

## Introduction

What are the most important characteristics of quality after-school programs for preteens, based on the latest research? The Lucile Packard Foundation for Children's Health (the Foundation) set out to answer that question by commissioning Public/Private Ventures (P/PV) to examine the literature and develop a set of guiding principles for after-school programs serving preteens. This report builds on a set of benchmarks that P/PV created for the Foundation in 2003.<sup>1</sup>

Broadly speaking, a quality after-school program will use youth development<sup>2</sup> strategies to provide academic, recreational and/or enrichment activities. Research has shown that quality programs can lead to positive developmental outcomes for youth, including improved academic achievement and emotional and behavioral health.<sup>3</sup> This report explores the specific elements of quality that have shown such results. Primarily intended as a resource for after-school providers and their funders, this report may also be useful to policymakers interested in promoting quality after-school opportunities. While programs serve youth with a variety of needs and thus have different goals and strategies, the principles included here are general and can be applied to any after-school program serving preteens.

## Background

### Preteen Development

Children go through intense physical, emotional and cognitive changes as they begin the transition from child to adult. They also gain independence, associated with an increase in unsupervised time and a decrease in parental involvement. During the preteen years, children transition from elementary to middle school, increase the number of activities outside of school and home, and begin to form a coherent identity.<sup>4</sup>

Successfully navigating the preteen years depends, in large part, on the availability of safe and engaging activities and supportive relationships with adults. This is a critical age for parental involvement and support, but parents may struggle to deal with their preteen children effectively. Many preteens have limited access to positive opportunities, such as after-school programs, and are challenged by changing relationships with the adults in their lives, resulting in too much discretionary time, more unhealthy behaviors, more life stress and more difficulty forming healthy connections

to other people. Researchers believe that in early adolescence young people begin to adopt behavior patterns that can have lifelong consequences; therefore, programs that provide positive supports and opportunities at this age could shape the development of enduring healthy behaviors.<sup>5</sup>

### The Importance of After-School Programs

Research has shown that 3 p.m. to 6 p.m. are the peak hours for youth to commit or be victims of crimes and to smoke, drink or do drugs.<sup>6</sup> After-school programs can keep youth out of trouble, improve school attitudes and behavior, strengthen social networks, teach new skills and improve self-confidence by offering safety, structure, supportive adults and exposure to new and different experiences.<sup>7</sup> Conversely, youth without adult supervision after school are at risk for academic and behavior problems. However, the demand for after-school programs exceeds the supply, and access to quality out-of-school-time activities is especially limited in low-income communities.<sup>8</sup>

After-school programs geared toward preteens are particularly important because youth at this age need environments that help them develop long-term healthy behaviors. Yet preteens have the ability to “vote with their feet,” so programs must be engaging enough to attract and retain them.

### Guiding Principles for Quality Preteen Programming

To achieve positive developmental outcomes such as good health habits, good decision-making skills, successful educational experiences and healthy connections to families and friends, preteens need a variety of supports and opportunities, including quality programs. The research on quality programming in the after-school hours is dynamic, and there are many different lists of standards, benchmarks, exemplary practices and guiding principles, all describing important aspects of quality programming and how to achieve them.<sup>9</sup> Although to date there is no one set of agreed upon standards, consistent themes emerge in the research.

This online version of the report features references and endnotes that were omitted from printed copies in the interest of brevity. A companion Resource Guide that contains links to research and tools to strengthen programs is available at [www.lpfch.org/afterschool](http://www.lpfch.org/afterschool).