



# After the Bell

What Do We Want Our Afterschool Programs to Do?

## A Note on Public Agenda's Choicework Discussion Guides

Public Agenda Choicework Discussion Guides support dialogue and deliberation on a wide variety of issues. They have been used in thousands of community conversations and classrooms, by journalists and researchers, and by individual citizens looking to gain perspective on public issues.

Each guide is organized around several alternative ways of thinking about an issue, each with its own set of values, priorities, pros, cons and trade-offs. The different perspectives are drawn both from what the public thinks about an issue, based on surveys and focus groups, as well as what experts and leaders say about it in policy debates.

### **Customizing to Fit Your Situation**

Note that the Choicework Discussion Guides are meant to help people start thinking and talking about an issue in productive ways—they are not meant to rigidly restrict thinking or dialogue. The perspectives described are not the only ways of dealing with the problem, nor are the viewpoints mutually exclusive in every respect. Many people would mix and match from different perspectives, or add additional related ideas.

Additionally, users of these guides have the option of providing various kinds of nonpartisan information along with them as context for a conversation.

### **Public Agenda's Community Conversations Model**

Public Agenda often uses these guides as discussion starters for Community Conversations as part of a larger program of community dialogue and action. Such conversations are frequently a solid first step toward new partnerships and initiatives.

Public Agenda's approach to Community Conversations involves several principles and guidelines that can be flexibly applied to different settings:

- Local, nonpartisan sponsors/organizers
- Diverse cross-section of participants, "beyond the usual suspects"
- Small, diverse dialogue groups with trained moderators and recorders
- Nonpartisan discussion materials that help citizens weigh alternatives (Choicework)
- Strategic follow-up to connect dialogue to action

If you would like to learn more about Public Agenda's approach to public engagement, or to see a full list of our Choicework Discussion Guides (including print and video versions), please visit our website [www.publicagenda.org](http://www.publicagenda.org) and click on "Public Engagement."

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# After the Bell

## What Do We Want Our Afterschool Programs to Do?

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### Introduction

Different people often have different ideas about what the goals of afterschool programs should be. Given that resources for afterschool programs are limited, and no single program can be all things to all people, communities need to make decisions about what kinds of afterschool programs they want to invest in. Here are three distinct approaches to afterschool programs, based on different ideas about how afterschool time is best used. Which approach do you think is best for your community, and why?

### Approach A:

#### Keeping Kids Off the Streets and On the Right Path

The most important goal of afterschool programs in our community should be to provide a safe and positive environment for children that keeps them out of trouble and helps them develop the skills and habits that will keep them healthy in mind and body.

Children left without supervision during afterschool hours are more likely to get into trouble and are vulnerable to victimization. Afterschool programs should offer safe, structured environments that keep children away from dangers and negative influences and expose them to positive influences.

#### Therefore, afterschool programs should provide:

- Mentoring programs and community service opportunities
- Activities that help kids learn to resolve conflicts without violence and to make healthy decisions about drugs and sex
- Sports, exercise and nutrition classes that fight childhood obesity and promote healthy habits

#### Tough questions for this approach:

- Are there any downsides to this approach?
- Should we really be investing community resources to keep kids safe and out of trouble when, some might say, this is really the job of families, religious institutions and the police?

## Approach B: Giving Kids Better Learning Opportunities

The most important goal of afterschool programs should be to deepen learning so that young people can better succeed in school, go on to college or a good career, and become productive members of society.

Therefore, afterschool programs should coordinate closely with schools in order to deepen (rather than just repeat) what children learn during the school day. Experiential learning and project-based activities can provide children with new, more engaging ways of learning core academic subjects while also building the kinds of “21st Century” skills that today’s employers are looking for.

### Therefore, afterschool programs should provide:

- Individualized tutoring and supervised homework time
- Hands-on workshops that apply knowledge gained during the school day to “real world” activities
- Training in different kinds of trades, job interviewing skills, and the like to help kids succeed in the job market

### Tough questions for this approach:

- Are there any downsides to this approach?
- Is it really healthy and useful for kids to spend their entire days doing academic work?

## Approach C:

### Broadening Kids' Horizons by Exposing Them to New Cultural Experiences

The most important goal of afterschool programs should be to provide young people with growth opportunities that are different from academic learning by exposing them to cultural activities they might not otherwise encounter, such as learning to paint, play chess, or participate in a “poetry slam.”

These kinds of experiences, which give young people the chance to become well-rounded and discover special talents and gifts, should not be only for those families who can afford it. And as kids develop new, creative interests it can also decrease the likelihood that they will become “burned out” on academics or spend their time getting into trouble.

#### Therefore, afterschool programs should provide:

- Art, music, dance, cooking and other classes that expose kids to new creative pursuits and possibilities
- Chess or science clubs that provide kids with engaging, brain-building activities
- Field trips to cultural institutions such as museums, science centers and performances

#### Tough questions for this approach:

- Are there any downsides to this approach?
- As important as these activities are, are they really as high a priority as ensuring that kids stay out of trouble or improving their academic success?

## The Choices in Brief

### Approach A: Keeping Kids Off the Streets and On the Right Path

Afterschool programs should provide a safe, positive environment for children that keeps them out of trouble and helps them develop the skills and habits that will keep them healthy in mind and body.

#### Afterschool programs should provide:

- Mentoring programs and community service opportunities
- Activities that help kids learn to resolve conflicts without violence and to make healthy decisions about drugs and sex
- Sports, exercise and nutrition classes that fight childhood obesity and promote healthy habits

#### Tough questions for this approach:

- Should we really be investing community resources to keep kids safe and out of trouble when, some might say, this is really the job of families, religious institutions and the police?

### Approach B: Giving Kids Better Learning Opportunities

Afterschool programs should deepen learning so that young people can better succeed in school, go on to college or a good career, and become productive members of society.

#### Afterschool programs should provide:

- Individualized tutoring and supervised homework time
- Hands-on workshops that apply knowledge gained during the school day to “real world” activities
- Training in different kinds of trades, job interviewing skills, and the like to help kids succeed in the job market

#### Tough questions for this approach:

- Is it really healthy and useful for kids to spend their entire days doing academic work?

### Approach C: Broadening Kids’ Horizons by Exposing Them to New Cultural Experiences

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#### Tough questions for this approach:

- As important as these activities are, are they really as high a priority as ensuring that kids stay out of trouble or improving their academic success?

## Using this guide in a community conversation, discussion group or classroom setting

After discussing the choices on the previous pages, you may wish to consider and talk through the following questions.

### Summarizing a Choicework Conversation

These questions are a good way to summarize a Choicework conversation, prior to considering more action-oriented questions.

1. In our conversation so far, have we discovered any common ground? What do we agree on or have in common?
2. What were our important areas of disagreement—the issues we may have to keep talking about in the future?
3. What are the questions and concerns that need more attention? Are there things we need more information about?

### Bridging from Dialogue to Action

These questions can help you move from dialogue about the issue at hand to actions that can help address the issue.

1. How can we work together to make a difference in our community on the issues we discussed today?

*Note: If this question generates a long list of potential actions, they can be prioritized by asking each person to list his or her top three ideas.*

2. Is there anything that you, as individuals, might do, or do differently, as a result of today's conversation?
3. What would you like to see happen to follow up on today's conversation? What should the immediate follow-up steps be?

## Public Agenda

Public Agenda is a nonprofit, nonpartisan opinion research organization with an expanding program of citizen education and public engagement activities. Public Agenda was founded in 1975 by former U.S. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance and Daniel Yankelovich.

Every day, thousands of Americans log on to PublicAgenda.org for accurate, up-to-date information on critical issues. PublicAgenda.org has twice been nominated for the prestigious Webby Award. PublicAgenda.org is recommended by Newsweek, Fox News, MSNBC.com and is a USA Today "Hot Site" and a Yahoo! "Web Pick." Time Magazine.com named it one of the "50 Coolest Websites" and Library Journal has praised the site as one of the best sources on the web.

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