How Kids Learn Foundation

TEMESCAL Associates
Building the capacity of leaders and organizations in education and youth development

THE COVID PANDEMIC AND YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH

A Briefing Paper

By Sam Piha and Samantha Fasen

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Sam Piha has served as founder and president of Temescal Associates since 2007. Sam began his career in 1974 as an afterschool worker, an experience that led to 13 years of classroom teaching and work as a child and family counselor and school social worker. Between 1989 and 2006, Sam managed school-based youth programs at the regional and national levels. He later founded Temescal Associates and The How Kids Learn Foundation, both dedicated to improving the quality of afterschool programs. Sam served as editor and contributing author of several important practice guides and journal articles on afterschool programming. Sam holds a master's degree in Social Welfare.

Samantha Fasen joined Temescal Associates and the How Kids Learn Foundation in 2019 and has fully embraced her work with the afterschool field. She helps to coordinate and develop marketing campaigns and multimedia elements to reach a wider audience and share with people the importance of out-of-school time and youth development.

Ren (Stacey) Daraio brings over 35 years of experience working in the field of youth development as a facilitator, trainer, and coach. She has experience training and coaching diverse audience groups, from afterschool practitioners and parents to funders and technical assistance providers. Prior to her work with Temescal Associates, Ren was the Deputy Director at the Community Network for Youth Development and a consultant for the Institute for Research and Reform in Education.

ABOUT THE ORGANIZATIONS

Temescal Associates is dedicated to building the capacity of leaders and organizations in education and youth development who organizations, and policy makers.

The How Kids Learn Foundation (HKLF) is a 501(c)(3) organization. It is dedicated to improving the effectiveness of settings that support the education and healthy development of youth. This includes schools and out-of-school time programs. The HKL Foundation provides educational and training activities that promote the capacity of organizations that support the education and healthy development of youth. Examples of activities include conferences, speaker forums, screenings of relevant films, training sessions, coaching sessions, the awarding of digital badges to acknowledge exemplar programs and the learning that happens within these settings. Activities also include the development and distribution of educational materials (papers, self-assessment tools, videos, program guides, etc.). You can see a catalogue of the resources we've produced for the afterschool field.

Cover Photo: www.pexels.com.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

2 About & Acknowledgements

4 Introduction, Background & How to Use

5 Know the Facts

9 Youth Mental Health: What Can We Do in Afterschool?

15 Addressing COVID Isolation: Get Kids Moving!

22 The Radical Power of Kindness and Joy In Afterschool Programs

29 Youth-Led Efforts to Address the Mental Health Crisis

34 A Youth Leader Speaks Out on a Youth-Led Mental Health Initiative

37 "Put Your Own Oxygen Mask on First": Promoting the Mental Health and Self-Care of Afterschool Workers

39 Conclusion and Key Take Aways

40 More Information on Afterschool and Youth Mental Health

THE COVID PANDEMIC AND YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH

Source: Afterschool Alliance

INTRODUCTION

Young people have proven to be especially vulnerable to mental health issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic. School closures, having to learn remotely, and isolating from friends due to physical distancing have been sources of stress and loneliness. While COVID learning loss in math and reading are of high concern, research about how students are doing mentally and emotionally since the coronavirus pandemic began indicates they are not doing well.

> ***"The global pandemic, even though it affected all of us, especially caused children and teenagers to be isolated from their peers for prolonged periods of time—and especially during these developmental periods that they showed the most intense need for interactions with peers."*** – Sarah D. Sparks, *Kids Are Feeling Isolated. P.E. May Help Them Bounce Back*

In this briefing paper we examine the facts of how the pandemic has impacted young people's mental health, what we can do in afterschool, the radical power of kindness and joy in afterschool programs, current youth-led efforts to address the mental health crisis, promoting the mental health and self-care of afterschool workers and offer additional resources if readers want to learn more.

HOW TO USE THIS BRIEFING PAPER

This paper is designed to raise understanding and awareness of the youth mental health crisis and ways that afterschool programs can address these issues. It also provides resources for afterschool and organizational leaders. We recommend that program leaders share this paper with organizational leaders and program staff and consider the best ways to respond to the youth mental health crisis.

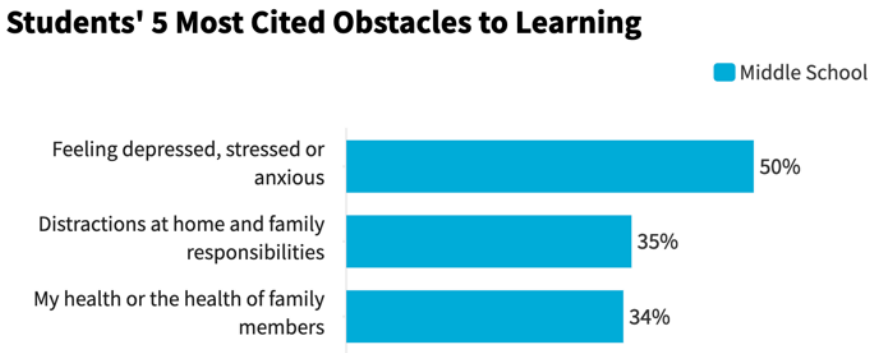
KNOW THE FACTS

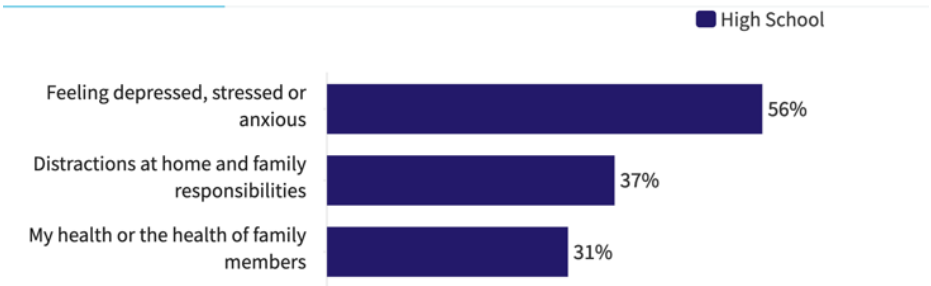
Source: www.pexels.com

We are still learning about how the pandemic has impacted young people's mental health. It is important that youth workers and afterschool leaders are aware of the facts. Below we cite some of what we know about mental health and the impact of the COVID pandemic.

Obstacles To Learning

A recent survey of youth (222,837 students at 845 schools across 20 states) reported that "…depression, stress, and anxiety are the biggest barriers to their learning. Teachers have also noted that dealing with student behavioral and mental health issues has been the biggest barrier to addressing unfinished learning."- Arianna Prothero, *Students Say Depression, Anxiety Are Holding Them Back. But They Can't Find Help at School*





Know The Signs to Look For

Youth workers are not trained mental health experts. They do not have the training to diagnose mental health problems, however it is important to know the signs and symptoms to look out for. Below we cite a list of symptoms to look out for, originally published by ***Mental Health America***.

"Symptoms that happen across multiple conditions:

- Problems with concentration, memory, or ability to think clearly
- Changes in appetite
- Feeling sad, empty, hopeless, or worthless
- Loss of interest in things that they used to enjoy
- Excessive worry
- Irritability or restlessness
- Changes in sleep
- Angry outbursts
- Not wanting to be around people or take part in activities

Other things to look out for:

- Hearing or seeing things that other people don't
- Extreme panic
- Onset of new behaviors or rituals that are repeated
- Mood swings or frequent shifts in energy
- Changes in how they dress –if your child is wearing long pants and sleeves in hot weather, or hats all of a sudden, they could be hiding signs of self-injury like cutting or hair pulling."

Risk Factors

We know that all youth who suffered as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic are at risk for mental health issues. However, not all youth are at the same level of risk. We cite some risk factors that youth workers should be aware of. According to the ***U.S. Surgeon General's Advisory on Protecting Youth Mental Health***, these are the risk factors contributing to youth mental health symptoms during the pandemic:

- Having **mental health challenges** before the pandemic
- Living in an **urban area** or an **area with more severe COVID-19 outbreaks**
- Having parents or caregivers who were **frontline workers**
- Having parents or caregivers at elevated risk of **burnout** (for example, due to parenting demands)
- Being **worried about COVID-19**
- Experiencing **disruptions in routine**, such as not seeing friends or going to school in person
- Experiencing more **adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)** such as abuse, neglect, community violence, and discrimination

- Experiencing more **financial instability, food shortages, or housing instability**
- Experiencing **trauma**, such as losing a family member or caregiver to COVID-19

Note: Not a comprehensive list of risk factors

Who Are Most at Risk?
Recent studies are showing that at highest risk are youth in foster care, youth in poverty, and especially LGBTQ+ youth.

Foster Care:
"Young people placed in foster care are already dealing with a higher level of uncertainty than other young people. Placement in foster care can be disruptive and traumatizing, requiring enormous adjustments. Adding the upheaval caused by the pandemic can increase the feelings of instability for those in foster care." – National Library of Medicine

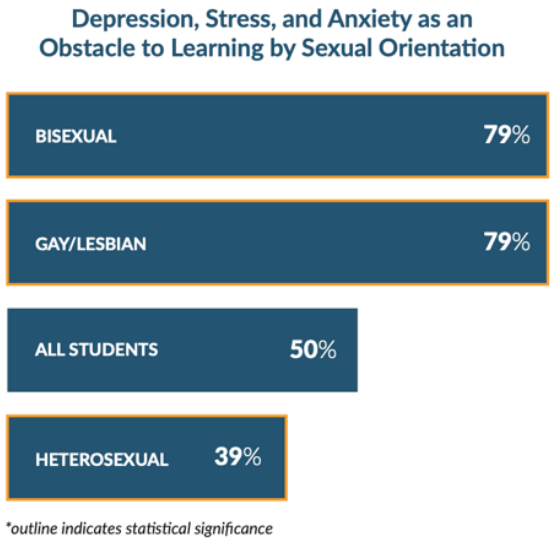
Urban Poverty:
"The current mental health system is failing to meet the extensive needs of children living in urban poverty. After school programs, whose mission includes children's socialization, peer relations, and adaptive functioning, are uniquely positioned to support and promote children's healthy development." – National Library of Medicine

Source: www.pexels.com

LGBTQ+ Youth:
LGBTQ+ youth are at higher risk for experiences leading to learning obstacles, bullying, and higher rates of depression, stress, anxiety, and suicidal thinking and behavior. To raise awareness, we cite some findings from ***Youth Truth: Emotional and Mental Health***.

On Obstacles to Learning:
"Sexual orientation matters when considering obstacles to learning, particularly for middle school students. At the middle-school level, gay or lesbian students (79 percent) and bisexual

students (79 percent) report at more than double the percentage of their heterosexual classmates (39 percent) that depression, stress, and anxiety impede their learning."



Source: Youth Truth: Emotional and Mental Health

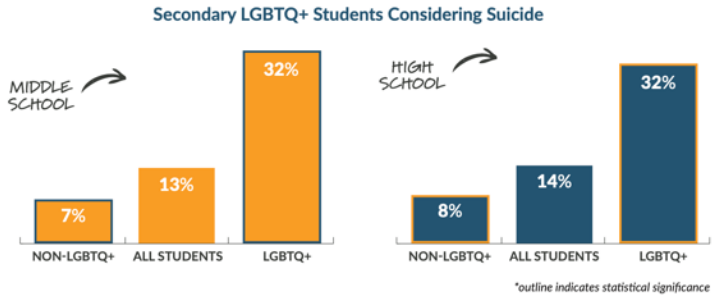
On Bullying:

"Over a quarter of our youngest secondary students identify bullying as a top five obstacle to learning… For gender non-binary and LGBTQ+ youth, bullying is a formidable weight that adds to their overall obstacle- to-learning load.

The only high school group to report at a significantly larger percentage than the overall (8 percent) that bullying is an obstacle to learning are non- binary students (17 percent). And at the middle-school level the only two groups to report that bullying is an obstacle to learning at a significantly higher rate than the overall (19 percent) are LGBTQ+ students (27 percent) and non-binary students (34 percent)."

On Suicidality:

"While there is no significant difference in reporting rates by grade level or by race, there are alarming differences by gender identity and LGBTQ+ status. A full 32 percent of LGBTQ+ middle school students report that they have considered suicide, four and half times higher than their non-LGBTQ+ peers (7 percent). And this pattern holds in high school where again 32 percent of LGBTQ+ students report that they have seriously considered suicide compared to their peers (8 percent)."



Source: Youth Truth: Emotional and Mental Health

YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH: WHAT CAN WE DO IN AFTERSCHOOL?

Source: WINGS for Kids

Since the return of young people to school and afterschool programs after the COVID shutdowns, there have been major concerns raised by educators and youth workers regarding youth mental health, the increase of challenging behavior and a decrease in acts of kindness shown to peers.

> ***"Broadly speaking, after school is mental health, as both promote enriching opportunities for growth and healthy development, thus preventing problems and promoting possibilities for children living in urban poverty."*** - Stacy Frazier, et al. *Linking Mental Health and After School Systems for Children in Urban Poverty: Preventing Problems, Promoting Possibilities*

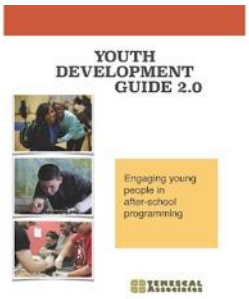
Afterschool programs are not equipped to solve the youth mental health crisis. However, afterschool programs are well positioned to promote positive mental health. To do this we should lean into our strengths. Below we offer some ideas on how afterschool programs can lean into their strengths to improve youth mental health and COVID recovery. (Note: learning loss indicated by lower reading and math scores should not be the focus of afterschool.)

The Importance of Positive Relationships in Afterschool

We know in afterschool programs that relationships are key. By working to build positive relationships with youth we can ensure that everyone has "someone to talk to."

"The percentage of elementary students who report that they have an adult they can talk to at school when they are upset drops steadily from third grade (61 percent) to fourth grade (55 percent) to fifth grade (50 percent). Fewer than half of secondary students, regardless of grade level, gender, race, or LGBTQ+ status, report that they have an adult at school they can talk to when they feel upset, stressed, or have a problem." - *Youth Truth: Emotional and Mental Health*

It would be useful to review the *Youth Development Guide 2.0*, which speaks to the importance of building positive relationships and other important topics.



Provide Opportunities for Youth to Express Themselves
Quality afterschool programs place an emphasis on opportunities for youth to express themselves. These include things like:

- **Check-in Circles**- This doesn't need to take very long and can greatly benefit both young people and program staff. In small groups (20 or fewer), begin the day by sitting quietly in a circle and letting each person speak briefly. Sometimes it helps to have a special item to pass around the group like a talking stick that identifies the one who has the "rapt attention" of the group. You can learn more by reviewing **our LIAS Blogs** on this.

Source: Ever Forward Club

"Listening to youth is essential to effectively addressing the youth mental health crisis that is setting off alarms across America." - Youth Truth Survey

- **Journals**- Journal writing is a good way for youth to freely express themselves. Afterschool leaders can use journal writing prompts and/or just offer free writing. You can learn more by reviewing **our LIAS Blogs** on this topic.

- **Art-** Art is a good way that youth can express themselves without words. These can be art projects or opportunities to do free art.

> ***"Bring healing and joy through art…Evidence shows that engaging in the arts—simply for the experience and pleasure of it—is therapeutic. Yet many schools, especially in under resourced communities, have extinguished this opportunity. Make art a regular part of every child's school experience."*** **-** Daniel Coles, et al. *Mental Health Crises Are Bombarding Our Schools. Here's What We Can Do*

Artist: Angie, 17, describes her artwork- "I feel trapped inside figurative and literal borders. These borders include attending and graduating college, getting a job, and not being able to visit my family back in Mexico"

> ***"These [afterschool] programs are uniquely positioned to support and promote children's healthy development, inclusive of mental health needs instigated by trauma. Children are not the only recipients; parents and the OST workforce can benefit from mental health supports provided directly or indirectly in these environments."*** – Child Care Technical Assistance Network

Predictability and Rituals

> ***"Predictability, or being able to know what to expect, is an important ingredient for healthy development. Predictable routines and consistent relationships provide a foundation of trust and security for children. When children know what to expect and who they can rely on, they have the confidence to explore the world around them and develop new skills."*** - *Future Learn, Predictability and Development*

Predictability reduces stress because children want to know what is going to happen next and what to expect. Familiar patterns are calming. This is especially true for young people who have experienced trauma.

> ***"Provide a consistent, predictable pattern for the day. Make sure the child knows the pattern. When the day includes new or different activities, tell the child beforehand and explain why this day's pattern is different. Don't underestimate how important it is for children to know that their***

> ***caretakers are "in control." It is frightening for traumatized children (who are sensitive to control) to sense that the people caring for them are, themselves, disorganized, confused and anxious. There is no expectation of perfection, however, when caretakers are overwhelmed, irritable or anxious; simply help the child understand why, and that these reactions are normal and will pass."*** **-** Dr. Bruce Perry, *Importance of Predictability*

When we repeat important activities on a regular basis, they become rituals that young participants can depend on. These activities include talking or check-in circles, particular ways that you always open or close the program, activities that acknowledge youth or staff that are departing the program, birthdays, etc.

> ***"Predictability is a stabilizing force for teens, but it's been disrupted by the pandemic."*** - Teen Mental Health: A Vulnerable Stage of Life

Promote Peer Interaction and Support

To address COVID-19 isolation, afterschool programs can help by emphasizing activities that promote peer interaction. Activities include check-in circles, group play and games and group projects.

Source: www.pexels.com

> ***"The global pandemic, even though it affected all of us, especially caused children and teenagers to be isolated from their peers for prolonged periods of time—and especially during these developmental periods that they showed the most intense need for interactions with peers."*** – Sarah D. Sparks, *Kids Are Feeling Isolated. P.E. May Help Them Bounce Back*

Educate Youth and Normalize the Issue of "Mental Health"

It is important that youth understand that "mental health" does not mean "crazy". They should understand that the impacts of COVID and isolation are real. These conversations can happen in group meetings and individual conversations.

Create Opportunities for Youth to Contribute to Youth Mental Health

> ***"Youth express a collective desire – they even demand – that adults involve them in creating a more responsive education system so that they can, as one student put it, 'find our way back to loving learning.'"*** – Youth Truth Survey

Young people want to be involved in a way that's meaningful. Consider training students to spot peers with mental health struggles and guide them to help. To learn more about developing a peer counseling program, check out HOPE Squad.

> ***"I wish the school did more to train and educate its students on how to identify ... warning signs of deteriorating mental health, abuse, self-harm, and violence within their peers - and respond appropriately and compassionately."*** – 12th grade student

> ***"Teens are more likely to communicate with their peers than with their parents or teachers. Peer-led counseling programs show promise in helping to detect mental health concerns in younger students."*** - *Tonya Russell, Peer Counseling May Reach Teens in Ways That Adults Can't*

Provide Daily Exercise Activities

During the COVID shutdowns young people had few opportunities for exercise and playing with friends. It has been suggested that youth who suffered from COVID-19 isolation can benefit from physical exercise.

> ***"At a time when recess and physical education programs may feel a squeeze from schools seeking more time for reading or math, studies suggest boosting students' physical activity time also has an important role. It may help students rebound from the social isolation many have experienced during the pandemic."*** – Sarah D. Sparks, *Kids Are Feeling Isolated. P.E. May Help Them Bounce Back*

Source: pexels.com

We also know from research that free play and activities that introduce young people to the natural world are also healing. To learn more, check out our LIAS Blogs on Play and Nature.

> ***"At Lawrence Family Development Charter School, Art, Music and Physical Education (Gym) are important to helping students interact with friends while participating in activities that take them away from desks and screens. These classes teach critical thinking, decision making and use a separate set of skills to interact with others. Gym in particular has an important role to play in helping children reduce anxiety and stress."*** - Susan Dion Earabino, Ed.D, Principal at Lawrence Family Development Charter School

Know How and When to Collaborate with the School and Parents and When to Refer to a Professional
It is recommended that program leaders check with their schools or provider organizations to see if there are policies that lay out protocols for this. Many schools have IEP or Care Team meetings that identify strategies for particular youth who are experiencing problems. Afterschool leaders should attend these meetings as they have a unique perspective to bring. Afterschool staff shall also receive training on when and how to collaborate with parents, the school and/or mental health professionals.

A Word About Confidentiality and Referrals

As you get to know young people in the program and they develop trust with you, many may share personal information, assuming it will be kept confidential. Older youth may feel safer knowing that you can and will keep their conversations confidential. However, there are certain times when you will not be able to keep confidentiality—such as when a young person lets you know that someone is hurting them, or that they are going to hurt someone else.

It is important that adult staff understand the legal reporting responsibilities regarding child abuse and endangerment. If your program is addressing personal, sensitive issues with young people, it is important to have a clear policy on confidentiality that you can share openly with participants. It is particularly important with adolescents that they understand you will respect their privacy, and that there are limits regarding ensuring their safety. There will be times when a young participant's issues are beyond the scope of your program practice. It is important that staff members receive guidance on how to handle these situations and have access to their program supervisors to discuss situations where referrals to other professionals may be in order.

ADDRESSING COVID ISOLATION: GET KIDS MOVING!

Source: A World Fit for Kids

Many youth who returned to school this year were socially isolated due to the pandemic. While schools are concerned with academic learning loss, schools need to understand that young people may be fearful and anxious. How can we help? **Get kids moving!**

During the COVID shutdowns young people had few opportunities for exercise and playing with friends. Research suggests that physical activity can help young people recover from isolation experienced due to the COVID pandemic. Research also suggests that physical activity in nature can help young people recover from the isolation and fear experienced due to the COVID pandemic.

Source: Girls Inc.

"Our results suggest for those students that are returning to school and that were socially isolated," Enrique Pérez-Cardona, a professor, and the chairman of the education department at the University of Puerto Rico said. 'The school has to be prepared and define a good physical education program, so those children can try to release those negative effects of isolation.'" – Sarah D. Sparks, *Kids Are Feeling Isolated. P.E. May Help Them Bounce Back*

Source: www.pexels.com

"At a time when recess and physical education programs may feel a squeeze from schools seeking more time for reading or math, studies suggest boosting students' physical activity time also has an important role. It may help students rebound from the social isolation many have experienced during the pandemic." – Sarah D. Sparks, *Kids Are Feeling Isolated. P.E. May Help Them Bounce Back*

Voices From the Field

To learn more, we interviewed three youth development experts: Ed Center from *The Village Well* and Brad Lupien and Bob Lund from the *ARC Experience*.

Q: Research suggests that physical activity can help young people recover from isolation experienced due to the COVID pandemic. Do you believe this is true?

Ed- This is key in a biological and a sociological way. Stress itself is not a bad thing. Stressful events are part of life and can help us build assets and resiliency. Stress becomes toxic when we are unable to complete stress cycles, meaning that our fight-flight systems kick in with adrenaline and cortisol, but we don't move through them into safety, resolution, and calmness.

The simplest way to complete a stress cycle is to move. A brisk walk is great, dancing is phenomenal, soccer is transformative. Physiologically, this metabolizes the stress hormones and brings us back to equilibrium. The social components of physical activity are equally important. Young people connect through physical play, whether through organized sports, dance, or skipping stones across an urban lake.

Source: NHP Foundation

Every teacher and afterschool leader reports that we've seen a delay in social skills over the last three years. Outdoor play, supported by nurturing adults, offers a perfect environment for kids to build these skills and form the connections with peers and adults that are the hallmark of positive youth development.

Brad and Bob- Absolutely. We are seeing that, in addition to learning loss and socialization issues caused by the COVID pandemic, many of our students have seen downgrades in their physical fitness. Getting outside and moving around, especially with a group of friends, allows many of our students to not only improve their physical health, but also their mental health and feelings of connectedness as well.

Q: Research also suggests that physical activity in nature can help young people recover from isolation and fear experienced due to the COVID pandemic. Do you believe this is true?

Brad and Bob: Outdoor education is a great way to experience the world around them while affording opportunities to socialize in a safe manner. When properly done, guided physical activity in the outdoors has a litany of benefits, including building community and trust with peers, reducing feelings of isolation as well as providing opportunities for self-control and to demonstrate grit.

Q: There is pressure for afterschool programs to divert their resources away from things like physical activities and outdoor education to address academic learning loss. What are your thoughts on this?

Ed- Yes, we have a learning loss crisis and need to address that. What perpetuates that crisis? In large part, we have a mental health services gap, a connection gap, and a lingering malaise for black and brown youth whose families bore the brunt of pandemic sickness, death, and economic difficulty. My son goes to a tiny private school. Are they freaking out about learning loss? No. They are giving themselves years to help their students catch up, in the meantime they continue to emphasize field trips, experiential learning, service learning, sports, dances, and social activities. Let's stop quantifying poor kids as numbers that need to be improved and start creating rich learning experiences to prepare them for life. These experiences include connection, wonder, play, and movement.

Brad and Bob- We've all heard the saying "what gets measured gets done" and this is often all too true in K-12 education. Unfortunately, this has meant a shift towards standardized testing and numerical evaluation of our students and those numbers—which get measured very precisely—become the focus rather than on building whole, well rounded individuals.

Physical activity and exercise are important parts of the human experience, even if they aren't as easily quantifiable as a math test. Programs that encourage students to move and play provide a wealth of positive results, including improving student's mental health, and can provide a force multiplier effect, increasing the student's performance in the other parts of their school day.

Source: A World Fit for Kids

"Adolescents coming of age during the pandemic have experienced social "learning loss," and will need remedial support in social, not just academic, development, …. And at a time when recess and physical education programs may feel a squeeze from schools seeking more time for reading or math, studies suggest boosting students' physical activity time also has an important role. It may help students rebound from the social isolation many have experienced

during the pandemic." - Sarah D. Sparks, *Kids Are Feeling Isolated. P.E. May Help Them Bounce Back*

Q: What are some physical activities you would recommend for youth in afterschool?

Ed- The most important thing is to offer a range of free or low-cost opportunities for different types of activity. I'm surprised that our culture still labels children as athletic or not based on just two factors: speed and coordination. If you can get to the ball first and do something cool with the ball, you are athletic. What about those who can run for miles, who find joy in the wilderness, who want to lean into their flexibility, who harbor hip-hop, half-pipe, or pirouette dreams?

Generally, after school programs do a decent job of exposing kids to different activities to explore interests and passions. My criticism is that public schools and afterschool programs usually fail to take the next step, giving youth opportunities to pursue those passions through deep engagement and mastery. Our programs offer the six-week karate enrichment options, but how do we support the kid who finds a calling and wants to go further? We chose our local rec and park after school program for our kindergartener because of the diversity of the students, and because they practice tennis every day (shoutout to Tennis Learning Center in San Francisco).

Brad and Bob- The simplest way to get students moving is to have them play. Offering opportunities to play games that don't just reward the tallest or strongest students will encourage more participation rather than limiting it to the best athletes. From an outdoor perspective, introducing students to new challenges and experiences in a low-risk, low-pressure environment allows us to meet students where they are. On the simplest end, a simple hike to a new destination gets kids out and moving (and away from their phones). If resources allow, geocaching, kayaking, bike riding and rock climbing are all wonderful ways to encourage students to push their own boundaries, to explore their communities and to build their self-confidence (along with their physical strength).

Source: www.pexels.com

Q: Are there any resources that afterschool leaders can use to develop physical activities for youth? Would you advise any training for staff and coaches?

Ed- The resources are already there in the community. The key is to provide program staff with time, flexible resources, and training in partnership development. Someone has a cousin who is passionate about West African dance and would love to bring that to the students. That person should be paid for their time and given a small budget for supplies or field trips. Let's stop the scarcity and tireless hustle mentality.

Brad and Bob- Many of us in education get caught up on the idea of having the right "gear" as the reason that we deliver boring physical activities, as if the equipment is what makes games fun. Many students are reluctant to try something new out of fear of failure, so training staff to encourage effort and participation, not just results is huge, as it builds an environment where all are welcome, not just the best athletes. Your staff can be your greatest asset in that they can leverage their existing relationships with students to get them to try something new and to push themselves—just a bit—out of their comfort zones. In that same vein, if staff are playing too, they will have more fun and you'll see a sizeable increase in student participation as they can both more actively manage the game as well as provide behavioral role models for the activity.

MORE ABOUT

Ed Center is a queer brown dad who coaches parents and other kid-raisers toward greater connection, calm, and joy. Ed worked in education for 25 years, starting as a high school teacher, always focused on the needs of kids of color. During the height of the pandemic, Ed's son suffered an acute mental health crisis. Searching for support, Ed discovered the field of positive parenting and learned strategies and tools to strengthen his connection with his son, leading to healing for the whole family. However, Ed was frustrated with the lack of attention to diverse cultures and traditions in the positive parenting courses and literature, as well as a dearth of focus on healing trauma in children and parents. He started to bring more connection, joy, and healing to families of color. The child of a Filipino American mother and White-American father, Ed grew up in Hawai'i, and feels at home there, in the Philippines, in San Francisco, and wherever he smells good barbecue. **The Village Well,** which Ed founded, focuses on an approach to parenting that starts with your own wellness and healing and moves to building more connection and meaning with your family. They offer culturally grounded support that honors your unique family.

Brad Lupien is President & CEO of ARC Experience. His career began as a teacher and social worker in the juvenile justice system and as a special education teacher in Boston, MA. He taught middle and high school young people identified as having behavioral and emotional disabilities. To address his students' multiple risks, Brad began an after-school Outdoor Education Club for his gang-involved students. He modeled the method after his experience serving as a summer guide for teens, leading month-long adventures in the Rocky Mountains. Previous board roles include Interfaith Family, Learning in After School & Summer (LIAS) Region 11 Workforce Advisory Group, the youth Take Action Campaign, San Diego Education Synergy Project. Lupien is a team member of the Policy Committee for California Expanded Learning Division (EXLD) of the California Department of Education and a Steering Committee member of the California Afterschool Advocacy Alliance (CA3). Lupien was recently appointed by California Senator Pro Tem Toni Atkins to the Governor's California Before- and After-School Advisory Board.

Bob Lund is the Director of Outdoor Education Programs at ARC Experience. Growing up in Long Beach, Bob was fortunate to have had many opportunities to appreciate the outdoors from an early age. Because of his family's frequent camping and off-roading trips as a child, he was well suited for taking on a variety of staff roles at summer camp including high adventure, aquatics, and in camp administration. His natural leadership abilities and affinity for outdoor adventures drew him to join the Boy Scouts at a young age and he achieved the rank of Eagle Scout in 2001. Bob spent his career working with high schoolers with special needs and delivering exceptional enrichment programs to students of all abilities throughout the Pacific Southwest.

Arc Experience is an award-winning, nationally recognized organization running after school and experiential education programs for the past 20 years in communities throughout California. They provide afterschool, outdoor, enrichment, and leadership development to elementary, middle, and high school students as well as college students and professionals.

THE RADICAL POWER OF KINDNESS AND JOY IN AFTERSCHOOL PROGRAMS

It seems we live in a time in which meanness is in vogue, whether it's cyber bullying, political discourse and violent actions or hate crimes.

Voices From the Field

To learn more we interviewed Stu Semigran, Co-Founder and President of the EduCare Foundation, and youth leader, Axel Perez, Executive Director of Simply Wholehearted. Their responses are below.

Q: What mental health changes have you seen in youth due to COVID?

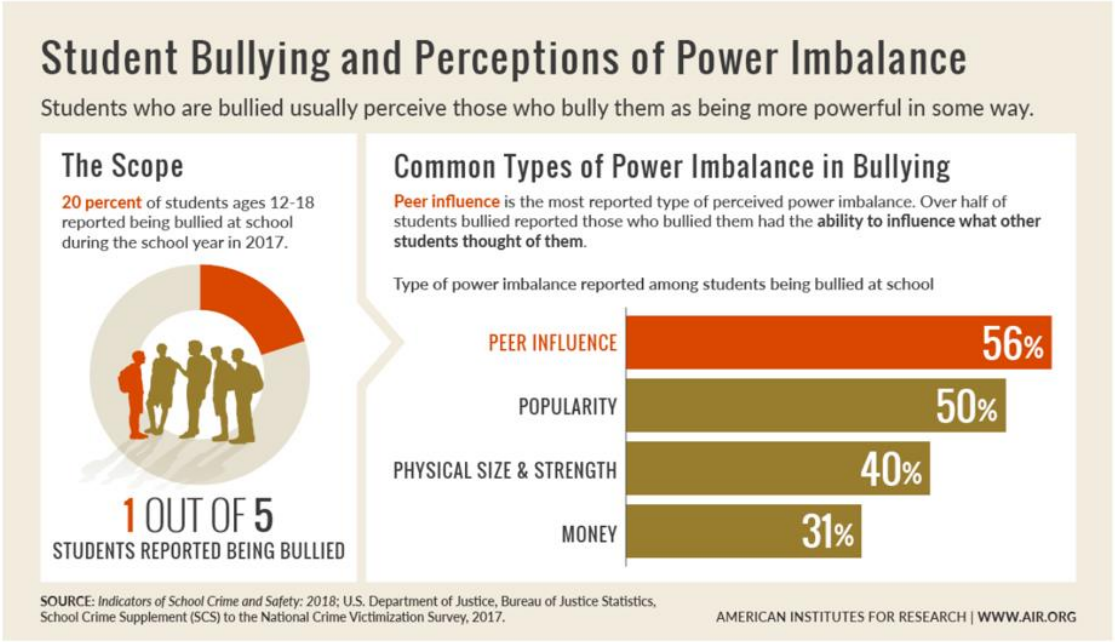
Axel: Mental health challenges I continue to see in our youth due to COVID-19 are physical insecurities, anti-social tendencies, anxiety, depression, and many others. These challenges presented themselves as we were stuck at home with no social interaction and living our lives behind the screens of our devices. The lasting effects are some that we are still dealing with today and are challenged to overcome.

Q: Do you agree that meanness is in vogue? And why do you think this is so?

Stu: It certainly appears as if discord, againstness, and striking back is increasingly evident in our world. Many people are feeling threatened and fearful with a great need for power, to gain control, and stake out positions of being "right" and claiming others as "wrong". Righteous judgment is on the loose. On one level, people are dealing with more stress and are looking to feel more secure. One misdirected approach for establishing a sense of personal security may be to stake out a position, hold on tight and

defend it, and then combat anything that might shake that position- threaten that false sense of inner security.

Source: www.pexels.com



It takes a strong sense of self (apart from our righteous beliefs) and a solid foundation to withstand and be receptive to other points of view. Building that deeper core of self-awareness and self-acceptance leads to a freedom to step into a world where opposing opinions, beliefs, and points of view are not threatening.

Building greater self-acceptance and self-compassion opens the way to more readily respond to others with more acceptance and kindness. The path out from meanness- to tolerance, to understanding, and to compassion- is each person's responsibility. Educating towards that is the aim of Heartset® education.

Axel: I agree that we are living in a time with high stakes regarding hate, meanness, and pain. I believe this is due to the political, racial, and gender divide that our country is facing. We have forgotten that we are all human and have emotions underneath our beliefs. During the beginning stages of COVID, we learned how to become compassionate and empathetic as we were all experiencing the same emotions. However, as COVID became prolonged and we began to go back to our everyday lives, we forgot how to be compassionate. We no longer made an importance to be kind and understanding towards others.

Q: How would you define "Kindness"?

Stu: Kindness is a generosity of heart. It is expression of loving in action. It has infinite expressions. It may be a mere thought, a wish, or prayer for another. It is a willingness to risk sharing love and compassion and perhaps being rejected or misunderstood. Kindness can be expressed quietly or very demonstratively. It may be seen or go unnoticed. Nonetheless, it is setting a tone, a pervasive foundation of caring and unconditional love.

Kindness provides the encouragement and the fortitude to keep going when life is tough by knowing that you are valued, supported, and cared for.

Axel: To me, kindness is the act of being empathetic, caring, and loving towards those around you and with whom you interact. To be kind is to be human and to come from a place of understanding when coming across others, leaving everyone with a positive experience.

"Do your little bit of good where you are; it's those little bits of good put together that overwhelm the world."- Desmond Tutu

Q: What can we do in afterschool to prevent meanness? What can we do in afterschool to promote kindness?

Stu: As adults we can promote kindness by taking care of ourselves, expressing kindness with others, encouraging our students to treat themselves kindly, and by teaching kindness activities on a regular basis so it becomes a way of relating. There are many excellent resources for teaching compassion, empathy, and kindness. One, developed through EduCare, is ***Making the Best of Me: A handbook for student excellence and self-esteem***, that includes over 200 easy-to-use, engaging activities for afterschool and school day classes.

Community service projects are terrific opportunities for students to build the lifestyle habit of expressing kindness. Practicing acts of kindness individually and as a group or class are impactful, joyful ways to begin to redirect a pattern of meanness to one of acceptance and compassion. Acts of kindness and community building become important parts of the kindness formula. The mindset and heartset of giving and receiving kindness set a personal habit and lay a solid foundation for students to continue to develop throughout their lives.)

Axel: Afterschool enrichment is vital to students. An essential factor that afterschool programs should focus on is ensuring their programs offer students a life-learning skill as a takeaway. Along with

enrichment, teaching students skills like leadership, integrity, compassion, and gratitude will help improve not only the lives and characters of these students but the culture and climate of your campus and community.

Afterschool programs can prompt kindness by creating campaigns with pass-it-on cards or random acts of kindness where you randomly show appreciation to staff and/or students by giving away items like popcorn, candy, snow cones, etc. The main idea is to accomplish an act of kindness that will randomly make someone's day. We may not know what everyone is going through, but we can show gratitude and appreciation toward them.

Q: How were youth impacted by the COVID pandemic?

Axel: Our youth took a considerable hit with the COVID-19 pandemic. Post-pandemic, we saw the youth struggle with several mental health issues. For youth, it is vital for them to interact with peers and society, as well as explore their surroundings and challenge their abilities. None of this was possible during the pandemic, and still, to this day, we find restrictions with the acknowledgment that COVID is still around. This is how the youth became impacted.

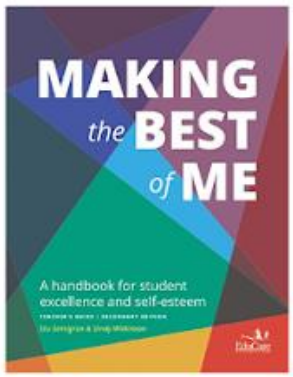
Source: EduCare Foundation

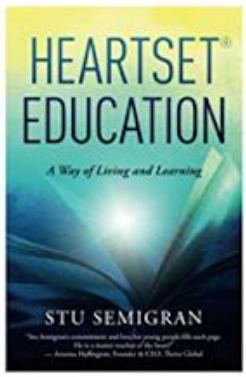
Q: Can you give an example of kindness between youth and their peers or community?

Stu: One example is the **Take Action Campaign (TAC)**, a far-reaching initiative launched in 2008 by Los Angeles Unified School District's (LAUSD's) Beyond the Bell and facilitated by EduCare and several community partners. TAC gives thousands of high school students leadership opportunities by celebrating the arts, serving their schools & their local communities, and empowering them to mentor their peers. Projects have included volunteering at homeless shelters & food banks, environmental cleanups, tree planting, food and clothing drives, unity building events, and student led advocacy campaigns around issues important to them. In school year 2022-23, students from 37 LAUSD high schools are participating in TAC.

Q: You recently wrote a book *Heartset Education: A Way of Living and Learning*. Can you say a little about the book and whether it would be useful for afterschool leaders?

Stu: Students need to have their minds ready to learn. However, to become active learners, a lot of our young people need more than that. They don't just need a new mindset; they need a new heartset. When the heart is set in a good place, the mind is open and receptive. When the heart is troubled, the mind is cluttered. So, heart and mind have to go hand in hand.





Q: Can you describe what your organizations do?

Stu: EduCare Foundation's mission is "*to inspire and support young people in empowering themselves to become responsible citizens, courageous and compassionate leaders, and live their dreams.*" In 1987, EduCare piloted the ACE (Achievement and Commitment to Excellence) Program in one Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) middle school. ACE focuses on the social-emotional learning (SEL) elements of character development, personal management, emotional intelligence, and interpersonal skills. EduCare's flagship ACE Program became the forerunner to the educational movements that today bear many names: Character Education, Social-Emotional Learning (SEL), and Trauma-Informed Teaching. To learn more about EduCare's efforts, check out their website here.

Axel: Simply Wholehearted is a non-profit organization providing leadership opportunities to historically excluded students in low-income communities, creating game-changers who live, lead, and inspire. Our goal and mission is to provide equal access leadership with no borders because we believe that leadership shouldn't be exclusive to specific communities.

Q: How is kindness related to youth leadership?

Axel: Kindness is a trait that leaders must practice. When you become a leader, you are no longer on the frontline producing the work. You are building the team that is producing the work. Kindness is one of the many traits that will earn you respect from your peers which will create a stronger bond and impact your organization in a more meaningful way.

Source: Simply Wholehearted

Q: Why did you start your organization?

Stu: Why EduCare? It was a chance, an opportunity, a pressing need that I saw to do something that I thought was missing in education- to address an obvious need of my students who were coming into my classroom when I was a middle school teacher in LA. I could see that they were lost in many ways. For many, their wholistic needs, not just physical needs, but their emotional, mental and social needs as well, we're not being addressed and attended to.

I wanted them to be healthier and happier and be in a place to succeed academically. I felt they needed to develop greater self-awareness and personal development tools so they could believe in themselves, ignite their desire, and gain the skills for creating a successful and fulfilling life. I wanted the chance to touch their hearts, open their minds, and hopefully assist them in empowering themselves to transform the trajectory of their lives.

> ***"As I drove up to the school, the blighted neighborhood was giving off all the signals of distress. But when I walked into the school, it was like when the Wizard of Oz turned from black and white to color! You could feel the positive energy, the love. I have been around high quality after school and youth development work for over 25 years. What I witnessed while visiting the ACE Program was some of the most transformational and powerful moments I have ever seen."***- Michael Funk, Director of Expanded Learning Division, California Department of Education

Michael Funk

[To view a webinar recording on the topic of Kindness in Afterschool, click here.]

Axel: Simply Wholehearted was founded based on my experience with leadership in high school. I was fortunate to have the opportunity to get involved with several organizations, but my peers did not have the same opportunities. After realizing communities like mine were not receiving leadership development, curriculum, conferences, or leadership opportunities, I decided to change that factor and give back to my community in a way that would create a generational impact.

Q: How can youth be involved in improving mental health? How does this interact with youth leadership?

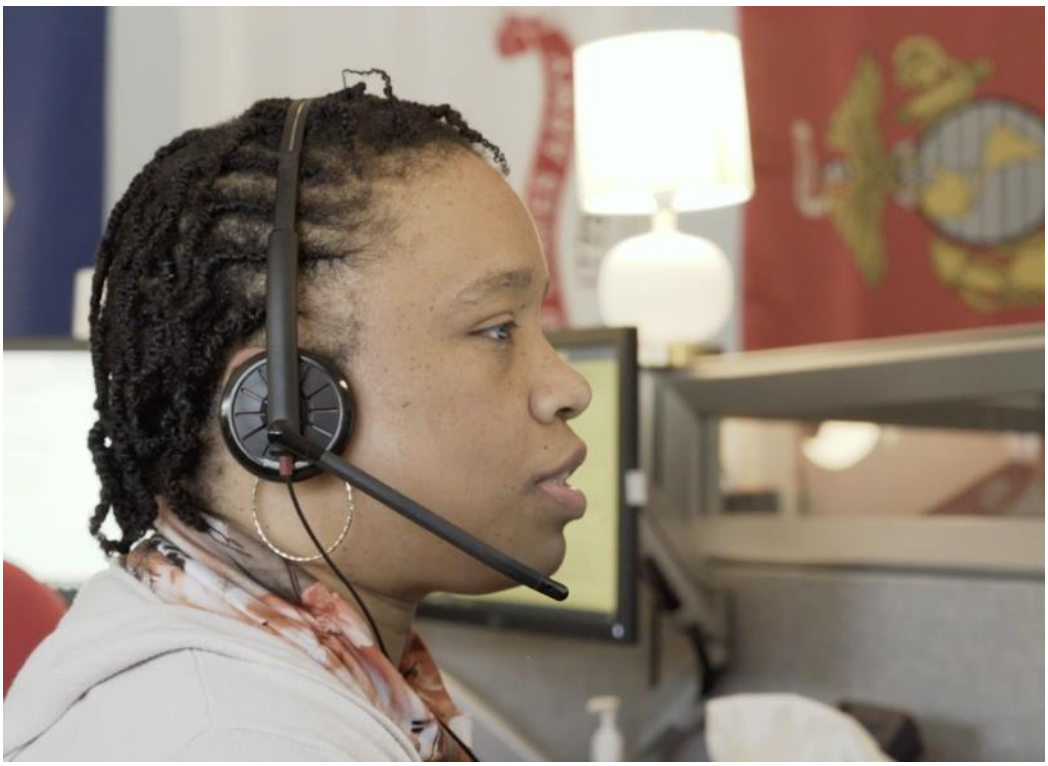
Axel: Youth can get involved by becoming advocates of change and mental health. It is vital that youth speak up and destigmatize mental health, but most importantly, amongst their peers. Sharing their stories and what has helped improve their mental health is a great start, as well as creating school-wide campaigns to recognize mental health and share resources with the school community. Reaching out to school staff, district services, and community organizations and collaboratively bringing them all together to create an awareness event creates an opportunity for youth leadership, especially when it's student-run and organized.

MORE ABOUT…

Stu Semigran is the Co-Founder and President of the EduCare Foundation. With over 35 years of experience as an educator, he has facilitated thousands of youth, professionals, educators and parents in Heartset® education, SEL, leadership development, and afterschool management. His new book, ***Heartset® Education: A Way of Living and Learning***, has been rated a #1 Amazon New Release Bestseller. His previous book, ***Making the Best of Me: A Handbook for Student Excellence and Self-Esteem***, is used in schools worldwide. He was recognized in 2012 as a David Chow Humanitarian Award Foundation recipient for his service to youth.

Axel Perez, 20 years old**,** is the co-founder and president of Simply Wholehearted, an Expanded Learning Program Lead for EduCare Foundation and educator from Lynwood (CA) who is dedicated to helping students receive equal opportunities in leadership. Axel, a former participant of EduCare programs, now advocates for the important impact afterschool makes on youth. Axel is an inspiring organizer, activist, and creative leader committed to make sure leadership has no borders. He is also the host of *SIMPLY AXEL* a podcast, an event series and a community that connects and empowers through a personal journey. He is the founder of *EMPOWER*, a movement created to empower others through kindness and other ways. Axel is a natural-born leader that believes in inspiring those to seek self-discovery.

YOUTH-LED EFFORTS TO ADDRESS THE MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS



Source: Line for Life 2019- Always Hope

The concerns of youth declining mental health are not new. Nor is the shortage of mental health professionals in our schools and communities. Both were issues before the pandemic and as a result of the pandemic, these issues are of greater concern.

Youth are clear: they want to be involved as part of the solution. There are several reasons to involve youth directly:

The Shortage of Adult Helpers.

> ***"Currently, there is only one school psychologist per 1,200 students nationally, above the recommended ratio of 1 per 500 students, according to the National Association of School Psychologists."*** – University of Northern Iowa, *A model for "growing" school psychologists*

And the need is clearly growing. For instance, YouthLine, a teen-to-teen youth crisis and support service, received roughly 1,400 contacts, many coming from in state of Oregon. But, by 2021, things had exploded, with almost 25,000 annual contacts from all across the country.

> ***"This issue has intensified in a COVID world, where teens have lost access to school counselors and support systems. Their journey with mental illness or mental health concerns is made much harder, and they are struggling severely with few ways to feel better."*** - Youth Crisis Line Volunteer, *Tales of a Teen Crisis Worker*

Youth Are Effective

Teens cope better with stress when they interact with their peers, rather than adults. Seven out of 10 youth say that when they are struggling with something, they are more likely to confide in a peer than a trusted adult.

> ***"We just have a much better perspective on what it's like to be a teenager today and the complexities that comes with and the strain that that can put on your mental health."*** – Fiona, Youth Line Volunteer

> ***"Teens are more likely to communicate with their peers than with their parents or teachers. Peer-led counseling programs show promise in helping to detect mental health concerns in younger students."*** – Tonya Russell, *Peer Counseling May Reach Teens in Ways That Adults Can't*

Youth Want to be Part of the Solution

> ***"Youth express a collective desire – they even demand – that adults involve them in creating a more responsive education system so that they can, as one student put it, 'find our way back to loving learning.'"*** – Youth Truth Survey

> ***"I wish the school did more to train and educate its students on how to identify ... warning signs of deteriorating mental health, abuse, self-harm, and violence within their peers - and respond appropriately and compassionately."*** – 12th grade student

Youth Can Handle the Responsibility

> ***"If you're still uneasy about the idea of youth supporting other youth, I understand, but I challenge you to think of us not as kids thrown on a crisis line, but as trained specialists, adequately prepared and supported in doing life-changing (and at times, life-saving) work on both sides of the phone."*** – Youth Line Volunteer

> ***"I asked students, is this too much to take on? But I realized that they're having these conversations with their peers on a daily basis. In the absence of formal training, they very much carry the weight on their shoulders that they have to fix their friends' problems. If we're not engaging them and giving them the right tools and training to engage in those conversations, we're missing the boat."*** - Suzanna Davis, vice president of operations and programs, Grant Us Hope, and former high school principal

There Are Benefits Accrued by Youth Helpers

> ***"Most nights I leave my shift feeling more energized than when I came in. Sitting in that virtual space, talking to those most interesting and dynamic teens, clears my heart of a heavy day and wipes my head of the weight of the world. There is no feeling comparable to being a part of someone's journey to self-love, self-acceptance, and healing, and I gain far much more from the teens I talk to than I could ever give."*** - Youth Crisis Line Volunteer, *Tales of a Teen Crisis Worker*

Below we profile youth-led efforts dedicated to improving youth mental health. In some cases, we hear directly from involved youth leaders through interviews or videos.

Grant Us Hope

According to their website, *Grant Us Hope* is a change agent for teen suicide prevention in the Greater Cincinnati region. They are passionate about providing a platform for teens, parents, and families to engage in pro-mental health conversations, activities, and solutions, and they're committed to expanding the availability, reach, and impact of mental health services for teens in distress.

Grant Us Hope also implements a HOPE Squad program, which they describe as "an evidence-based peer-to-peer suicide prevention program. This school-based initiative includes ongoing mental health/suicide prevention curriculum and empowers youth to apply the lessons using their own creativity**"**.

> **"Seven out of 10 youth say that when they are struggling with something, they are more likely to confide in a peer than a trusted adult." -** Grant Us Hope

You can click on the image below to view a video and learn more about their youth-led efforts.

Source: Grant Us Hope- Hope Squad

HOPE Squad

According to the HOPE Squad National Council, the HOPE Squad program is a school-based peer support team that partners with local mental health agencies. HOPE Squads seek to reduce self-destructive behavior and youth suicide by training, building and creating change in schools and communities.

Peers select students who are trustworthy and caring individuals to join the HOPE Squad. Squad members are trained to watch for at-risk students, provide friendship, identify suicide-warning signs, and seek help from adults. HOPE Squad members are NOT taught to act as counselors but are educated on recognizing suicide warning signs and how to properly and respectfully report concerns to an adult.

> ***"Some students won't get help because they're just afraid to ask for it," said Sofia, a senior at Davidson. But if a peer knows, and if their struggle is seen and heard, then they're able to say, OK, yes, I do need the help. And we can get them to go to an adult themselves."*** - Students Train to Spot Peers with Mental Health Struggles and Guide Them

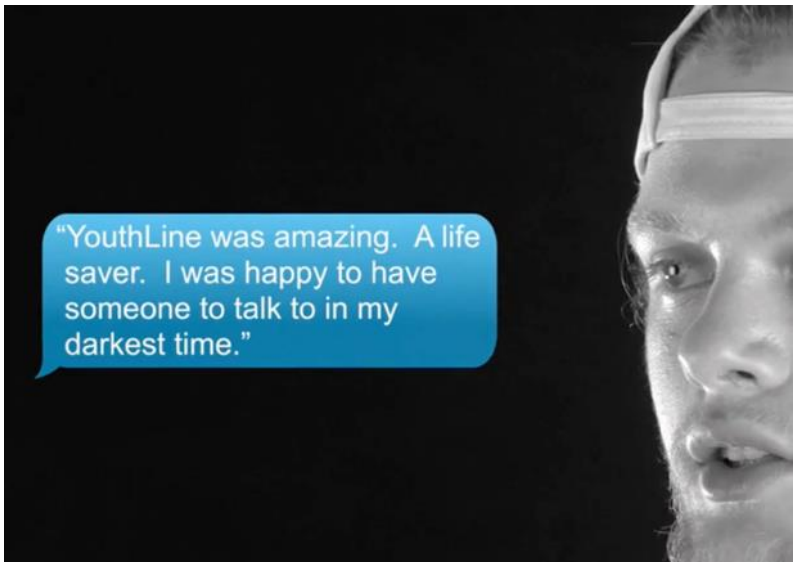
Click on the image below to view a video of statements from HOPE Squad youth volunteers.

Source: 2022 Hope Squad National Conference

YouthLine

YouthLine's website describes their program this way: "We are teens helping teens. YouthLine is a teen-to-teen youth crisis and support service provided by Lines for Life—a non-profit dedicated to preventing substance abuse and suicide. YouthLine operates a national helpline that provides crisis support and referrals via call, text, and chat. The YouthLine is answered by teen volunteers daily from 4pm-10pm PST (and by adults at all other times!). Translation services are available upon request. YouthLine also operates a peer-supported outreach program to destigmatize mental health challenges, increase awareness for mental health and wellness, and encourage youth to reach out for help. YouthLine's helpline and outreach programs are supported by our youth development program, which builds skills and confidence around mental health and wellness."

Click on the image below (video) to learn more about YouthLine.



Source: YouthLine Volunteer Video Update

In the Portland YouthLine program each youth volunteer gets more than 60 hours of training, and master's level supervisors are constantly on standby in the room, listening in and reading along, ready at

a moment's notice to step in if needed. The *PBS News Hour* recently toured the Portland YouthLine program. You can click on the image below to view their broadcast.

Source: PBS News Hour

Simply Wholehearted

Simply Wholehearted is a non-profit organization providing leadership opportunities to historically excluded students in low-income communities, creating game-changers who live, lead, and inspire. Their goal and mission are to provide equal access leadership with no borders because they believe that leadership shouldn't be exclusive to specific communities. *Simply Wholehearted* was founded by Axel Perez. He was 18 when Simply Wholehearted was formally founded (15 if you count the first version created, which stems from his podcast).

Simply Wholehearted supports the youth mental health crisis by connecting them with extracurricular activities that can help boost their mental health and provide resources for organizations servicing mental health. In doing so, they have connected youth to soccer, dance, and student government opportunities. Additionally, Simply Wholehearted has hosted mental health workshops for middle and high school students during the summer in partnership with local school districts.

> ***"Youth can get involved by becoming advocates of change and mental health. It is vital that youth speak up and destigmatize mental health, but most importantly, amongst their peers. Sharing their stories and what has helped improve their mental health is a great start, as well as creating school-wide campaigns to recognize mental health and share resources with the school community. Reaching out to school staff, district services, and community organizations and collaboratively bringing them all together to create an awareness event creates an opportunity for youth leadership, especially when it's student-run and organized."*** - Axel Perez, Simply Wholehearted

A YOUTH LEADER SPEAKS OUT ON A YOUTH-LED MENTAL HEALTH INITIATIVE

Source: Sofia Mendoza

Voices From the Field

Since the return of young people to school and afterschool programs after the COVID shutdowns, there have been major concerns raised by educators and youth workers regarding youth mental health, the increase of challenging behavior and a decrease in acts of kindness shown to peers. Youth are not blind to these issues and want to be part of the solution.

In this vein, meet Sofia Mendoza, a freshman at Purdue University. When she was a senior at Hilliard Davidson High School, she served as a peer-to-peer counselor in the HOPE Squad program. HOPE squad is a school-based peer support team that partners with local mental health agencies. They seek to reduce self-destructive behavior and youth suicide by training, building and creating change in schools and communities.

Below is an interview with Sofia Mendoza about her experiences as a HOPE Squad peer counselor. She is also a featured speaker in an upcoming webinar entitled, *Youth-Led Efforts to Improve Mental Health*.

Q: Why did you join the HOPE Squad?
A: During my freshman year of high school, I was selected to be a HOPE Squad member as the selection process was based on peer-to-peer nominations. I accepted my role because I did not know what HOPE Squad would look like at my school, but I knew that breaking the stigma around mental health was something I wanted to be a part of.

Source: HOPE Squad

Q: How were you prepared for this role?
A: As a HOPE Squad member, we all received instruction on how to Question, Persuade, and Refer our peers, better known as QPR training. We learned about the warning signs of suicide, practiced mock conversations with students, and learned about all the resources students can utilize to find professional help regardless of whether or not the student is in crisis.

Q: Many people say that youth are not able to handle the responsibility of a peer counselor. Please comment on this.
A: The situations that youth must deal with nowadays can be very challenging to navigate and especially mentally draining. Even if a student isn't a peer counselor, they are already helping their peers through these difficult times.

HOPE Squad equips students with a toolbox to navigate these tough conversations. I would also say that as a peer counselor, we focus our efforts on referring students to the correct resources. We are not expected to solve a student's issues, what we are responsible for is recognizing when students are showing signs of suicide and providing them the support to find the resources best for them. Especially with programming such as HOPE Squad, students work hand in hand with their guidance counselors. This relationship is critical because the student does not have the sole responsibility of ensuring their peer gets help, these counselors are here to support as well.

Q: Why do you think this peer approach is important?
A: Unfortunately, there are many students who do not have strong support systems to lean on when going through difficult times. Often when students do have these support systems, they would rather lean on their peers anyways because they do not want to burden their parents and mentors, or they simply may feel uncomfortable talking about their mental struggles. This is where their peers come in because the trust and confidence built between friendships is like no other. Because of these relationships, peers can notice these mental struggles earlier and have the ability to intervene. We must equip youth with the tools to listen and adequately respond when they believe their friends are in crisis. This is why this approach works because speaking about personal struggles comes much easier than discussing these issues with adults.

Q: What impact did serving as a peer counselor have on you?
A: I have gained a new awareness when interacting with people and I feel this experience has increased my emotional intelligence. I do my best to spread positivity each and every day by recognizing that the interactions I have with people can have a huge impact on their lives.

Q: Can you define "kindness"?
A: To me, kindness means being emotionally aware of others and offering continuous support to those around you. Kindness can be shown from little things such as saying thank you, holding the door for others, or even complimenting someone. It can also be exemplified through larger things such as assisting someone through difficult times.

Q: In your experience, what was the impact of the COVID pandemic on young people?
A: The little good that did come from COVID was that the pandemic highlighted the importance of self-care practices. Many students went from rigorous schoolwork and busy lifestyles to immediate isolation. This shift illustrated that it is okay to take breaks and not force students to stretch themselves thin.

Additionally, many young people's lives changed by the pandemic whether their financial, family, or physical situations had changed. These unforeseen circumstances shifted many people's views on what they truly value in life.

Q: Did you find that self-care was important in your role? Can you say more about this?
A: You cannot fully help people when you are not meeting your own needs. Even before joining HOPE Squad I had struggled with this because I enjoyed giving and helping people even when I could not give anymore. Once I was in this role, I found that our curriculum had equally emphasized the importance of self-care, and I even learned about new activities I could try to decompress. I have found that self-care is one of the most important things you could do in order to recharge your social, emotional, and physical batteries.

Q: If schools and youth programs want to learn more about youth led peer counseling, who could they contact or what resources would you recommend?
A: I would recommend schools and youth programs to look into starting a HOPE Squad. This organization has done a good job developing a curriculum for students to follow in order to begin breaking the stigma around mental health. If this opportunity is not an option, an alternative could be hosting educational events centered around mental health by consulting mental health experts in the area. Anything that involves talking about mental struggles and acknowledging that everyone deals with these issues whether big or small, is one step closer to normalizing discussing mental health.

Additionally, I would also recommend having all faculty to be Question, Persuade, Refer (QPR) certified, sponsored by a Youth Suicide Prevention organization, as this is one of the most important educational tools I have been taught. As a society, I think it is important to be able to recognize the warning signs of suicide because this information alone can save lives if we correctly respond to these signs.

Click the image below to hear an interview with Sofia when she was named "A Rising Star."

MORE ABOUT...

Sofia Mendoza is a freshman in First-Year Engineering at Purdue University. She serves as the project manager for the Women in Engineering section of the Engineering Projects in Community Service initiative at Purdue, as well as a multi-faceted dancer for *XSeries* and the *Purdue Contemporary Dance Company*. Along with her passion for STEM and dance, she has an extensive history with advocating for mental health as a past member of HOPE Squad, a peer-to-peer suicide prevention program.

"PUT YOUR OWN OXYGEN MASK ON FIRST": PROMOTING THE MENTAL HEALTH AND SELF-CARE OF AFTERSCHOOL WORKERS

Source: www.pexels.com

Below we offer thoughts on how afterschool programs can promote the mental health of adult staff. We also offer additional resources on mental health.

Don't Forget to Actively Promote the Mental Health of Afterschool Workers
Serving as a youth worker can be very stressful, even before the pandemic. It can be challenging, especially if staff are struggling with their own stress. It is important for afterschool organizations, leaders and individual youth workers to take actions to support the mental health of staff.

> ***"Self-care is giving the world the best of you instead of what's left of you."*** - Katie Reed, Writer, speaker, and mental health advocate

Tips for Afterschool Provider Organizations:

- Ensure access to free mental health services for staff.
- Allow program staff to take mental health days, with pay.
- Lead activities that express appreciation for program staff as important "first responders."
- Even though many programs suffer from staff shortages, try to avoid over scheduling your staff.
- Compensate staff when they work overtime.

Tips for Afterschool Program Leaders:

- Make statements that normalize the stress that comes with youth work and acknowledge the contributions of staff.
- Take the time for frequent team building exercises.
- Promote messaging to staff to set aside time for self-care and seek mental health support when needed. Offer workshops on self-care practices. Incorporate self-care practices into meetings and encourage staff to practice mindfulness, yoga and stretching can help build coping skills.
- Institute check-in circles at staff meetings, which allow people to share their experiences.
- Remind staff, "We can't solve the youth mental health crisis alone. It takes the entire village."

> ***"Self-care is the action and effort of taking care of one's physical, mental and emotional well-being. It is not about being selfish, but rather about self-preservation. It also isn't about investing in products; it's about investing in one's self."*** – National Afterschool Association, *104 Self-Care Strategies for Afterschool Professionals*

Self-Care Tips for Individual Afterschool Workers

- Set aside time for self-care and seek support when needed.
- Take a mental health day as a paid sick day when needed.
- Practice mindfulness, yoga and stretching.

Source: www.pexels.com

"Self-care is a personal practice that should be exercised daily and for the long term. Beginning a self-care journey may feel daunting and overwhelming with all the information available on the topic. The following 104 strategies are tips to help get you started and/or refine your self-care practices. While there plenty of tips included in this guide, identify those which you most resonate with and will help you on your self-care journey." - National Afterschool Association, *104 Self-Care Strategies for Afterschool Professionals*

CONCLUSION and KEY TAKE AWAYS

Young people have proven to be especially vulnerable to mental health issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic. School closures, having to learn remotely, and isolating from friends due to physical distancing have been sources of stress and loneliness.

Afterschool programs are not equipped to solve the youth mental health crisis alone. Youth workers are not trained mental health experts. However, afterschool programs are well positioned to promote positive mental health among their participants. To do this they should lean into their unique strengths. (Note: learning loss indicated by lower reading and math scores should not be the focus of afterschool.)

Afterschool programs can:

- **Ensure that staff know the facts about the youth mental health crisis.**
- **Ensure that staff know the signs to look for**
- **Ensure that staff Know the Risk Factors and Who are most at risk**
- **Afterschool Programs should lean into their strengths, such as:**
    - Building positive relationships with adults and peers;
    - Providing opportunities for youth to express themselves;
    - Designing programs that are predictable and include "Rituals";
    - Promoting peer interaction and support;
    - Engaging youth in efforts to address the mental health crisis.
- **Educate youth to normalize the issue of "mental health"**
- **Know how and when to collaborate with the school and parents and when to refer to a professional.**
- **Get kids moving! -** physical activity can help young people recover from isolation experienced due to the covid pandemic.
- **Offer outdoor education** as research suggests that physical activity in nature can help young people recover from the isolation and fear experienced due to the COVID pandemic.
- **Introduce efforts to prevent meanness and promote kindness.**
- Promoting the mental health and self-care of afterschool workers is the responsibility of provider organizations and program leaders, and individual youth workers. These things require the building of awareness, knowledge, and program planning through training, facilitation, staff discussions and program improvement planning. Providing needed time and resources are the responsibility of provider organizations and program leaders.

We want to hear from you! *What kinds of things are you doing to promote the mental health of staff and participants in your program? Would you add any additional resources that would be valuable to afterschool stakeholders? Email us at* info@temescalassociates.com.

MORE INFORMATION ON AFTERSCHOOL AND YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH

There is an abundance of information on COVID and youth mental health. In addition to the links cited above in this paper, below are some recommended resources on the topics discussed.

MENTAL HEATH

- Shaping Minds: The Mental Health Benefits of After-School Programs
- 5 Things We Learned About Student Mental Health in 2022
- Supporting and Promoting Mental Health in Out-of-School Time
- Sports Coaches Want More Training on How to Address Young Athletes' Mental Health
- K-12 Mental Health & Psychopathology Toolkit
- Spotlight on Student Mental Health
- 2022 Mental Health By the Numbers
- 4 ways to ensure your school's mental health initiatives support transgender students
- 5 ways to help students with ADHD thrive in the classroom
- How School Mental Health Professionals Can Banish Burnout
- How Can I Support You? A Teen Mental Health Primer

BULLYING

- Preventing And Tackling Bullying
- Standing on the Edge: How School Leaders Apply Restorative Practices in Response to Cyberbullying and Online Aggression
- 11 Facts About Bullying Everyone Should Know

SELF-CARE

- 104 Self-Care Strategies For Afterschool Professionals
- Self-Care and Wellness for Child Care Professionals
- 9 Steps to Taking Care of Yourself
- 5 Mindfulness Apps for Teachers

YOUTH SUICIDE

- Addressing the Rise in Youth Suicide

YOUTH-LED EFFORTS TO IMPROVE YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH

- Peer Counseling May Reach Teens in Ways That Adults Can't
- Grant Us Hope
- HOPE Squad
- YouthLine
- Simply Wholehearted

SPEAKER'S FORUMS/ TRAINING WEBINARS

Temescal Associates and The How Kids Learn Foundation have sponsored 3 recent webinars on the topic of kindness and mental health. We invite you to view these presentations by clicking on the image below.

How Afterschool Programs Can Respond to the Youth Mental Health Crisis

This webinar offers a deep dive into the issue of youth mental health (stress, trauma, anxiety and depression) and how best to respond to this in afterschool programs. This webinar features developmental psychologist, Dr. Gil Noam, Associate Professor at Harvard Medical School and founder of Partnerships in Education and Resilience (PEAR). Dr. Noam discusses how these issues manifest, who we should involve if we have concerns, and what strategies we can use in afterschool to help alleviate these issues.

Managing Challenging Behavior in Afterschool

This webinar focuses on managing challenging behavior, supporting kids who struggle, finding your footing (spot) when the behavior of certain kids (or parents!) pushes your buttons. Our featured presenter is family therapist, school consultant and parenting expert, Sheri Glucoft Wong, LCSW. We also hear from a panel of afterschool leaders, Autrilla Gillis (ISANA Academies) and Ludecea Nunis, MSW, ASW (YMCA Urban Services Bureau), and open up the rest of the time for comments and questions of the registrants.

Promoting Kindness in Afterschool Programs

This interactive webinar will focus on strategies of how we can promote kindness in our afterschool programs. Our featured presenter is Stu Semigran, Co- Founder and President of The EduCare Foundation. He just authored a book entitled, *Heartset Education: A Way of Living and Learning*. Following his presentation, registrants share their strategies and ask questions.

Youth-Led Efforts to Improve Mental Health

This webinar will feature youth leaders who have worked to improve youth mental health and are associated with Simply Wholehearted and Hope Squad (providing peer-to-peer mental health support). We will hear their perspectives and from a school official on the importance of engaging youth in mental health initiatives. Our speakers will share their programs they are involved with, direct participants to resources, and answer any questions. Participants will also be encouraged to share strategies they are using to improve youth mental health.