



# Promoting Positive Behavior in Out-of-School Time Programs

## *Promising Practices*

*Based on findings from the Afterschool Access Project*



## About the Afterschool Access Project

The Afterschool Access for All Project is a partnership between BOSTnet, Program in Education, Afterschool, & Resiliency (PEAR), and Massachusetts Afterschool Partnership (MAP) and is funded by Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care (EEC). We've found that many School Age Child Care programs struggle with behavior management often do not view behavior management as a program wide, holistic, positive prevention model but rather as interventions for youth who are “at-risk”.

Afterschool Access is based on the needs of afterschool programs to more effectively deal with behavior issues in a positive manner, thereby, reducing their expulsion and discipline intervention rates. There are many different approaches to promoting positive behavior, including Positive Behavior Support (PBS or PBIS), but currently no positive behavior models exist specifically for afterschool programs. The goals of Afterschool Access are to (1) reduce the rate of expulsions due to behavior in SACC programs in 4 different regions, (2) help programs create positive behavior management plans, and (3) create tools and strategies that can help all SACC programs to implement positive behavior strategies.

In it's first year, the Afterschool Access Project worked with 16 after school programs serving over 1500 children ages 5-13. These programs were:

- For Kids Only, Inc. in Revere and Winthrop
- Brockton 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers at the Arnone and Raymond Schools
- YMCA of Greater Lynn at Lynn and Peabody
- Cambridge Agenda for Children: Art Center; Margaret Fuller Neiborhood House ASP; Windsor Street Boys and Girls Club; Cambridge Community Center
- Little People's College of New Bedford Church Street and Dartmouth Street sites
- YMCA of Greater Boston sites: Mason School SACC; Sumner School SACC; Guild School SACC; and Dorchester Branch on-site SACC

These programs benefited training from BOSTnet and from a total of 1000 hours of on-site observations and coaching from four behavior health organizations:

- Judge Baker Children's Center
- The May Institute
- North Shore Arc
- Wediko Children's Services

## Introduction

Below you will find five of promising practices that Build the Out-of-School Time Network (BOSTnet), observed during the first year of the Afterschool Access Project. These five practices represent common and universal strategies that can have an immediate and practical impact on out-of-school time (OST) programs. BOSTnet hopes to continue the Afterschool Access Project with wider audiences and be able to create a more in depth promising practices as greater variety of OST programs participate and BOSTnet is able to observe long-term impacts.

Each promising practice in this guide has a description of what the practice means and a few real-life examples that can guide you through how to implement the practice. We conclude with perhaps the most important practice that will help your program develop the capacity to create a lasting and growing positive behavior strategy.

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## Promising Practices

### **P1: Staff must be engaged with and available for youth during activities**

Children and youth want and need attention from adults. In the absence of positive attention, some children and youth might engage in inappropriate behavior to gain negative attention from adults. This feeds the need for attention, even though it is negative. An out-of-school time environment does not always allow for enough positive attention from adults. Most staff feel that it is impossible to give one-on-one attention to children and youth when there are anywhere between 10 and 20 children/youth and only one staff.

There are, however, some ways that staff can interact and engage with children and youth without sacrificing attention to the entire group. Awareness is critical. Staff must make the effort to acknowledge different children and youth through out the activity and be a part of the activity that youth are doing. This is achieved through sitting with youth, doing the same activity as children/youth, rotating between groups, and making eye contact to acknowledge the achievements of most children/youth through out the activity.

#### ***Examples:***

Here are some examples of youth engagement from several after school programs who were involved in the first year of the Afterschool Access Project:

#### **Project/Activity Time:**

During an arts/crafts project where children were using clay at two different tables, the teacher of the class would sit at one table with the children and use clay herself. She would constantly look at what the children at both tables were creating, and try to get the attention of the children at the second table by calling them by name to compliment them on their creations. She did the same thing at the table that she was sitting at. Half way through the activity, she switched tables and continued the same interaction. She was aware of what everyone was doing around her and made contact with children through out the activity, by sitting with them, complementing them and making eye contact with them.

#### Snack/Meal Time:

During snack time, the staff in charge of snack would rotate through the tables, sitting for a short time with each group, engaging them in conversation, and listening to their stories and events of the day. He would acknowledge if any children wanted more snack, serve them, and then return to the different groups. The staff member made sure that he sat with every group at least once during the snack time. By being attentive and engaged with the kids, the staff member reduced the tendency of children getting out of their chairs and running around. This created a more relaxed environment and allowed the children to enjoy their time with the staff member, eliminating the need to compete for attention by getting out of their chairs or creating chaos.

#### Free/Gym Time:

During free time, two of the three program leaders lead activities on the playground for two groups of children. The other program leader engages with children that have chosen to participate in their own activities, whether in groups or by themselves. The program leaders will switch between groups once in a while depending on the different activities. All three program leaders make sure that they are interacting with children. Before adopting this practice, staff would cluster together and use free time to talk, leading to many incidents of pushing, shoving, and other negative behavior by some children. With an engaged and interactive staff, the behavior of children greatly improved and rates of incidents has been reduced dramatically.

## **P<sub>2</sub>: Positive Reinforcement should be more prevalent than Corrective Action**

When children misbehave, adults usually tell them to stop doing the negative action or the adult punishes the child for their behavior. This is usually referred to as corrective action and is the most common adult response to inappropriate behavior. However, one of the quickest ways to reduce negative behavior and increase positive behavior is through positive reinforcement. Positive reinforcement is the use of praise for the appropriate or correct behavior. According to the Positive Behavior Support (PBS) model, a 4:1 ration of positive reinforcement to corrective action creates the quickest results in reducing negative behavior.

Positive reinforcement does not have to be directed at a specific child. It can be directed towards a group to encourage appropriate behavior and to set the standard that you want all the other children to achieve. Positive reinforcement can be done in the open, or it can be done discretely.

***Examples:***

Here are some examples of positive reinforcement that was done by several after school programs during the first year of Afterschool Access Project:

Transition:

At the end of an outdoor activity the two group leaders ask all the children and youth in the group to line up before moving inside to make sure everyone is present. As children start to line up some of them start to goof around, talk and not get in line. Instead of correcting the action of the children that are not listening, the group leaders start praising the ones who are lined up and following directions. This approach catches the children's attention and they start lining up, asking the group leaders to recognize their ability to follow direction. These simple uses of positive reinforcement quiets the whole group and gets everyone to line up and pay attention. The leaders praise everyone for following directions and then move everyone inside.

General Programming:

Some programs adopted the practice of catching kids being good. Using cards or points, staff started rewarding children when they saw them follow directions, complete an assignment, show leadership or act kindly. These cards/points are redeemed for prizes, such as extra computer time, extra free time, special one-on-one time with the teacher, and other fun activities. In some programs, there was no prize attached to the technique. Being recognized for good behavior was a reward itself.

**P<sub>3</sub>: Programs should have a single set of 4-6 general, positively stated rules for the entire program that are enforced consistently through all activities and classrooms**

In many schools and after school programs there is a long list of rules, usually consisting of "no running" or "no chewing gum," that are deemed inappropriate. These rules are generally stated in the negative. In addition, many children and youth find that rules vary from teacher to teacher and often one set of rules contradicts another set of rules. This confuses children and makes it difficult for them to understand exactly what is expected of them within a particular environment.

A set of 4-6 general rules usually covers most after school program needs. Every rule can have examples stated in a positive way that change per program or activity, but general rules state

broad program wide expectations that usually apply to key areas of the program such as: Transitions, Compliance, Preparation, Timeliness, etc. These general rules can apply to all aspects of the program. What will change are the examples for these rules based on the activity.

***Example:***

Here is one example of a general rule that was done by one after school program during the first year of Afterschool Access Project:

Same Rule, Different Activity:

A program has as one of their rules: “Come on time and be prepared to participate.” This rule will hold for children regardless of the activity. During homework time it means coming with their book bags, pencils and erasers, and the day’s homework assignment(s) at 3:30 pm to the homework room. For Gym time, they know that this same rule means that they need to come in either shorts or sweats and gym shoes at 2:30 pm and be ready to play the games of the day. When children understand what is expected of them because it has been communicated clearly and enforced consistently, they are better able to make good decisions.

**P 4: Staff must take the time to teach children/youth the program rules**

The biggest misconception around rules is that just telling youth the rules and then posting them on the wall will be enough of a reminder. Such tactics do not address the major need of most children/youth to understand why there are such rules, how they should abide by the rules, and what is and is not exempt from the rules. Children and youth have different sets of rules that they go by on a daily basis, from home to school to their peer groups to their after school program. The assumption that children and youth should know how to behave in a program leads to many frustrating moments and wasted learning time. It is up to the afterschool program to teach the program’s behavior expectations. Rules are just the guidelines for these behaviors and teachers must take the time to teach the behavior expectations are for each rule.

Most approaches use activities or games to teach the rules and behavior expectations. Some programs incorporated the teaching of rules in day-to-day activities. The purpose is to insure that children and youth have learned the rules and behavior expectations, decreasing testing of the rules, and getting rid of any grey area in the behavior expectations. Programs should think of ways that they can teach the rules and behavior expectations through fun activities and design several activities that teachers can choose from and implement in their schedule of activities with the children/youth.

***Example:***

Here is one example of teaching rules to children that was done by an after school program during the first year of Afterschool Access project:

### Rules Jeopardy Game:

One program runs Friday Jeopardy Parties. This is a short game of about 20 minutes that engages children/youth of either a classroom or several classrooms of the same age groups in answering questions based on behavior expectations and rules. The children/youth really seem to enjoy this game and the winner gets a small prize such as stickers or pencils.

## **P 5: Transitions must be limited and structured**

When out-of-school time programs are asked when they see the most behavioral challenges, the majority put transition time at the top. Transition time is usually the time between two activities, and usually means a change of classroom or a change of atmosphere (snack is put away and puzzles are brought out). Transitions happen all the time, and in most cases, transitions are not looked at as programming time, but rather something that happens between programs. This view translates into unstructured transitions, which coupled with lengthy waiting time, equals boredom and behavioral outbursts by children and youth.

Programs need to look at transitions as another activity in their schedule and plan for and create a structured activity for transitions. When long (more than a few minutes) transitions need to happen, activities need to be planned so the children and youth are not just sitting or standing around. Programs should also look at what transitions are unnecessary and can be eliminated. In some instances, certain transitions can be eliminated and its purpose can be redirected to another aspect of the program, thus reducing the potential for boredom and chaos that is sometimes created by having too many transitions.

### ***Examples:***

Here are some examples of dealing with transitions that were done by several after school programs during the first year of Afterschool Access project:

### Eliminating Unnecessary Transitions:

An after school program housed in an elementary school had children come into the program and go directly into study or reading time. After the study and reading time was finished at 4 pm, the program transitioned all of their youth (a large number) into the large school cafeteria to announce the activities for the rest of the day. In this transitional moment, many of the students were loud, acted out, and it was very difficult for the staff to engage the students. As the year went on, the challenges increased during this activity review time. With some analysis and discussion, the program eliminated this transition time and instead let the children know what activities were planned when they signed in and during their homework time.

### Reducing Transitions:

A large after school program in a multi floor organization had for years performed two massive transitions of taking about 50 –70 children from the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor to a large, partially separated basement room to do homework. This was the hardest part of the day and provided the most headaches for staff. The transition from the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor to the basement created so much energy that it was hard for the children to calm down and refocus for homework. Also, just getting 50 – 70 children lined up and moving together took way too much time. After many program adjustment and experimentation, the staff and director agreed that homework time could be in each classroom or during each activity. The director made sure that every room, except for the gym, had a designated quiet area with all the necessary equipment for doing homework, such as pencils, paper, calculator, etc. Children chose when and where they wanted to do homework and there was always a staff person available to help them with homework. This change in approach to homework was communicated to all parents. The director wanted to make sure that parents understood that the Afterschool program was not going to do a separate time for homework and that the children were allowed to choose where and when they did homework. Although there was some fear that parents might object, the majority of responses from the parents were very positive and children still completed their homework. This eliminated and reduced a major transition headache. The downstairs room was developed into a computer room and activity room, and smaller groups of children were transitioned down for computer and activities.

#### Providing activities during long transitions periods:

In one after school program, staff had children line up against a wall while they setup between activities. This would usually take about 10 minutes, leaving a lot of time for disturbances and boredom. Because the disturbances would take staff time for reprimands, the transition would sometimes go for 20 minutes or more. After reviewing what was not working with this transition period and brainstorming ways to reduce disturbances, staff decided to turn the 10 minute transition into a choice activity time. During the transition, instead of being lined up against the wall, the children had a choice of picking between playing board games, having quiet reading time, or playing on two computers in the room for 10 minutes while staff changed over the room for the next activity. Now the transition is an actual activity, the children line up, staff ask who wants to read, those who raise their hands go and select the books that they want to read and sit in a comfortable part of the room reading, those who want to play with board games select the games they want and go to another end of the room to play, and the children who want to play on the computer sign up and play on the computer. Staff monitor while getting ready for the next activity and the level of behavioral challenges has dropped dramatically.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, programs should remember the most important promising practice in promoting positive behavior, and that is taking the time to observe, talk about, and try different approaches to creating a positive environment until you get the result you want.

The successes outlined above happened because program directors took the time to observe their staff, to talk about challenges and successes at staff meeting, engaged staff in assessing the programs approach to behavioral challenges, and created and implemented action plans. This process was repeated over again to see if the action plans have worked, and to create new strategies when the action plan had not worked.

This continuous evaluation and improvement strategy is crucial. As one after school program noted, programs deal with behavior from the moment the child steps into the program to the moment they leave. While a gym activity takes 45 minutes, dealing with behavior is an all day activity. This should be the most compelling reason to put as much energy, if not more, into identifying and implementing positive behavior support strategies in programs and engaging all staff in implementing these changes. Remember, the best way to address challenging behavior and create a positive behavior support system is to:

1. Observe your program and children and note when and where the behavior challenges are happening (data collection).
2. Use a self-assessment tool with all the staff to assess the programs approach to behavior and to find common barriers.
3. Use the results of the self-assessment tool to create an action plan for implementing positive behavior strategies and preventing challenging behavior.
4. Work with all staff to prioritize action plan items, identify a timeline, and create an implementation process.
5. Implement priority action plan items.
6. Continue to observe the program, set aside time at each staff meeting to review the progress of the action plan, and make modifications if necessary.

Engrain this process into the culture of the program by continuing to do it every year. Remember, you deal with behavior all day, every day. Treat promoting positive behavior as the priority for your program and you will continue to see improvements.