

Preventing Problem Behaviors and Raising Academic Performance in California Children: The Impacts of School Age Child Care Programs Supported by the University of California Cooperative Extension

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A Report by the Extension National Consortium for School-age Child Care, authored by:
Sharon Junge, University of California
Dave Riley, University of Wisconsin
Jill Steinberg, University of Wisconsin
Chris Todd, University of Illinois
Ina McClain, University of Missouri

California Collaborators: Evelyn Conklin-Ginop, Nancy Feldman, Pat Johns, Sharon Junge, Sue Manglallan, Teresa McAllister, Dave Snell, Isela Valdez and Juliann Cheney.

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Our Task

The California portion of a national study.

As part of its Youth-at-Risk Initiative, the Extension System/U.S. Department of Agriculture has started or assisted school-age child care (SACC) programs in targeted communities across the nation. University of California Cooperative Extension System has participated in this effort. To determine if these programs are having their desired impacts of reducing or preventing problem behaviors while increasing positive development in youth, a national evaluation of 76 of these Extension-supported programs in 16 states has been undertaken. This report summarizes findings from the California portion of that evaluation.

School-Age Child Care Programs surveyed for this project represented the following California Counties: Humboldt, Lake, Mendocino, Nevada, Placer, San Diego, Sutter, Tuolumne and Yuba Counties.

The Evaluation Study

This study taps the expertise of professionals who observe the children daily.

The impacts of 31 Extension-supported SACC programs upon, 1,138 children (ages 4 to 14) was investigated by the use of "key informant" survey of three kinds of observers: the SACC lead teachers, the classroom teachers associated with those children, and the school principals. The response rates to our questionnaire survey were 84% for SACC staff, 34% for teachers, and 41% for principals.

By surveying Principals and Teachers, this study taps the expertise of professionals who observe the children daily, and who can see how they have changed over the course of a year. This method is also efficient, with each respondent reporting on several children. But this method also has weaknesses. While 13 principals returned our questionnaires, 25 did not, and we need to worry, therefore, if the non-respondents might have painted a different picture of the program's impacts. For reasons such as this, we must exercise caution and remain tentative in stating the conclusions of the study.

The communities in which these SACC sites were located were selected by the California Extension Service as especially likely to benefit from the programs. Of the 31 elementary schools serving the children, 77% received Chapter 1 funding. The SACC programs are part of Extension's federally funded "Youth-at-Risk" initiative.

How many of the children in these SACC programs might be considered "at risk" in their development? The school principals told us that 31% of the children were "working below grade level in terms of their academic skills at the beginning of the year." The SACC staff gave a similar estimate (28%), while the classroom teachers offered a harsher assessment, saying the 41% were behind academically. In the area of social skills, principals reported 26% of children were performing below average, with SACC staff reporting 32% and classroom teachers 38%. These estimates are not too different, and suggest that between one-quarter and one-third of the SACC program children were having difficulties in school, academically or in social behavior or both.

All respondents--the SACC Staff, the School Teachers, and the Principals--were asked about changes in the children which they could say were specifically due to the effects of the SACC program. Where it was logical to do so, the staff, teachers, and principals were asked the same questions, but some questions were asked only of those respondents who were in a position to answer accurately. For example, we asked school teachers, but not SACC staff, about changes in children's grades.

Were the SACC programs having clear, positive impacts upon the children? According to all three types of informants, the answer was "yes." We will summarize the impacts in three areas: increasing prosocial behaviors, decreasing problem behaviors, and raising academic performance.

Increased Pro-Social Behaviors

Rejection by peers in childhood predicts lifelong negative consequences.

We expected these programs might have special benefits for children who were low in social skills. Like a good 4-H program, a good SACC program offers opportunities for recreation-based, multi-age activities in the company of a caring adult. SACC programs, however, have up to 10 times more contact hours with children than traditional 4-H programs, so the potential impacts are much greater.

Shy and Rejected Children

Two areas of social skill were of special concern: shy children and rejected children. Rejection by peers in childhood is important, not just in current heartache, but also because it predicts lifelong negative consequences in social relations and personality development.

When asked whether any children "who were shy have become more outgoing, more skilled at joining group activities" because of the SACC program, 96% of SACC staff answered yes, and they named 26% of the children in this category. But since SACC staff were reporting on their own programs, we might reasonably expect a tendency to exaggerate the impacts of the program. That is why the school teachers were asked the identical question. The classroom teachers reported a very similar percentage of children, 30% who had become less shy and more socially skilled "because of their involvement in the SACC program." Here are two examples of such a child, described by their classroom teachers:

Ashley started kindergarten as an extremely shy and withdrawn little girl. She is much smaller than the other children and had few academic and social skills. By the end of the year, Ashley had blossomed into a much more outgoing student, who was much more at ease participating in classroom activities, as well as developing a large circle of playground friends. I attribute a great deal of her incredible transformation to her participation in the SACC program."

--Classroom Teacher

"The student who participated from my classroom has become more outgoing and speaks with greater confidence in front of the class."

--Classroom Teacher

Did the SACC programs provide opportunities for rejected children to learn how to make friends? Most SACC staff saw this happening, with positive impacts on 23% of the children they served. The classroom teachers confirmed this estimate, giving the SACC programs credit for positive impacts in this area on 20% of their students from the SACC.

"We had a boy who was not accepted by his peers because he was different. He was overweight and was very feminine, and would rather be with adults rather than peers. We decided to help him by making him a junior leader. With that he gained a lot of self esteem. He was able to take charge, do demonstrations for groups, and become more outgoing. His new responsibilities made him feel better about himself. He soon began to lose weight and befriending other students. He now gets along better with the other kids."

--SACC Staff

Respecting the Authority of Adults

Learning to work well in a group of one's peers is one aspect of prosocial behavior. Another which we asked about is learning to get along with the adults in the program. SACC programs, we suspected, have the potential to teach young people to live within rules, and to respect the reasonable authority of adults. This kind of learning, if it has not taken place already within the home, is crucial in the years of middle childhood, before young people reach the wider world of adolescence.

When asked if any children "have become more cooperative with adults now, more willing to follow the directions and rules of adults" because of the SACC program, all of the SACC staff answered "yes." The classroom teachers reported this improvement in 24% of the children, and the principals in 23%, nearly identical estimates.

"There is a 10 year old boy who has a short fuse and thinks he does not have to follow the rules. What we did that was effective was to set boundaries for him and stick by them. Very few adults have been consistent with him. He responded with greater participation in the activities and with significantly fewer out-of-control rages."

--SACC Staff

"The afternoon 4-H AM/PM coordinator provided the continuation of standards and rules used in my class and at our school. He was kind, but firm. [The child] had been allowed not to mind, not to follow rules and to be very disruptive in the other daycare centers and this was a GREAT problem when he entered kindergarten in my class and when he entered the 4-H AM/PM program. After much work, and almost daily keeping in touch with the 4-H AM/PM director about Billy's behavior and/or success, I feel Billy will have a very good possibility of

success in first grade now and I believe the 4-H AM/PM director and his program have added to his chances."

--Classroom Teacher

Leadership is a form of prosocial behavior upon which 4-H programs have traditionally focused. In this study, we assessed leadership by asking SACC staff if any of their children had "learned to take more responsibility for planning and running the program activities." Nearly all of the SACC programs saw this, and they reported that 29% of the children had grown in this way.

Helping Children to Explore New Interests

Besides learning to work well with peers and with adults, a third area of prosocial behavior we asked about was the development of new interests by children. The middle years of childhood are a period in which children like to do real things for themselves, in which their horizons widen greatly, and in which they develop new and sometimes lasting interests. A good program for pre-adolescent children will expose them to a wide variety of activities, and provide the opportunity for exploration in depth of those activities which capture their interests. As its best, new interests developed during this period can form the basis for lifelong vocational or avocational pursuits. Did these children in these SACC programs develop "interest they would not otherwise have, in new topics or activities"? Yes. The SACC staff reported that 38% of the children had developed new interests. The classroom teachers verified this by reporting nearly the identical percentage of children (39%) with new interests gained in the SACC program.

"For one child in particular, the SACC program has offered an opportunity for choices and time to pursue interest -- not always possible in the classroom. This child still has problems, but has evidenced "dramatic positive changes" in social and academic skills."

--Classroom Teacher

"The particular student I had this year opened up many new interests. He became particularly fond of gardening based on a classroom project as well as a 4-H project. Since this particular student would have gone home to an empty home it was nice he could have assistance in the 4-H program with his homework!"

--Classroom Teacher

Reduced Problem Behaviors

Reducing the violence and aggression that have become so common in America's playgrounds ought to be a high priority.

We generally expect that children who have positive social skills will have relatively few behavior problems. A program that teaches children to work well with peers and cooperate with adults (the outcomes reviewed above) should thereby reduce behavior problems among its children. Rather than assume this to be true, however, we asked the SACC staff, school teachers, and principals directly about behavior problems, and the possible side effect of the SACC programs in reducing them.

When asked if "some of these children have begun to demonstrate fewer behavior problems" because of their involvement in the SACC program, school principals and classroom teachers each reported improvement in 21% of their children, while SACC staff reported these gains for 19%. Here is one example:

"I have 2 families of 2 siblings who have felt secure and safe and cared for in the SACC environment, and who definitely do NOT have that sense at home. As a result, these 4 are no longer so inclined to "fall apart" at every small change in events or even at bigger upsets."

--School Principal

Indeed, one-third of the principals (38%) reported that because of the program, there had been a decrease in the amount of vandalism in and around the school.

Reducing the violence and aggression that have become so common in America's playgrounds and classrooms ought to be a high priority of any youth-serving program. One of the ways that a good program can reduce aggression is by teaching its alternatives. Both the SACC staff and the school teachers agreed that the SACC programs are doing this. The SACC staff reported 27% of the children "have learned to handle conflicts by talking or negotiating more often, instead of just hitting or fighting." The classroom teachers also saw children improving in this area; 23% of the SACC children in their classes.

"Through consistent supervision, students have been provided a structure that has reduced the number of office referrals. Students manage conflicts in a more positive way -- less fighting and more dialogue."

--School Principal

Improved Academic Behaviors

Did SACC programs in targeted neighborhoods improve children's academic performance?

Social skills and behavior problems are not the only domains in which children might benefit from a high quality SACC program. We were also interested in the possibility that SACC programs in targeted neighborhoods might improve children's academic performance.

The classroom teachers suggested that this was true. They reported that 27% of the SACC program children had developed an interest in recreational reading, 12% had improved their school attendance, and 27% were turning in more or better quality homework. Not surprisingly, this had led to better grades for 30% of the children. It had even led, in the teachers' estimation, to 7% of the children avoiding being held back in grades, and 6% avoiding placement in special education. The principals named 5% who avoided retention in grade. In each case, the classroom teachers and principals reported that these improvements were specifically "because of their involvement in the SACC program."

"The five children in my class who attended have definitely done better in their homework skills -- this was a very important highlight for me because they weren't getting it done at home. Also -- the Books-Across-America program -- the 4-H kids ended up being the only ones who participated and they all won awards."

--Classroom Teacher

"One boy, who didn't particularly seem confident or care much about the work he did in Kindergarten began bringing in wonderful little craft projects he had created at 4-H and smiled broadly as he shared them. His work in our class seemed to take on a new care and concern for better quality. Nick would look for praise and approval as he completed these tasks."

--Classroom Teacher

"Jenny comes from quite an unstable home. The time she spent in 4-H seemed to have many positive effects, such as completed homework assignments, a more positive attitude and an overall calming effect. I would say that 4-H was a positive experience for this little girl!"

--Classroom Teacher

"One of my older boys was very difficult in the past. He was physically aggressive and violent when pushed. He had after-school detention on a regular basis, was behind in school and

refused to do his homework. I spent a lot of time talking with him and his mom and I worked with them both. Compared to the start of the year he is like a new child. Very rarely does he have detention. He made honor roll last semester, does his homework daily while at 4-H and most of all he is able to talk out conflicts most of the time."

--SACC Staff

These are big impacts not only for the children, but also in monetary terms. In these school districts, the average cost to repeat a year of school is \$3852. We therefore estimate that the SACC program saved the school district taxpayers over \$119,000 last year just by preventing retention in grade of the 31 children named by the teachers.

Extension's Role

"...Going to where the client is..."

What is the connection of these SACC programs to the Extension service? Half (58%) of the SACC programs we evaluated are supported by Extension Youth-at-Risk (federal) funds, and 85% are operated by Extension. Half (54%) have 4-H clubs and activities as part of their programs, and 73% have received staff training from Extension agents. The SACC staff from these 31 programs met with the local Extension agents between 0 and 150 times in the previous year (with 12 meetings as the median response). The SACC staff who responded report they clearly gained from the training and consultation provided by the Extension agents.

"She is an excellent role model for healthy, effective adult-child interaction and she provided many creative ideas for activities."

--SACC Staff

"I think it's wonderful that finally the afterschool programs can now incorporate 4-H. Most parents in my program love the 4-H aspect of it and the children do too! (I hope they continue to provide Resource manuals, because they are priceless.)"

--SACC Staff

"Total support with behavior problems."

--SACC Staff

These SACC programs represent an innovative response by the Extension Service to the changing demography of American family life and work life. Most children today are being raised by employed parents, whether in a single-parent household or a 2-parent 2-

earner household. SACC programs represent a safe and enriching alternative to the "latchkey child" situation, in which children at young ages are left without adult supervision.

By "going to where the client is," in this case a school-age child care program, the Extension System has adapted its traditional programs for youth development to these recent societal changes. Because children are in SACC programs for many more hours each week than in a traditional 4-H club, Extension's flexible approach to delivery of its programs has led to a greatly expanded potential for effecting children in positive ways.

Conclusion

...multiple, positive impacts...

The SACC staff, classroom teachers, and school principals showed considerable agreement in their questionnaire responses. This agreement supports the validity of the results reported here. Surprisingly, in many cases the principals saw even greater gains due to the SACC programs than did the staff of those programs.

We suggest that the SACC programs operated by the University of California Cooperative Extension Service appear to be having multiple, positive impacts on the children, their families, and their schools. These impacts range from social skills, to reduced problem behaviors, to increased academic achievement, and are evident not only to the staff of the SACC program, but also to local child development experts such as school principals and classroom teachers.