# The Three Pillars of Critical Hours Programming



## SKILL DEVELOPMENT

Critical hours programs foster the social and academic skills of participants. When students are engaged in high quality after school activities, they experience higher levels of intrinsic concentration and motivation.

### Social and Emotional Skills

After-school programs are key spaces where students expand their socio-emotional learning horizons. Self-esteem, self-regulation, psychosocial adjustment, empathy and school bonding are some of the emotional faculties which are critical indicators of positive development and successful outcomes, and are also a focus in after-school programs.[2]

### Academic Skills

Although critical hours programs are not strictly scholastic, they support their capacity to improve academic outcomes for participants. Activities which consist of academic enrichment or homework and requires children and youth to develop skills which are invaluable to academic success, such as persistence, focus, and sustained attention and engagement.[3]

## SAFE AND SUPPORTIVE SPACES

The second pillar which supports critical hours programming is known as "safe and supportive spaces". Critical hours programming provides two different kinds of "safe and supportive spaces": safe in the sense of a stable emotional climate and in terms of program space.

For critical hours programs to be considered safe it must have several components:

1) Staff turnover should be low,[4]
2) Staff training and ongoing supervision (the capacity to address academic questions, but more importantly, participants' personal problems) should be strong and evidence based,[5] and
3) Authority displayed by staff should be progressive, with lots of opportunity for participants autonomous choice.[6]

Children are vulnerable when left alone in their time outside of school. Critical hours programs provide a safe, structured space where these children can be engaged in constructive activities during these risky hours. High quality critical hours programs help children and youth establish positive, healthy behaviours which they will carry with them through their teen years and hopefully for the remainder of their lives.[7]

## POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS

The third pillar of critical hours programming is Positive Relationships. Evidence shows that the primary reasons children return to programs is because of the relationships they build there.[8] More than attendance, it is the peer-peer and child/youth-adult relationships that positively influence social and academic outcomes for participants.

### Peer-Peer Relationships

Positive relationships with peers increases participant engagement, social competency, and relationships with peers. On peer bonding in critical hours, programs show "an increase in prosocial development in youth when peer social support is present. As peer social supports increase, prosocial behavior and self-esteem increase while conduct disorder, emotional problems, hyperactivity and indirect aggression all decrease."[9]

### Child/Youth-Adult Relationships

The development of positive relationships between program participants and the adults who staff the programs can be complex due to various dimensions of social bonding but two studies found that they are in fact the singular most important program factor to enhance social and academic outcomes for youth.[10]

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