

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Out-of-School Time Study, conducted by the School-Age Child Care Project at the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women, is an investigation of how young low-income children in three urban communities spend their daytime hours outside of school. The study looks at what children are doing and where; it also examines what parents want for their children, the barriers they encounter, and the impact of maternal employment on children's out-of-school time.

These are questions that have both immediate urgency and long-term implications for school-age children and their parents, and for the nation as a whole. In the 1990s, more American children than ever are living in poverty. Violence, crime, and substance abuse have a pervasive impact on the lives of children living in at-risk urban neighborhoods, compromising their social, emotional, and cognitive development. Teachers are struggling to work with a cohort of children who are more aggressive and disorganized, and less adept with language, than their predecessors. Clearly, there is an increasing need to look beyond the walls of the classroom to other resources for children and families.

A great deal is already known about what children need to thrive, and about what causes them to languish or become troubled. The Out-of-School Time Study reviewed the literature on two kinds of research—outcome research, which examines the effects of Head Start, preschool child care, school-age child care, and self-care—and research on resiliency, which explores why some children thrive despite environmental and biological risk factors. The full report reviews the literature in detail. Less well understood—and thus the focus of our own work—is how children's needs and parents' preferences and aspirations for their children intersect with the realities of their lives.

Why Study Children's Out-of-School Time?

Research suggests that how children spend their out-of-school hours can significantly affect their social development and school success. Even children in good schools do not get their full quota of constructive learning activities during the school day; research indicates that children who spend 20-35 hours per week engaged in constructive learning activities are significantly more likely to succeed in school. Children's out-of-school hours represent a substantial ongoing opportunity for them to learn through play, to learn how to get along with other children, and to have enduring and supportive relationships with adults. Several studies have found that school-age children's academic performance is enhanced by attending formal child-care programs of at least adequate quality. Children attending such programs have been found to have better work habits and peer relations, and to be better adjusted and less antisocial than children who spent their out-of-school hours alone, with their mothers, or informally supervised by other adults. Other studies have found how well a child gets along with other children to be a better predictor of adult adjustment than academic performance or classroom behavior.

“Research suggests that how children spend their out-of-school hours can significantly affect their social development and school success.”

What Is At Stake for Low-Income Children?

“Out-of-school time has the potential to contribute to all three protective mechanisms.”

We decided to focus our attention on low-income children because there is considerable evidence that the stakes are particularly high for them and for their families. For children in lower-quality schools, in-school time spent on constructive activities can be as meager as seven hours per week. When low-income children attend disorganized schools, out-of-school time offers the best hope for overcoming the negative effects of poverty. There is growing evidence, in fact, that formal after-school programs can do just that. The research literature on resiliency indicates that children who successfully overcome the effects of such risk factors as poverty and exposure to violence are protected by (1) individual factors, including cognitive abilities, sociability, and language skills; (2) stable relationships with caring adults; and (3) external support from individuals and community institutions. Out-of-school time has the potential to contribute to all three protective mechanisms. Research suggests that low-income children are more isolated from their peers during the out-of-school hours than higher-income children, and have less opportunities to develop either individual skills or external relationships. Most formal after-school programs operate exclusively on parent fees, thereby excluding families who cannot pay average weekly fees of \$45. Only about one-third of school-age care programs enjoy *any* governmental support for low-income participants.

Another large and compelling body of evidence reveals that the primary out-of-school activity of many American children is watching television. On average, American children spend 40 hours a week watching television and playing video games, more hours than they spend in school. Specifically, children in low-income households are estimated to spend 50 percent more time watching television than their more affluent peers. It is known that children who watch more television than average are more obese, read less, and play less than their peers; they are also more aggressive and more fearful of violence, and have more stereotyped views of sex roles. Heavy television watching appears to have a variety of detrimental effects on children’s intellectual and social development. Furthermore, there is evidence that playing with friends during out-of-school time is associated with school achievement and adult success. Children from low-income homes, however, tend to be more isolated from peers during out-of-school time than middle-income children.

Despite evidence that unsatisfactory child-care arrangements are associated with less competent parenting and low parental morale, surprisingly little is known about how parents make decisions about their children’s out-of-school time. Our study investigated how parents feel about their children’s use of out-of-school time. We also looked at whether parents postpone employment or limit their work hours in the absence of affordable, high-quality child care.

The Design and Methodology of the Study

Our research questions embody our interest in finding out not only what children do outside of school, but also how their parents and teachers