Toronto School-Age Quality Standards Support Guide

A companion to the Toronto School-Age Quality Standards Inventory

INTRODUCTION

High quality after-school programs support children's social, emotional and physical development. They provide space for children to explore their autonomy, develop aptitudes, and form important peer and adult relationships. Given the importance of after-school programs in supporting children and families, as well as the substantial amount of time children spend in these programs, high quality in programs is essential, regardless of program type or location.

Early in 2015, The City of Toronto embarked on research to identify the characteristics of high quality after-school programs. This research merged Toronto's after-school program community's expertise with a robust pool of research evidence to establish 10 quality standards for Toronto's after-school programs.

The 10 Quality Standards are:

- Sound Leadership & Staffing Practices
- Quality Interactions & Relationships
- Provides a Positive Atmosphere
- Safe & Healthy
- Fosters Well-Being & Healthy Self-Beliefs
- Quality Programming
- Intentional Pedagogical Approaches
- Culturally Responsive & Inclusive
- Integrated Community Partnerships
- Evaluates Effectiveness

This Support Guide was designed to accompany the School-age Quality Standards Inventory and provides programs with evidence-based strategies to support their implementation of the 10 Quality Standards. To that end, this Support Guide offers:

- **Research** on characteristics of high-quality in after-school programs;
- **Strategies** proven effective in advancing quality in after-school programs through the use of the inventory; and
- **Reflective Questions** to guide professional discussions.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Program leaders, staff and other after-school program professionals are encouraged to use this Support Guide together with the School-Age Quality Standards Inventory. Because reflective practice is central to continuous quality improvement, this resource can be used to guide deliberately planned conversations (e.g., during staff meetings) wherein leaders and staff reflect on areas of strength and areas for improvement. By building on strategies implemented effectively in other programs, after-school programs using this Support Guide can drive their own continuous quality advancement. Throughout this document, there are questions for reflection. They are included to inspire thought and conversation around the 10 quality standards, programming, and pedagogy.

The strategies presented on the following pages of this Support Guide are categorized according to the 10 after-school program quality standards.

HOW THIS GUIDE WAS DEVELOPED

The City of Toronto, in partnership with over 30 after-school programs, developed and piloted the Toronto School-age Quality Standards Inventory – a document linking evidence with practice through the provision of research based quality characteristics (e.g., things for programs to look for). Supervisors from after-school programs across Toronto were recruited, and qualitative data were collected over the course of several months. Program supervisors shared strategies they've used to advance quality in their programs. These strategies were collected with the aim of harnessing program leaders' expertise and creativity. In this way, supervisors and staff were considered experts and their voices were high priority in informing this guide to ensure its practical use. Their input was then paired with relevant evidence from current research.

For a write-up of the research and findings regarding the effectiveness of the School-Age Quality Standards Inventory in improving program quality please see: Toronto School-age Quality Standards – Research Report (Lopata & Grundmann, 2016).

LEADERSHIP & STAFFING

Exceptional after-school program leaders articulate their program's vision and goals to staff, administrators, children, families, and community leaders (Huang, 2001). Previous research shows high quality staff are approachable, engaged, and interested. They act respectfully towards children and their families, listen actively, and model positive behavior (Chung, 2000; Harvard Family Research Project, 2006).
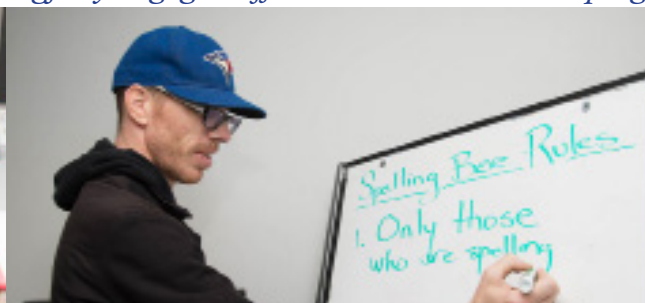
PHILOSOPHY & GOALS

Effective after-school program leaders provide a clear program vision and implement informed staffing policies (Huang, 2001). These leaders motivate and empower staff and ensure the availability of sufficient resources thereby creating a positive work environment for everyone (Huang, 2008; Wright, 2005).

- Review existing organizational statements as a starting point upon which to base your school-age program statement

- Program statement includes guiding principles on inclusion, equity, and anti-oppression

- Invite team members to explore and discuss the concept (i.e., underlying values) of a program statement for your particular program

- Provide opportunities (e.g., meetings) for staff input to inform the development of the program statement

- Revisit and review the program statement annually

- Include children in developing program goals

- Once you've come up with program goals, post them in the program environment

- Implement a workplace respect policy (e.g., inclusion, equity, and anti-oppression) for staff, parents, visitors, and children. This type of policy benefits all programs and their participants

Effective programs have strong leaders that implement informed staffing policies (HUANG, 2001).

How do you meaningfully engage staff in conversation about program quality and pedagogy?

Collaborative, respectful, and knowledgeable leaders are key to program success and staff retention. Recognizing staff as skilled professionals and compensating them adequately can help mitigate turnover. Providing low staff-to-child ratios also helps staff develop more meaningful relationships with children and families (Yohalem, Pittman & Wilson-Ahlstrom, 2004).

- When possible, pursue full-time or additional opportunities within the organization (e.g., summer opportunities) for staff with minimum or part-time hours. This may be an incentive for valuable staff to stay with the organization longer

- Share information about transitioning of staff (e.g., career changes, new hires, retirements) with staff, parents, and children. This can be done broadly as well as during program time

How do you know staff are fully engaged and feel empowered?

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Research shows that program staff in high-quality after-school programs are experienced and well trained (Huang, 2008; Wright, 2005). When staff have access to ongoing professional development opportunities both the children and broader organization benefit from the knowledge and skills developed (Wright, 2005).

- Encourage staff to attend relevant information sessions, workshops, and city-organized trainings. This could involve posting upcoming opportunities and incentivising attendance/ participation

- Provide dedicated times during staff meetings to share and discuss team members' relevant professional learnings and knowledge gained

- Embed professional learning conversations into staff meetings thereby supporting ongoing reflective practice

Quality Interactions & Relationships

Researchers agree that positive and responsive relationships are essential to high-quality programs (Ministry of Education, Ontario, 2014). This includes relationships between staff and children, children and their peers, staff and colleagues, and with other program partners including families and the community. Staff and educators build relationships and model positive interactions that are warm, responsive and inclusive. Nurturing peer relationships in after-school programs promotes the sense of security that is so important to children's overall growth and development. Authentic engagement can strengthen important extra-familial bonds that children carry with them for the rest of their lives (St. Clair, 2004; Wright et al, 2006).

How do you establish meaningful relationships with children? How do you encourage their full participation?

Interactions & Relationships

- Establish a regular practice of asking children how their day was

- Staff regularly engage and play with children at the children's eye level as play partners

- Invite children to participate in planning their learning experiences [or programming]

- Promote children's areas of confidence by
  -creating a designated space to show their work and accomplishments
  -utilizing emergent opportunities to reinforce children's competencies

- Plan mentoring opportunities amongst children. Older children can help younger ones with homework and learning more about their mutual interests

- Embed planned and emergent leadership opportunities in learning experiences to support/build children's autonomy and self-esteem

Staff of high-quality programs are approachable, engaged, and interested. They act respectfully towards children, listen actively, and model positive behaviour (Harvard Family Research Project, 2006).

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The program environment plays a key role in promoting quality interactions and learning experiences for children, staff and families. Often considered the "third teacher" (Malaguzzi, 1993), the environment should support the program's vision and statement and promote inclusion and belonging.

PROGRAM SPACE

High quality after-school programs have adequate space for varied types of activities and invite children to investigate, learn and create through the use of different materials. Research supports the inclusion of natural elements in indoor and outdoor space to nurture children's innate curiosity and connection with the natural world (Ministry of Education, Ontario, 2014). This may in turn help promote children's overall health and well-being, including their spiritual, emotional, and physical

Are there any program environment factors causing stress for children and staff? What can you do to alleviate these stressors?

BELONGING

High quality programs intentionally set up space that reflects and respects the ideas, values, attitudes and cultures of program participants. Previous research shows that high quality learning environments offer a positive atmosphere where everyone has a sense of belonging, feels connected to each other, and are valued (National Children's Alliance, 2005).

- Intentionally set up program space to engage children with varying abilities, interests, and needs (e.g., quiet space, space for active play, etc.)

- Design program space to encourage the interconnection between participants and their program (e.g., post photographs, art and projects displaying participants as active members of their after-school program community)

- Access neighbouring outdoor spaces including fields, courts, and playgrounds

- Incorporate children's choice of activities in program plans

- Post a visual schedule in a place that is easily accessible to children, staff, and parents

- Encourage children to explore their developing identities through play in an inclusive and non-judgmental environment

- Provide ongoing opportunities for children to plan and participate in their community events and celebrations (e.g., Diwali, Pride) during program time

Both staff and children benefit from a positive program environment founded on clear expectations (BECKETT ET AL., 2001).

SAFE & HEALTHY

When children experience a safe environment wherein their physical and emotional needs are met, they can engage in higher order cognitive endeavours (e.g., learning, creating, analyzing, interacting; Maslow, 1970). To develop these important skills, children need to feel secure and cared for.

SECURITY & SUPERVISION

High quality after-school programs prioritize safety and security in both indoor and outdoor spaces (Huang et al., 2008). This is accomplished through consistent staff supervision, particularly during periods of transition (e.g., to and from school and during program time).

• Take and document attendance daily

• Follow up (e.g., phone calls) with parents/caregivers when a child is absent. In programs we visited, this was often entrusted as a staff responsibility

• Identify and utilize designated meeting locations to safely transition children to and from school

• Ensure parents/caregivers complete an information form documenting authorized people who can pick up their children

HEALTH PROMOTION

Promoting wellness and educating children on health and nutrition are also important in after-school programs. Quality programs promote health by ensuring staff are aware of and implement measures to reduce health risks (e.g., frequent hand-washing, etc.; Wright, 2005).

• Clean and/or disinfect areas before and after use (e.g., snack and homework tables)

• Implement an anaphylaxis management policy

• Post information on children with allergy and food considerations. Consider including photos of children alongside their allergies/considerations for easy identification

What policies and procedures are in place to minimize stress on children during transitions?

What is your role in supporting smooth transitions to, from, and during program time?

WELL-BEING & POSITIVE SELF BELIEFS

WBSB

High-quality after-school programs promote well-being by providing healthy snacks and implementing a variety of other measures to increase general wellness (e.g., allowing for breaks as needed, ensuring access to outdoor spaces; Wright, 2005). According to the National Children's Alliance (2006), after-school programs serve multiple purposes in healthy child development such as integrating gross and fine motor skills, promoting stress management, reducing alienation, loneliness, and antisocial behaviour, and enhancing social inclusion.

What do you do to promote children's positive self-image on a daily basis?

IDENTITY

High quality after-school programs nurture children's physical, social, and emotional health and wellness. They recognize the importance of each child's holistic development and pay special attention to building self-awareness, self-esteem, and autonomy (Harvard Family Research Project, 2004).

- Plan reflective activities surrounding children's self-perceptions (e.g., a "who am I" activity)

- Invite children to explore the factors and contexts (e.g., home, school, after-school) influencing who they are (i.e., their identity – including their cultural, sexual, and gender identities)

- Invite other organizations/partners (e.g., Indigenous, LGBTQ2S, etc.) to provide workshops, programs, and sessions to promote healthy self-beliefs (e.g., anti-bullying, self-esteem building workshops)

- Speak sensitively when using language surrounding body image and eating habits

NUTRITION & PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

High-quality after-school programs not only provide healthy snacks in appropriate portions, they also cultivate children's understandings of healthy nutrition and eating habits. Staff model healthy lifestyle choices such as proper nourishment and regular physical activity.

High-quality programs promote well-being by providing healthy snacks and implementing measures to increase wellness (WRIGHT, 2005).

- Engage children in conversations about healthy foods, where they come from, and options for preparation

- Prepare physical activity plans to maximize the inclusion of children with varying abilities

- Encourage staff to participate in at least one physical activity with children each day

QUALITY PROGRAMMING

By having a solid understanding of child development, program staff are well equipped to plan and implement developmentally appropriate and rewarding learning experiences.

QP

CHILD-CENTRED; VARIETY OF LEARNING EXPERIENCES

Are all children able to fully participate in the activities they choose?

High quality after-school programs intentionally consider, plan and implement a variety of learning activities thereby allowing children with different strengths to participate and build self-confidence. Building on children's natural curiosity and interests, programs support the development of problem-solving and creative thinking skills.

- Create opportunities (through multiple means) for children to share ideas on their after-school program content/activities
    - e.g., a white board to write ideas on
    - e.g., an idea dropbox

- Encourage staff to tailor activities according to children's interests and developmental ages and stages

- Provide resources and materials throughout the program space that nurture children's natural curiosity and facilitate exploration

- Provide hands-on opportunities (e.g., activity centres) that enable children's problem solving abilities

- Consider making dedicated time and space for homework during program time
    - e.g., one program we visited schedules 15-20 mins of daily homework time
    - e.g., provide an area as dedicated homework space

Evidence-based programming that builds on children's strengths and accounts for their preferences ensures that all children can participate and demonstrate their progress through the means best suited to them (BIRMINGHAM ET AL., 2005).

INTENTIONAL PEDAGOGICAL APPROACHES

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High-quality after-school programs implement evidence-based pedagogies that provide opportunities for children to learn according to their individual learning preferences. Such program delivery approaches ensure that all children not only participate, they thrive (Birmingham et al., 2005). Increasingly, the education community has focused on the whole-child with the goal of programming being the broad development of cognitive, social, and emotional well-being (Schaps, 2006; Hodgkinson, 2006). While school typically emphasizes children's cognitive development, particularly in reading, writing, math, science and technology, there is an emerging opportunity for after-school programs to support children's social and emotional development (Harvard Family Research Project, 2004; 2005; 2006).

PEDAGOGICAL APPROACHES

- Staff observe children during learning experiences and assist them in developing knowledge and understandings

- Staff use timely questioning to guide children's learning towards discovery

- Programs may benefit from professional learning experiences for staff on Questioning. They may consider posting questioning tools/prompts and other information in a visible location. This can serve as a reminder for staff and children about the role of ongoing inquiry in learning

- Embed skill and knowledge development opportunities into play and games

- Staff document and reflect on pedagogy through a variety of means (e.g., written observations, photos, children's portfolios)

- Staff attend to and note children's evolving interests and learning preferences preparing them to tailor learning experiences as opportunities emerge

- Staff converse with one another and share their own best methods and practices for engaging and working with specific children

How do you document and build on children's 'in the moment' explorations and related learnings?

Culturally Responsive and Inclusive

In high quality after-school programs, leaders and staff engage parents, family members, and the broader community (Chung, 2000; Owens & Vallercamp, 2003). Researchers suggest that staff in high quality after-school programs should be culturally competent and aware of the social (and community) factors affecting children's lives (Huang, 2001; Schwartz, 1996). All children see themselves reflected in activities, the environment, and overall programming.

Do all children see themselves reflected in your program in terms of culture, language, ability, and gender?

What evidence is there of such inclusion?

Responsive & Inclusive

- Program staff continuously observe and attune themselves to the children's unique and additional support needs and ensure inclusion across programming

- Staff reach out to other programs and services for external support to supplement their own knowledge and abilities

- Investigate and access programs and services to support program delivery for those with additional and/or unique needs (e.g., children with disabilities, children that are gifted and talented)

- Consider providing resources in the languages of the communities served

- Encourage and plan activities recognizing families' home languages, family structures, and celebrations (e.g., plan inclusive approaches to mother's day and father's day)

- Staff engage in inclusion and equity-focused professional learning

Staff in high-quality after-school programs are culturally competent and aware of social factors affecting children's lives (HUANG, 2001; Schwartz, 1996).

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

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Strong community partnerships provide the opportunity to engage with people, places and the local environment. Community partnerships enhance after-school programs by providing opportunities to apply inquiries and learnings in real world settings. By building relationships and partnerships with the community, children develop important ties that support their participation in community projects, opportunities, and events. These are invaluable experiences that can help inform professional and career choices down the road. Research literature highlights the importance of school partnerships, and encourages regular communication with teachers and administrative staff (Harvard Family Research Project, 2005).

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

- Initiate and engage parents in friendly discussion regularly

- When discussing sensitive issues, respect the need for privacy and use space accordingly. For example, when speaking to a parent/guardian about a child's behaviour, it is appropriate to do so privately, away from where others can hear

- Make available a variety of information (e.g., flyers, pamphlets, websites) on family support resources

- Plan opportunities for civic and community engagement
    - e.g., visit local libraries and cultural centres
    - e.g., explore volunteer opportunities in the community
    - e.g., invite community members to share their knowledge, experience, and histories

- Engage and communicate with school staff (e.g., principals, teachers, bus drivers) often. One program we visited shared that they aim to communicate with school staff daily

Effective leaders and staff consider community engagement and local partnerships when planning activities and learning experiences (HARVARD FAMILY RESEARCH PROJECT, 2005).

How can you connect with community partners to better support children's holistic development (e.g., mental health, nutrition, etc.)?

EVALUATION

Continuous evaluation of a broad range of program factors is necessary for the long-term sustainability and quality improvement of after-school programs (Huang, 2001). Meaningful evaluation is broad in scope and assesses activities, staff performance, and children's learning regularly (Seppanen et al., 1993). These evaluations ensure that the needs of all program stakeholders are met, and that programs continually deliver high quality programming (Fashola, 1998).

- Create opportunities for program participants to provide feedback on programming.
    - -e.g., simple surveys for children, staff, and parents
    - -e.g., a comment dropbox
    - -e.g., informal dialogue/conversations

- Record and reflect on staff's informal feedback (e.g., their observations on the program). This can be documented in a dedicated notebook or file, on paper or digitally

- Conduct mid- and year-end performance reviews for all staff

- Ensure ample time to review and reflect on performance reviews individually, together with individual staff, and as a team

How do you know if you are successfully meeting your program goals?

Meaningful evaluations ensure that the needs of all program stakeholders are met, and that programs continually ensure they are delivering high quality after-school programming (FASHOLA, 1998).

How often do you monitor progress?

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