Programs for Children in the Community: Activity Areas and Working Approaches of the After-School Center Service

Ruth Baruj-Kovarsky

Meirav Asulin

Myers JDC Brookdale

Editor (Hebrew): Ronit Cohen Ben-Nun
English editing: Ami Asher
Graphic design: Efrat Speaker

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Myers JDC Brookdale Institute
P.O.B. 3886, Jerusalem 9103702, Israel
Tel: 02-6557400
brookdale.jdc.org.il/en | brook@jdc.org

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Abstract

Background

Community-based after-school centers operate in the afternoon and serve children at risk. These settings complement the support provided at home, at school, and by social services. Their operation varies across local authorities in terms of resources, available facilities, staffing arrangements, and links with education, welfare, and community services. In light of challenges in providing an optimal response and the need to adapt the service to changing circumstances and children's emerging needs, the "After-School Centers 2030" development program was formulated. This study examined the program's working approaches, service characteristics, strengths, and challenges to support the development of an updated operating model for the after-school center service.

The study used a qualitative interpretive methodology. Thirty professionals and eight parents were interviewed, and visits were conducted at four after-school centers. Data were collected from June 2024 to July 2025 and analyzed thematically.

Main Findings

A "Warm Nest": Safety, Belonging, and a Stable Relationship

The after-school center serves as a complementary and supportive setting for the home and family, providing children with a stable and safe "normative afternoon" that resembles a risk-free home. The center seeks to establish a regular and dependable relationship between the child and a significant adult, in accordance with trauma-informed principles.

The instructor plays a central role in managing and leading the center's activities. She "sees the child," provides emotional support and immediate responsiveness, helps the child regulate emotions and behavior, and sets boundaries.

Overall, the center offers:



A consistent routine, the presence of a significant adult in the child's life, and a welcoming environment that contribute to a sense of home and safety



Appropriate facilities and equipment and a stable staff contribute to service quality; gaps in these areas lead to variation in quality



Engagement with parents as partners in the center's activities, which contributes to parental self-efficacy and to the parent-child relationship, despite challenges

> They come in just as they would come home [...] 'We're home now'; now we can be together." (After-school center instructor)

Learning for Self-Efficacy

The after-school center is part of the child's daily routine. The goals of learning at the center are to strengthen learning skills, reduce educational gaps, and use learning as a therapeutic and educational tool to foster experiences of success, self-efficacy, self-perception, and belonging, in accordance with the principles of therapeutic pedagogy. Another goal is to identify situations where professional intervention is required.



Children with substantial academic gaps require additional professional support



A structured relationship with the school and treatment providers is essential for continuity between educational and therapeutic support



After-school center staff need skills and awareness to identify distress and difficulties among children, as well as to ensure that information gathered at the center helps professional treatment providers offer the most appropriate response

> When a child feels stronger academically, it always affects their self-confidence as well." (Pedagogical facilitator)

Soft Skills Acquired Through Daily Routines

Children practice responsibility, self-regulation, cooperation, and conflict resolution through strengths identification, free play, peer mentoring, group and individual conversations, a supportive physical environment, and choices in everyday and special activities.

The concepts of agency and co-agency, together with strength-based practice, provide a foundation for an educational and developmental process of intentional learning, in which children acquire and practice soft skills in a safe environment. These approaches also help transform intuitive activity into intentional professional practice.



Developing soft skills in the center's daily routine provides a foundation for life skills, social integration, and preparation for adulthood and future demands, including learning, employment, and independent living

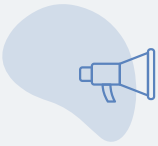


After-school center staff need training, professional guidance, and a shared professional language to support the development of soft skills



Links with the community can be strengthened through activities and community actors that foster children's sense of belonging and introduce them to relevant recreational settings that may serve them in the future as well

> The child knows how to draw really well [...] and suddenly that gets a lot of attention and becomes a source of pride." (After-school center instructor)



The after-school center can serve as an important anchor in a child's life when its objectives are clear and when its operating conditions enable translating those objectives into consistent daily practice.

Recommendations

1. Adapt the after-school center's operating model to children's ages and needs, the local authority's resources, and the services available in the community.
2. Position the service as a flagship program within the local authority and establish coordination with local education, welfare, and leisure and community services.
3. Clarify and prioritize the service's objectives.
4. Embed mechanisms for working with parents.
5. Define objectives for and formalize the relationship between after-school and school staff.
6. Reshape the physical environment in accordance with the service's objectives.
7. Develop professional capacity and define the boundaries of the center instructor's role.
8. Prepare children for the end of their participation in the center and promote their gradual integration into community-based services.
9. Establish a system for ongoing measurement, documentation, and learning.