

## Best Practices for Older Youth in Out-Of-School Time

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### Best Practices for Middle School Youth

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In order to benefit middle school students, after-school programs must provide sustained access to high-quality learning opportunities that are geared toward their specific developmental needs. During early adolescence, young people become more independent and take on new responsibilities. It is a critical time for discovering new interests, since middle school youth may no longer be engaged by the activities they enjoyed as children and begin to seek adventure and risk. Best practice research suggests four common components of effective after-school programs for middle school youth:

#### **Balance of independence and supervision**

In early adolescence, youth seek independence and new sources of adventure. They are open to new experiences and are capable of taking on increased responsibility.

After-school programs can provide these experiences for youth in a safe, supervised environment that minimizes the risks of new-found independence. Effective after-school programs for middle school students engage youth in decision-making and provide opportunities for leadership within the program.

#### **A menu of choices**

High-quality after-school programs offer a range of activities and allow middle school youth to make choices about how they will spend their time. Choices can include physical activity, homework with adult help, hands-on experiences in math and science, performances and art projects, and community service. Programs that offer these and other choices also allow students to take responsibility for their own learning.

#### **Adult-youth relationships**

Middle school youths need supportive relationships with adults who serve as role models and mentors. High-quality programs for middle school youth focus on building relationships between youth and adult role models by recruiting, training, and retaining well-prepared staff. These programs offer youth mentoring and one-on-one time with staff. Strong, trusting relationships with adults encourage youth to stay in the program over time.

#### **Strong connections to family, school, & community**

Youth want to participate in after-school programs that provide choices and novel programming and activities, but they also need programming that is integrated with the other places they spend their time. Middle school youth benefit most from after-school programming that complements the goals of their school curriculum and other activities. After-school programs for middle school youth should be inherently different from the activities they engage in at school, at home, or in the community, but they must complement these other activities.

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## Best Practices for High School Youth

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Most older teens are independent enough to choose where they spend their time after school. Many also have adult responsibilities, including part-time jobs and caring for younger siblings, and are thinking ahead to life after high school. Effective after-school programs for older teens must take these factors into consideration when structuring and implementing their programming. Best practice research suggests the following characteristics of highly-effective after school programs for older youth:

### **Employable skills and job experience**

Older youth are interested in after-school programs that offer them a sense of independence, including the financial independence that comes from earning money. High-quality after-school programs help youth navigate the options before them, teaching them relevant skills and connecting them to internships and apprenticeships. In this way, after-school programs can support youths' goals for the future and help them to prepare for college and employment.

### **Program flexibility**

Daily attendance at an after-school program is unrealistic for high school students who are balancing a variety of responsibilities and interests. Many older teens have part-time jobs, chores or childcare obligations at home, homework, and social lives that also compete for a share of their time outside of school.

Effective after-school programs for high school youth feature a flexible structure that allows youth to participate at different levels depending on their schedules. Such programs may include drop-in activities, less frequent meetings, or a menu of options so that youth can choose several different activities over the course of the week. Older youth prefer to participate in programs that include them in decisions about how the program is structured and how they will spend their time.

### **Opportunities to connect with peers and adults**

High school students want time outside of school to talk to and hang out with their friends. After-school programs designed for older youth must balance social time and structured activities.

Older teens also benefit from developing relationships with adults. This is not limited to program staff and mentors; after-school programs can also help youth connect to adults outside of the program, like business and community leaders.

### **Strong connections to family, school, & community**

As with middle school after-school programs, programs designed for older teens are most successful when they are integrated into the broader community. Schools and principals should be active partners of the after-school provider and may help after-school providers develop programming that links school curricula to hands-on activities and experiences.

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Programs will also be most effective when they link to local business and community leaders, helping young people to engage in their neighborhood and city.

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