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# The Effects of Homework Programs and After-School Activities on School Success

*The role of homework needs to be considered within the context of the broader developmental needs of children. This article focuses on how children spend their time after school and how homework, as well as other activities, can contribute to school success. Children differ in their after-school experiences, from “latchkey” children who lack supervision and structure, to the overextended child engaged in multiple extracurricular activities with little time for unstructured play. The authors summarize research on the impact of after-school activities—including homework programs—on school performance and make recommendations with regard to best practices for children who differ in their resources, abilities, and interests. Balancing homework with other aspects of the child’s home life to promote positive developmental outcomes is recommended.*

**N**ATIONAL CONCERNS HAVE BEEN raised about the number of children who do not have supervised activities after school. The U.S. Department of Justice (1999) reported that the peak time

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for juvenile crime is between 3:00 and 7:00 p.m. on school days, the period after school until parents typically return from work. The results of the *Juvenile Offenders and Victims: 1999 National Report* suggest that after-school programs have greater potential for reducing juvenile crime than imposition of a juvenile curfew.

Structured after-school activities have also been associated with higher educational outcomes. Jordan and Nettles (2000), in their analysis of data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study of 1988, found that student participation in structured activities, religious activities, and time with adults during 10th grade had a significant positive impact on educational outcomes for those same students in 12th grade. Conversely, students who spent more unstructured time (e.g., hanging out with peers) were at greater risk of negative educational outcomes. The authors provide a model reflecting that in addition to student characteristics and factors inherent in the school context, the investments students make during their off hours in themselves and in their community affects their investment in schooling and, consequently, their performance in school. It is important to note that the extracurricular activities examined in the study were broad-based, and did not specifically include homework assistance programs.

Clearly, how children and adolescents spend their time after school is a critical determinant of

both school and societal outcomes. The impact of after-school homework assistance programs will be examined next. The strengths and weaknesses of these types of programs relative to alternative after-school activities will also be considered.

### **Review of Research on After-School Academic Assistance Programs**

Cosden, Morrison, Albanese, and Macias (2001a) summarized the outcomes of 10 studies on structured after-school programs that offered students assistance with homework and other academic needs. Nearly all of the studies focused on children considered at risk for school failure as a result of low income, limited familial resources, and/or poor grades. Further, these after-school programs offered a broad range of activities in addition to academic support (Beck, 1999; Halpern, 1992; Posner & Vandell, 1999). While the nature of the academic support varied, each program provided children with structure and adult contact. The full impact of these programs on the student's academic performance appeared to be mediated by other child and teacher factors, such as increases in the child's self-esteem and school bonding and changes in teacher perceptions regarding the effort and capabilities of the student.

Both Beck (1999) and Halpern (1992) conducted qualitative evaluations of the dynamics of large, urban after-school programs. Beck studied a program that served youth from kindergarten through 12th grade. The author reported that the factors integral to the program's success were the provision of a structured time and location for doing homework and instructional support. Beck suggested that academic outcomes of this program were mediated by changes in the student's self-confidence as well as changes in teacher perceptions of the student's efforts. Halpern conducted a qualitative evaluation of a program that provided after-school homework assistance to younger children (5-12 years old). Similar to Beck, Halpern found that participation gave students greater confidence in their abilities and provided an opportunity to develop positive, school-related, adult attachments. Although the findings of these two studies are descriptive and do not identify causal relationships between homework completion and

academic performance, they suggest that homework completion can affect students' perceptions of themselves and teachers' expectations of students in meaningful ways.

In their study of 400 elementary school children in several different after-school programs, Ross, Saavedra, Shur, Winters, and Felner (1992) provide support for using these programs to build self-esteem, while also finding that self-esteem can be a mediator of academic performance. Participation in an after-school program designed to build self-esteem had positive effects on standardized test scores in math and reading, while receiving extended school time to complete homework did not have the same positive effects on self-esteem or achievement. These findings strengthen the idea that after-school academic support does the greatest good when it enhances the students' perceptions that they can be successful at school.

Several other studies (e.g., Morrison, Storino, Robertson, Weissglass, & Dondero, 2000; Tucker et al., 1995) have found that after-school academic tutoring or homework assistance may not result in an improvement in academic performance, but, rather, prevent a decline in performance that is evidenced by many at-risk youth. Morrison et al. (2000) studied 350 at-risk students, half of whom participated in an after-school program that provided homework assistance, tutoring, and cultural enrichment activities. They found after 1 year that students in the program maintained their initial levels of school bonding and teacher ratings of student behavior, while a matched cohort of students who did not participate in the program showed decreases on these measures over the same period of time. Tucker et al. (1995) evaluated an after-school tutoring program serving low-income African American students. After 2 years, participants did not show significant increases in grades, but students who were not in the program showed a significant grade decrease. Together, these studies indicate that after-school academic support may play a protective role by helping to prevent a loss of school engagement even if it doesn't result in higher levels of functioning.

In summary, most of the evaluated after-school programs that addressed academic needs were designed to serve at-risk youth. These programs served

a protective role by helping students maintain their academic standing while some of their peers began to fail. Further, these programs were typically broad-based, designed to promote self-esteem and enhance school bonding and motivation. The Gevirtz Homework Project, reviewed next, was designed to assess the impact of after-school homework assistance on a wider population of students.

### **The Gevirtz Homework Project**

The Gevirtz Homework Project (Cosden, Morrison, Albanese, & Macias, 2001b) differed from other previously reviewed after-school assistance programs in that it included students who were not at risk for school failure. All fourth-grade students in three participating schools were engaged in the project, with students randomly assigned to treatment (Homework Project) and non-treatment after their stratification into high, medium, and low achievement groups at school. Students were also stratified on the basis of ethnicity and English proficiency, with equal numbers assigned to the homework project and to the non-treatment control group. The program was designed to provide students with homework assistance and to help them learn study skills. Students attended the program 2-3 times a week over a period of 3 years (Grades 4-6), although attrition and partial attendance yielded a range in the "dosage" of treatment actually received. All students in the Homework Project and the non-treatment control group were assessed at the beginning and end of each grade. Measures included students' ratings of their perceptions of school belonging, teacher ratings of student behavior, student grades, and standardized test scores from the Stanford Achievement Test (SAT-9).

There were no overall differences between the treatment and control groups at the end of the study. However, the project had a positive impact on students who were English language learners. At the end of sixth grade, teachers rated English language learner participants in the homework project higher in academic effort and study skills than English language learners in the control group. This was not the case for students who were proficient in English. That is, students with English proficiency in the treatment and control groups had similar teacher ratings and academic outcomes at

the end of the 3-year project. Further, there was higher overall attrition from the treatment group for English proficient students.

These findings were interpreted in terms of the resources available to students to help them with their work. For example, families who did not speak English were less able to help their children with their homework and had fewer outside resources available to them. While this was the case for a majority of the children lacking English proficiency in the program, there are other instances and reasons that parents do not provide the homework assistance their children need. Thus, after-school homework programs may help children whose parents cannot or will not help. However, as discussed later, separating parents from their children's homework may have adverse outcomes in the long term.

This study also attempted to identify those aspects of the program specifically associated with academic achievement. The final analysis indicated that the level of students' program attendance in the fourth grade was a significant predictor of their academic outcomes in sixth grade, more so than was total attendance over the course of the Homework Project. Path analysis found a significant relationship between homework attendance in fourth grade and study skills, which in turn affected homework completion and reading and math achievement in sixth grade. It appears that regular attendance in the Homework Project in fourth grade helped students develop study skills, which they were able to utilize in later years. This was supported by student interviews conducted as part of the process evaluation (Brown & Herry, 2001). In particular, the investigators found that students who benefited the most from the Project were those who learned to do homework right after coming home from school, while children who benefited least did not. For example, one child stated, "Most of the time I start my homework right away (after school). I didn't do this in third grade. I guess I got in the habit from the Homework Project" (p. 8).

### **After-School Activities and School Achievement**

Although after-school homework programs appear to benefit children who are at risk for school

failure, there are several other factors that need to be considered in evaluating their impact. As noted, children spend their time after school in many different ways and with a significant range in supervision. While after-school homework programs provide structure and supervision, as well as academic assistance, there are other types of extracurricular activities that may benefit children and that may be unavailable if they attend homework programs.

Studies have shown that involvement in extracurricular activities is associated with school engagement and achievement (Cooper, Valentine, Nye, & Lindsey, 1999; Gerber, 1996; Jordan, 2000; Mahoney & Cairns, 1997). These studies typically assess involvement in non-academic activities, most of which occur after school hours. Rather than divert students from meeting their academic goals, studies find that students engaged in extracurricular activities—including sports, service clubs, and art activities—are less likely to drop out (Mahoney & Cairns, 1997) and more likely to have higher academic achievement (Gerber, 1996). Of particular importance, students at risk for school failure appear to benefit even more from participation in extracurricular activities than do children who are normal achievers. Most researchers believe that involvement in extracurricular activities has an indirect impact on achievement by increasing connectedness to the school and by helping to build student strengths, thereby increasing self-esteem and positive social networks. Mahoney and Cairns (1997) note that while remedial academic programs “focus on the deficits of students,” involvement in high interest, non-academic activities “provides a gateway into conventional social networks . . . through the maintenance and enhancement of positive characteristics of the individual that strengthen the student-school connection” (p. 248). One caveat is that school-based activities tend to be more associated with school connectedness than are community-based activities or employment. Further, there is a curvilinear relationship between extracurricular activities, such that levels of outside activity can be too high to allow students to also focus on their schoolwork.

These findings suggest that extracurricular activities can benefit student achievement, although this is not a black and white issue. For example,

while “no play” rules that prohibit students with low GPAs from participating in extracurricular activities may provide a needed incentive to some students, in other instances this rule may increase the student’s risk for school failure. Educators need to be concerned that after-school homework programs do not replace other non-academic extracurricular activities because these activities may also promote student resilience. Activities should enhance student engagement to the school while allowing time for homework to occur.

The following vignette describes how an after-school sports program played a positive influence in the life of a student who was experiencing distress at home and starting to fail at school.

Stephanie was a 14-year-old eighth grader. Throughout her early school years, her teachers described her as a good student. During fourth grade, Stephanie’s parents separated and she witnessed a lot of conflict in the home. Stephanie’s grades began to slip and her teacher commented that Stephanie was preoccupied with the events occurring in her home life.

In sixth grade her grades continued to plummet. In seventh grade, her brother suggested she become involved in sports. Stephanie enjoyed basketball, and she became the captain of the seventh-grade basketball team. At the same time her grades began to improve. When Stephanie was asked what made seventh grade different from sixth grade, she answered, “playing basketball and being the team captain.” She indicated that she plans to continue to play basketball because it has been a positive influence in her life and it gives her an outlet in which to channel some of the negative energy she was experiencing within her home life. As a result of her desire to engage in this sport, she made a conscious effort not to let her family life interfere with her schoolwork.

### **Parental Involvement**

Another concern about after-school homework programs is that they are likely to reduce parental involvement in the homework process. This has been viewed as both an asset and a deficit to this model. On the positive side, parents who are poorly educated, do not speak English, or are not familiar with the American educational system may find it difficult to assist their children with their schoolwork. Further, parents with limited resources (e.g., low-income single parents) may find it easier to have the schools supervise their children’s

after-school work. In their analysis of a national survey, Shumow and Miller (2001) found that parents who were high school graduates were more likely than parents who were not graduates to help their children with homework. In a review of more than 50 studies on parent involvement (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001), parents who were higher in their perceptions of self-efficacy were more likely to help their children with homework. It is clear that parents of children with fewer at-risk factors were more likely to be involved in their children's homework.

Studies find that parents of all educational backgrounds may be stressed by their children's homework demands. Several examples of this were noted in parent interviews conducted for the Gevirtz Homework Project (Cosden et al., 2001b). As one parent stated, "We have not had arguments about homework since he started the project . . . it brought peace of mind to our evenings" (p. 11). Similarly, another parent noted, "The project was a wonderful asset . . . because it gave a clear time and place for our son to do homework, (then) he had more time to play and participate in family related things" (p. 11).

However, studies also show that parental involvement in homework is important, not just because it provides immediate assistance to students, but because this involvement models positive attitudes and study skills needed to succeed in school (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001). Parents make particularly strong models because children see their parents as both competent and similar to them. Morrison et al. (2000) found that parent attendance at required parent meetings for one after-school homework program was positively related to student bonding to their school and to perceptions that their parents were actively involved in their supervision. The results demonstrated that parental involvement at school was seen as an important symbol for students about the importance of school activities and educational achievement. The following vignette from that program describes a situation that is indicative of the complex give and take between after-school activity programs that assist with homework and parents' struggle in supporting their child's education.

H.P. is a sixth grader at an elementary school. He lives with his parents and two younger sisters. His

parents, both immigrants from Mexico, are monolingual Spanish-speaking and have limited formal education; each completed only 4 years of schooling.

H.P. participates in an after-school activity program that offers homework assistance. His mother reports that it has become almost impossible to provide her son with homework assistance since the school discontinued their bilingual education program and homework assignments were no longer sent home with instructions in both Spanish and English. However, his parents have established a home environment that fosters a commitment to education. They designated a time and space for H.P. to do his homework, and they often talked to him about the benefits of obtaining an education and the importance of taking personal responsibility for that education.

Can working with other adults in an after-school program help children the same ways as working with their parents? Future studies will need to explore the relationships between adults who work in after-school programs and their students, and the impact this may have on program outcomes.

After-school activities, including those that support homework assistance, can have a positive or negative impact on students, depending on the context in which they are experienced. One way of viewing the impact of after-school activities is to apply a risk and resilience framework to them. Under certain circumstances after-school programs may present risks (detract from positive growth and development), while under others they may provide protective influences (prevent students who are at risk for negative outcomes from experiencing those outcomes). Table 1 provides examples of the risk and protective influences of after-school activity programs in general, and of homework programs specifically.

## Conclusion

After-school homework programs can provide students with structure, supervision, academic assistance, and the opportunity to learn study skills. At their best, participation in after-school homework programs can help students maintain their academic standing, feel more bonded to their school, reduce family stress, and develop attitudes and skills that would facilitate their success in school after the program is over. However, after-school homework programs can also interfere with other, non-academic activities that promote student bonding

**Table 1**  
**Risk and Protective Factors Associated with Participation in**  
**After-School Extracurricular Activities and Homework Programs**

<b>After-School Activities</b>	
<b>Risk</b>	<b>Protective</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Extracurricular activities can interfere with homework completion.</li> <li>• Participation in too many extracurricular activities detracts from academic work.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some after-school activities provide opportunities for parent involvement.</li> <li>• After-school activities support student talents in nonacademic arenas.</li> <li>• Student is connected to positive peer group through school-sponsored activities.</li> <li>• Academic minimum requirements to participate in nonacademic activities can motivate students to achieve.</li> <li>• After-school activities provide supervision when parents are working.</li> </ul>
<b>After-School Homework Programs</b>	
<b>Risk</b>	<b>Protective</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Taking parents out of the homework “loop” may reduce parental opportunities to communicate with child about school.</li> <li>• Homework support may not be coordinated with classroom teachers.</li> <li>• Required participation in homework activities after school may prevent participation in other activities that would benefit student bonding to peers and school.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Homework assistance may not be available at home.</li> <li>• Homework support at school relieves stress at home.</li> <li>• Students in homework programs see other students studying; norm of academic achievement is reinforced.</li> <li>• Early training in after-school homework programs may establish good study habits.</li> <li>• Student is better able to participate in class with homework support.</li> </ul>

to the school and the community and run the risk of reducing parental involvement in the schooling process. Finally, as is always the case, the help provided by these programs will be limited by the quality of the homework students receive, as well as the integration of these programs with the regular teachers.

As Gatto (2001) wrote in his book on teaching in America, “schooling is not education” (p. 49). After-school homework programs can provide students with the support they need to do well in school, but they should do so in ways that do not detract from the students’ opportunities to become involved in family and community activities.

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