 55104-4125.

Gregson, Bob. **Take Part in Art.** 1991. Carthage, Ill.: Fearon Teacher Aids.

Haas-Foletta, Karen, and Michele Cogley. **School-Age Ideas and Activities for After School Programs**. 1990. Nashville,Tenn.: School-Age NOTES.

Hopkins, Susan, and Jeffrey Winter. **Discover the World: Empowering Children to Value Themselves, Others, and the Earth.** 1990. Philadelphia, Penn.: New Society Publishers.

Koralek, Derry, et al. **Caring for Children in School-Age Programs.** 1995. Washington, D.C.: Teaching Strategies. Available from Gryphon House, P.O. Box 207, Beltsville, MD 20704-0207.

Lewis, Barbara. **The Kid's Guide to Service Projects: Over 500 Service Ideas for Young People Who Want to Make a Difference.** Available from Redleaf Press, 450 N. Syndicate Suite 5, St. Paul, MN 55104-4125.

Neugebauer, Roger, ed. **Child Care Information Exchange.** P.O. Box 2890, Redmond, WA 98073.

Scofield, Richard. **School-Age NOTES.** A bimonthly publication available from P.O. Box 40205, Nashville, TN 37204.

York, Stacey. **Roots and Wings: Affirming Culture in Early Childhood Programs.** 1991. St. Paul, Minn.: Redleaf Press.