

Addressing Mental Well-Being through Afterschool Programs



Afterschool and summer programs play an important role in supporting the healthy development of young people and are all the more critical today.

The Challenge

Experts, including the American Academy of Pediatrics, have declared children's mental health "a national emergency," citing rising rates of teen suicide and mental health concerns that worsened throughout the pandemic.¹ Young people are experiencing more anxiety, depression, anger, fear, hostility, and aggression.

Afterschool Is a Solution

Data like these feel overwhelming but a powerful network of afterschool and summer learning programs across Wisconsin stand ready to help. These local programs serve as a fundamental setting for healthy development and learning. They are staffed by caring mentors who are trained to help young people feel connected and develop important life skills like coping with stress and using their voice. Programs provide a safe, supportive space for youth-led activities, consistent support for families, and connections to social services and other community resources.

Program Spotlight

With one of the largest AmeriCorps programs in the state, Marshfield Clinic Health System, in partnership with the Wisconsin Out of School Time Alliance, trains young adults to be mental health leaders to work alongside staff at afterschool and summer programs. The mental health leaders learn how to develop mental health lessons for kids and teach staff how to better deal with behavior challenges.

Jamie Johnson, an AmeriCorps member, serves full-time in one of 10 La Crosse YMCA locations on any given day. She starts by reading the dynamics of each group of kids before leading them through team-building games, yoga or breathing exercises. She also evaluates how program staff interact with kids and respond to behavior issues to offer ways to improve.

"Day after day, I've tried to preach coping skills," Johnson said. "No matter what you're going through, it is always okay to take a break, to play with a fidget toy, to take a deep breath."

Tinley, 9, is a big fan of "Ms. Jamie," as she's known to kids. Tinley went to her mindfulness club after school.

When summer came, Johnson gave Tinley a bag of pink beads and string to make keychains, which Tinley likes to rub and fidget with when agitated. Tinley also uses a glitter jar she made in the club. When she shakes the jar and the colorful specs dance in swirls of water, Tinley said it makes her feel like all the bad thoughts are sinking.

Afterschool programs provide integral developmental supports:

-  Caring and supportive mentors
-  Safe spaces where students build confidence and feel a sense of belonging
-  Opportunities to work collaboratively, problem solve, and think critically

In turn, these supports help kids:²

-  Gain self-control and confidence
-  Develop strong social skills
-  Build healthy relationships with their peers and adults
-  Improve work habits and grades
-  Improve school day attendance and behavior
-  Reduce risky behaviors, such as tobacco, marijuana, and alcohol use

Meeting the Need in Wisconsin

Leading authorities and parents recognize the power of afterschool in supporting kids' mental well-being.

The [U.S. Surgeon General's advisory](#) on the mental health crisis encourages young people to enroll in afterschool programs as a way to build healthy relationships. It recommends that community organizations "implement evidence-based programs that promote healthy development, support children, youth, and their families, and increase their resilience" and calls out afterschool as an example.³

Wisconsin parents strongly support afterschool programs and agree that they:²



Allow youth to build positive relationships with caring adults and mentors **77%**

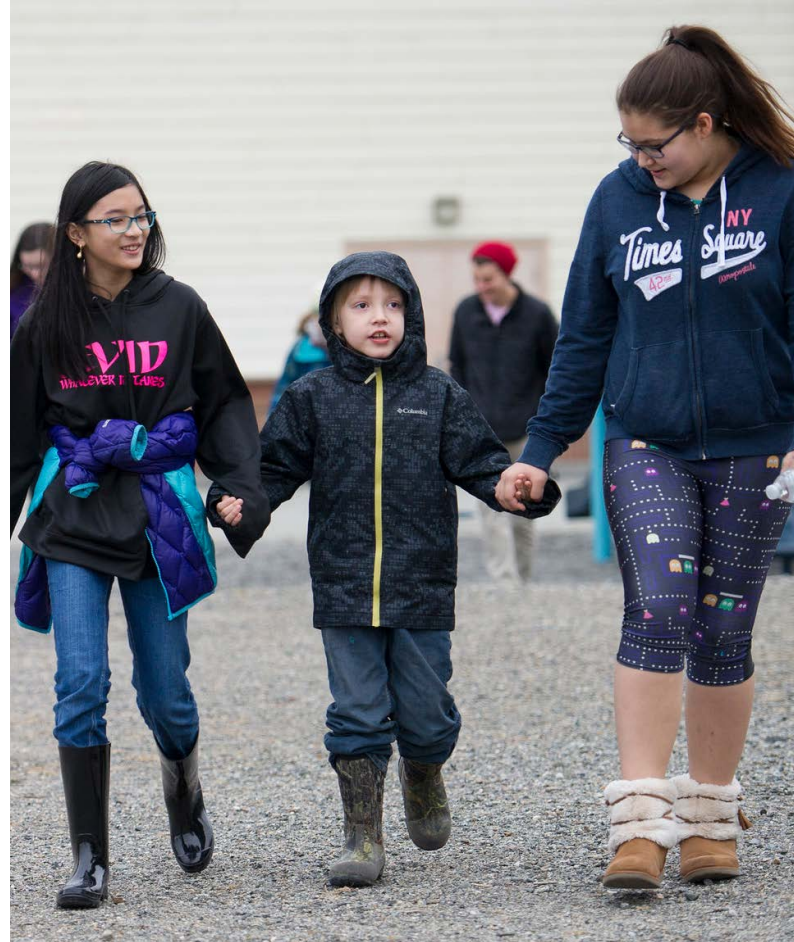
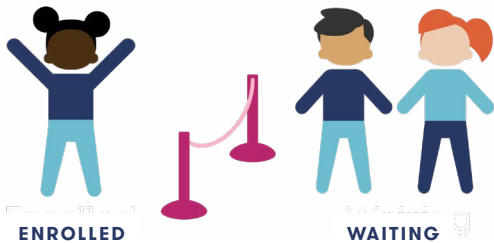


Provide opportunities for youth to build confidence and learn life skills **80%**



Provide opportunities for youth to interact with peers and build social skills **98%**

Yet Wisconsin has never had enough afterschool programs to serve all the families who want to attend. For every student enrolled in afterschool, **two more are waiting** to get in—that's more than 265,000 Wisconsin children that would enroll in a program if one were available to them.²



Power of Partnership

We must seize this moment to fund Wisconsin's afterschool programs so they can serve all families in need and help address the urgent youth mental health crisis. We can do this by providing resources that will allow programs to partner with more schools, community organizations, mental health agencies, and pediatricians. The Wisconsin Out of School Time Alliance is helping to make these connections.

SOURCES

1. Horowitz, J. M. & Igielnik, R. (2020). Most Parents of K-12 Students Learning Online Worry About Them Falling Behind. Pew Research Center. Retrieved from <https://www.pewresearch.org/social-trends/2020/10/29/most-parents-of-k-12-students-learning-online-worry-about-them-falling-behind/>; Learning Heroes. (2021). Out-of-School Time Programs: Paving the Way for Children to Find Passion, Purpose, & Voice. Retrieved from https://belearninghero.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Finding-Passion-Purpose-Voice_research-deck_final_9.21.pdf; American Academy of Pediatrics, American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, & Children's Hospital Association. (2021). AAP-AACAP-CHA Declaration of a National Emergency in Child and Adolescent Mental Health. Retrieved from <https://www.aap.org/en/advocacy/child-and-adolescent-healthy-mental-development/aap-aacap-cha-declaration-of-a-national-emergency-in-child-and-adolescent-mental-health/>
2. [www.afterschoolalliance.org/AA3PM](http://afterschoolalliance.org/AA3PM); <http://afterschoolalliance.org/documents/AA3PM-2020/WI-AA3PM-2020-Fact-Sheet.pdf>
3. <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-youth-mental-health-advisory.pdf>



The Wisconsin Out of School Time Alliance brings together agencies, organizations and individuals from across Wisconsin who want to see that all Wisconsin children have access to high quality OST programs in their non-school hours to develop to their full potential and become productive, contributing members of their communities.

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