

# A Blueprint for Promoting Academic and Social Competence in After-School Programs

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# A Blueprint for Promoting Academic and Social Competence in After-School Programs

 Springer

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*This book is dedicated to two exceptional individuals.*

*To Laurence P. “Jim” Smith who is the very essence of what this book is about and whose unrelenting focused interest in the lives of children in need will forever be an example of what civic virtue really means.*

*To Pat King whose contribution to this book and to the lives of children is felt by each of us in our hearts and minds every moment of every day.*

# Preface

This is a book about after-school programming. It is unique in the after-school programming literature for several reasons. First, it offers a theoretical and research foundation upon which to build effective after-school activities. Second, it systematically provides a series of templates that draws upon that theory and research to enable staff to build a successful after-school program. Third, it evaluates these efforts and offers an affordable approach for undertaking future field evaluations. Fourth, for the growing evidence-based prevention practice literature, it is step in the direction of designing the next generation for program models.

## Theory and Research Base

To revisit the first of the four statements above, this book offers the after-school program developer and staff member a context from which their work with young people should emerge. For example, in Chapter 1, Martin Bloom examines the multiple meanings of social competency from an ecological perspective. Martin then offers eight observations that are necessary for good programs to develop. In Chapter 2, Deirdre Fitzgerald provides an example-rich discussion of the way in which young people learn. This chapter offers an important backdrop against which the “blueprint” found in this book is drawn. Chapter 3 by Joseph Durlak, Sasha Berger, and Christine Celio departs from these theoretical perspectives to examine the small but increasing research base to identify effective after-school practices. In Chapter 4, Maurice Elias and Jennifer Gordon focus on activities that promote social and emotional learning and discuss the importance of nurturing this type of interpersonal intelligence among children attending after-school programs. Preston Britner and Lisa Kraimer-Rickaby continue this examination of specific interventions in Chapter 5 with their review of mentoring and its role in promoting academic and social competency. These foundational chapters conclude with Christine

Celio and Joseph Durlak describing in Chapter 6 the important differences between community service and service-learning.

These chapters provide leads to successful programming by emphasizing, each in its own way, that effective after-school programming must encourage academic achievement and healthy personal growth through planned intentional processes. They arrive at this conclusion from many different starting points, and this leads to a potential dilemma: to emphasize a strict adherence to one successful program or to recognize the diversity that occurs in every human setting.

To work, the current generation of effective prevention/health promotion programs depend on tightly adhering to an implementation protocol. Developed in laboratory-like settings with a highly motivated and invested staff testing those interventions, these programs have experienced less success when removed from this protective greenhouse-like atmosphere and planted in outside communities. Developers have responded to these realities by talking to the group being trained to deliver the services about the importance of fidelity and dosage and generally being ignored by that same group. This reality has been duly noted and calls made from the field of prevention science and funding bodies for a second generation of prevention initiatives that can better withstand this tinkering process.

## **Translating Theory and Research into Practice Strategies: Templates for Program Development**

In the spirit of that challenge and with the encouragement and support of the Salmon Foundation, we approached the objective of increasing academic achievement and nurturing prosocial behavior among school-aged children with the expectation that this program would be added to, changed, and modified. To use a food analogy, consider this program to be a densely rich tomato sauce. There is one absolute necessary ingredient to tomato sauce – tomatoes – beyond which an almost countless number of other ingredients can be added to satisfy the tastes of different groups. These capers, sausages, onions, garlic, basil, and so forth, address the ethnic, racial, religious, and socioeconomic issues of those various constituencies. So, what are these varieties of tomatoes? They are four operating assumptions that lead to a set of design templates that staff use to create *their* program. Those elements are

1. Cognitive learning theory is an effective way to teach new behavior. By offering examples of desired behaviors, modeling those behaviors, and encouraging those good behaviors, the good behavior develops.
2. Learning occurs developmentally, and opportunities for learning must be matched to the child's developmental ability to learn.

3. Intelligence is best viewed through multiple dimensions (verbal/linguistic, mathematical, kinesthetic, interpersonal, etc.). No one form of intelligence is “better” than another – they are simply different. One or another may be more useful in one time/context than another. All represent potentialities of human beings.
4. Primary prevention involves preventing predictable problems, protecting existing strengths, and promoting possible desired goals. This scientific perspective and its technology provides an effective approach to achieving academic growth and prosocial behavior.

The use of templates is a departure from the general practice of manualized programming where staff are given a prepared program, instructed in its use, and expected to implement it with proper fidelity and dosage. To return to our tomato sauce imagery for a moment, manualized programming is like purchasing a jar of tomato sauce off the grocery store shelves and serving it according to label directions. This might happen the first time but eventually human nature being what it is becomes bored with the product. Experience suggests that generating continued staff enthusiasm for an effort that requires so little personal investment is difficult to sustain. Thus, the use of this tomato sauce or prevention program may be only as long as the jar or program funding lasts. Again, experience suggests that it is not uncommon to find both half-emptied jars and partially implemented programs relegated to the trash before their time is due. In their place is yet another jar of sauce and some other packaged program promising change that never occurs because the same staff behavioral dynamics are repeated.

The Salmon program is a planned effort to alter this outcome by empowering staff with the responsibility to create the program while adhering to certain fundamental principles. Creating a program begins over three trainings with a facilitator.<sup>1</sup> Prior to meeting, staff read the background chapters in this book appropriate to the day’s assignment. The material in the Salmon program is divided into three sessions. In the first session, the staff map their workday, establish activity periods, identify problem times in their schedule, and use a logic plan to create meaningful multiple intelligence activities. In the second session, the staff establish an *authoritative* disciplinary system that is fair, consistent, and permitting of appeals. In the third session, staff focus their attention on logic model activities that enhance interpersonal intelligence (social competency) and gain an appreciation for promoting health and reducing illness among the youth attending this program.

Do not assume that with the conclusion of these three staff sessions that the job is complete. Quite the contrary, it has only just begun. Programs are dynamic and ever-changing requiring continual adjustments. There is one

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<sup>1</sup> The training of trainers in the use of this curriculum is provided by the Child & Family Agency of Southeastern Connecticut. To learn more, check their Web site at [www.cfapress.org](http://www.cfapress.org).



constant, however, and this is the four assumptions behind the templates that give rise to the program. It is against these assumptions that the program templates are completed, implemented, and evaluated by the staff.

## Evaluation

Because programs emerging from the Salmon curriculum may differ from the one evaluated in this book, it is important that an affordable evaluation strategy, able to be implemented by individuals not steeped in research methodology and statistics, be developed. In keeping with our love of food analogies, we looked about our community kitchen, uncovered a box of philo sheets, and offer for your consideration a “baklava” research strategy. What is baklava? It is a pastry made of very thin sheets of philo dough with honey, nuts, and spices between each sheet. One sheet of philo dough does not make baklava. It is the layering of multiple sheets with other ingredients that results in this delicious Greek pastry.

Now to apply this food imagery to the Salmon curriculum evaluation, we used the findings of other after-school programs to identify possible outcome measures. These included improved academic grades, the development of prosocial behavior, and fewer problem behaviors (see Chapter 3). Because the Salmon program is interested in nurturing five specific prosocial behaviors, we developed and administered a simple questionnaire to staff and parents to assess their perceptions of the growth of these behaviors in the sample population over the course of one academic year. To assess academic growth and behavior, we acquired the school report cards of children previously in the program and currently in the program and compared those reports on academic subjects, behaviors, attendance, and teacher comments against matched controls. Like a single sheet of thin philo dough, each of these efforts is inadequate to establish the effectiveness of the program. However, it is our contention that when layered together, the depth of the evidence either supports or refutes the efforts being undertaken by the program. Does every piece of evidence need to point in the desired direction of academic and prosocial growth?

It would be wonderful if it did, but philo dough sheets can tear or crumble and the desired overall result may appear less than perfect when in fact the finished product is completely acceptable. We contend that if staff perceive children behaving prosocially, and parents perceive children behaving prosocially, and teachers perceive children behaving prosocially, then at least in those three settings prosocial behavior appears to be the rule rather than the exception.

We contend that prosocial behavior will continue in these three settings only so long as it is encouraged. It will generalize to other settings (the neighborhood)

if those other settings (e.g., the neighborhood) are either encouraging of or neutral of prosocial behavior. For many youth, these prosocial behaviors will compartmentalize in an antisocial environment like a troubled neighborhood. That is, the behavior of the young person will correspond with the setting for survival reasons. Further, these prosocial behaviors will disappear if at least two of the three settings (family, after-school program, school) do not maintain prosocial environments. The sobering reality of this paragraph is that this program, *any program*, will not result in lasting generalized change unless the environment permits that change to take root!

## Next Generation of Primary Prevention Programming

This reality brings us to a discussion of the next generation of prevention programs. Two of the editors of this volume have had the scholarly opportunity to observe and participate in the development of the mental health prevention and health promotion movement over the past 35-plus years. Drawing upon their experiences as past editors of the *Journal of Primary Prevention* and most recently editing the *Encyclopedia of Primary Prevention and Health Promotion*, we recognized in a fleeting “ah ha” moment that the majority of the current generation of effective evidence-based prevention/health promotion program developers assume that the implementers are in fact *ready*, *willing*, and with proper training *able* to implement the program.

Unfortunately, in many instances this is not the case. Interestingly, we are observing prevention developers recognizing this fallacy and assessing the willingness of a site prior to providing staff training to implement their good program. We believe even this is not enough. We believe that a staff must be made ready and that the next generation of programs will focus on readiness preparation. What is *ready*? Think of ready as a primer coat or a wash upon a canvas *before* the finish coat or artistry is applied. In the Salmon program, *ready* means that the staff is equipped with the necessary tools and prepared to positively act on behalf of the young people entrusted to their care. Now it may well be that a primer coat alone is sufficient – that is the Salmon program. Or it may be that other good prevention programs will be layered onto the initial programming effort. Clearly, this will require that the initial effort has the robust flexibility both theoretically and practically to incorporate this new effort into the program. We believe the Salmon program is an important first step in that direction.

We cannot conclude this introduction without again acknowledging the Salmon Foundation for its support of our efforts to design this blueprint for successful after-school programming. We need to thank the B. P. Learned Mission and its board of directors for believing that its venerable institution

could be safely entrusted to us. We would be remiss if we did not also thank the Connecticut Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services and in particular its commissioner, Thomas A. Kirk, and director of prevention, Dianne Harnad, for their support in the development of this curriculum.

Finally, for those of us long associated with Child & Family Agency of Southeastern Connecticut, it could only be in this tolerant, friendly, and adventurous setting that a program like this could even be envisioned. This remarkable agency, descended from a female benevolent charitable society that continues to be governed by a volunteer structure reminiscent of that founding group, challenges us daily to do better in fulfilling its mission of serving children. And that is what this book is about – doing better by the children who in a very few short years will have the responsibility of governing this republic in a socially, morally, and ethically responsible manner.

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## About the Editors

**Martin Bloom** obtained a Ph.D. in social psychology from the University of Michigan in 1963, after receiving a diploma in social study from the University of Edinburgh in 1958. He recently retired from a career in research in gerontology and teaching at schools of social work. Some of his publications are mentioned in his chapter. His current preoccupations include primary prevention, art, and grandchildren – not necessarily in the order presented.

**Christianne F. Gullotta, B.S.**, a certified prevention specialist, has worked with youth and their families for more than 30 years. She is currently the youth program coordinator for Glastonbury Youth and Family Services. She has received the Governor's Award for Service, the Connecticut Youth Services Award for her efforts in the field of prevention, and most recently an award from Harvard University's School of Education for her developmental coaching of undergraduate education majors. She developed the Creative Experiences Program for her agency and has assisted other communities in developing similar programs. Ms. Gullotta also teaches in the STEP Program for the University of Connecticut School of Social Work.

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**Jennifer C. Messina, M.Ed.**, currently works at Child & Family Agency of Southeastern Connecticut as the educational coordinator for the B. P.

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**Deirdre Lee Fitzgerald** is a tenured assistant professor of psychology at Eastern Connecticut State University. Dr. Fitzgerald's teaching, research, and applied work has focused on identifying how to produce efficient and effective learning outcomes using instructional practices with demonstrated effectiveness to increase the success of young learners. She is a board-certified behavior analyst (BCBA) and educational consultant where she develops individualized accelerated learning programs and provides organizational training in the adoption of best practices.

**Jennifer S. Gordon's** commitment to fostering healthy social and emotional development in youth emerged during her high school years at Rocky Mountain Academy in Bonners Ferry, Idaho. Jennifer applied her early involvement in the field of social and emotional learning to her academic focus, earning a bachelor of science in psychology at Curry College in Milton, Massachusetts. Her professional experience includes program coordinator of Livingston Youth and Community Services (LYCS) in Livingston, New Jersey. Jennifer is currently pursuing her master's in educational psychology: learning, cognition, and development at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, in New Brunswick, New Jersey.

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