



4-H school-age child care (SACC) programs, set up to help at-risk kids, appear to be helping the children both socially and academically.



Helping youth at risk . . .

4-H and Cooperative Extension venture into child care

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An increasing number of children in America are considered at risk because of poverty, homelessness, hunger, family violence or other social ills. As part of its "Youth at Risk" initiative, the national Cooperative Extension System started school-age child care (SACC) programs to promote positive youth development by providing high quality, after-school care. UC Cooperative Extension and 4-H participated in this effort, supporting SACC sites in targeted communities throughout California. This report summarizes the California portion of a national evaluation to determine if the SACC programs are having their desired effects.

For more than a decade, educators and policymakers have been concerned with the issue of children being left at home, unsupervised, after school. When that lack of supervision combines with other family, social or community risk factors, it increases the likelihood of poor developmental outcomes for children.

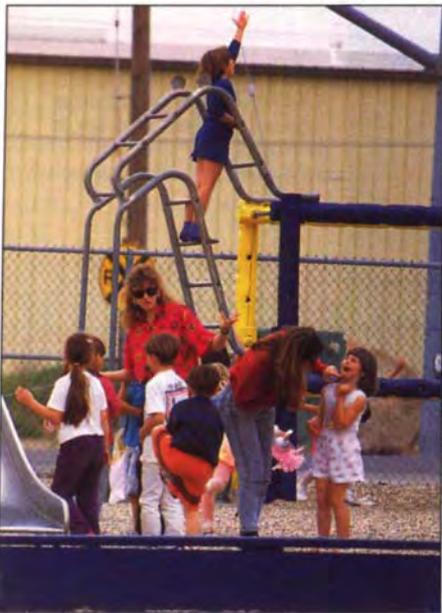
As part of its "Youth-at-Risk" initiative, the national Cooperative Extension System (U.S. Department of Agriculture) started or assisted in setting up school-age child care (SACC) programs in targeted communities across the nation. UC Cooperative Extension participated in this effort, helping to establish or support high quality, after-school programs in high-risk communities throughout California. Compared to the Extension System's traditional 4-H programs, children in the SACC programs have up to 10 times more hours of program contact. This presents both a challenge — and a greatly

expanded opportunity — for Extension to positively affect youth development across the state.

To determine if these programs were having their desired effects of reducing or preventing problem behaviors while increasing positive development in youth, a national evaluation of 76 Extension-supported programs in 16 states was undertaken. This report summarizes findings from the California portion of the evaluation, which surveyed 31 4-H-assisted SACC programs in 11 counties: Colusa, Humboldt, Lake, Fresno, Mendocino, Nevada, Placer, San Diego, Sutter, Tuolumne and Yuba.

The evaluation study

The impact of SACC programs upon 1,138 children, ages 4 to 14, was investigated by use of a "key informant" survey using three kinds of observers: the SACC lead teachers, classroom teachers associated with the



Learning to get along with other kids is a goal of the SACC program, shown here in Placer County.

children, and the school principals. Response rates were mixed, with an 84% response rate for SACC staff, 34% for classroom teachers, and 41% for principals.

By surveying principals and teachers, this study attempted to tap the expertise of professionals who observe the children daily, who could see how they have changed over the course of a year. The method was efficient, but also had its weaknesses. While 13 principals returned our questionnaires, 25 did not and we were concerned that broader-based data might have painted a different picture of the program's impacts. Therefore, we must exercise caution and remain tentative in stating our conclusions for the study.

The communities in which these SACC sites are located were selected by UC Cooperative Extension as especially likely to benefit from SACC programs and, in addition, met some or all of the "at risk" criteria identified by Extension's federally funded "Youth at Risk" initiative. Risk factors included inadequate care, shelter and food, neighborhood and family violence, child abuse and neglect, and family and community poverty. Of the 31 elementary schools, 77% received federal Chapter 1 funding, which is increased funding for school districts based on high risk and poverty issues. It is important to note, however, that

just because a community is considered "at risk" does not mean that every child in it will be performing below grade level or exhibiting "at risk" behaviors.

School principals reported that 31% of the children were working below grade level in terms of academic skills at the beginning of the year. The SACC staff gave a similar estimate (28%), while classroom teachers offered a more pessimistic view, reporting that 41% were behind academically. In the area of social skills, principals reported 26% of the children were performing below average, with SACC staff reporting 32% and classroom teachers, 38%. These estimates suggest that between one-quarter and one-third of all SACC program children were having difficulties in school, either academically, socially, or both.

Respondents also were asked if they saw changes in the children which they considered due specifically to the effects of the SACC program. The questions were asked only of respondents in a position to answer accurately. For example, we asked school teachers, but not SACC staff, about changes in children's grades.

All three groups reported that SACC programs were having clear, positive impacts upon the children. The following is a summary of reported improvements in three areas: increased pro-social behavior, decreased problem behavior, and improved academic performance.

Shy and rejected children

We had expected that SACC programs might have special benefits for children 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.

We were especially concerned with two areas of social skill: shyness and rejection. As Z. Rubin found in "Children's Friendships," rejection by childhood peers is important, not just in terms of current heartache, but also because it predicts lifelong negative consequences in social relations and personality development.

Asked whether some children had become more outgoing and skilled at joining group activities because of their involvement in SACC programs, SACC staff indicated that 26% had. School teachers reported a similar percentage (30%). As one classroom teacher remarked about a previously shy student, "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."

Staff found that SACC programs also provided opportunities for rejected children to learn how to make friends. The staff noted positive impacts for 23% of the children while classroom teachers gave SACC programs credit for having positive impacts on 20% of their SACC students. Said one SACC staff member, "We had a boy who was not accepted by his peers because he was different. He was overweight . . . and would rather be with adults 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 befriend other students. He now gets along better with the other kids."

Respect for adults

Learning to get along with adults is another aspect of positive social behavior we hoped to enforce in the SACC programs. Because of the adult involvement, we believed that these programs had the potential to teach young people to live within rules, and respect the reasonable authority of adults. This kind of learning, if it had not already taken place within the home, would become crucial in the years of middle childhood, before

young people reached the wider world of adolescence.

Classroom teachers, principals and the SACC staff all indicated involvement in the SACC programs had helped the children to become more cooperative with adults, and more willing to follow adult directions and rules. The three groups of respondents gave similar estimates, with SACC staff reporting improvement in 21% of the children, classroom teachers in 24% of the children, and the principals in 23% of children.

One classroom teacher explained, "The afternoon 4-H AM/PM [program] 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."

Children explore new interests

Pre-adolescence is a time when children like to take on challenges and attempt to do harder things for themselves. It is a time when their horizons widen greatly as 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 opportunity for in-depth exploration of these activities. New interests developed during this period can form the basis for lifelong vocational or avocational pursuits.

Children in the SACC programs were exposed to a wide range of new



SACC students are exposed to a wide range of new activities and interests. (Photo by Jack Kelly Clark)

activities, including recreational reading and writing, art, drama, and hobbies. This exposure had positive impacts for many of the children, with SACC staff reporting that 38% had developed interests in new topics or activities. Classroom teachers verified this by reporting nearly the identical percentage of children (39%) with new interests gained in the SACC programs.

Reducing problem behaviors

Research has shown that children with positive social skills have fewer behavior problems. In an attempt to determine if this held true for SACC programs, we asked staff, teachers and school principals about behavior problems, and what, if any, effects the SACC programs had in reducing them.

School principals and classroom teachers both indicated they thought SACC programs had an impact on reducing behavior problems. Both noted improvement in 21% of the children, while SACC staff reported gains for 19%. Said one school principal: "I have two families of two siblings who have felt secure and safe and cared for in this SACC environment, and who definitely do not have that sense at home. As a result, these four are no longer so inclined to 'fall apart' at every small change in events or even at bigger upsets."

To be effective, a good youth program must address the issues of violence and aggression that have become so common on America's playgrounds and in classrooms. A good way to reduce violence is to teach alternatives. Both staff and school teachers believe SACC programs attempt to do this. Staff reported that 27% of the children "have learned to handle conflicts by talking or negotiating more often, instead of just hitting or fighting."

Classroom teachers saw similar improvement in 23% of their children. As one school principal explained, "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."

Improving academic behaviors

We wanted to know whether SACC programs had any impact in improving children's academic performance in targeted neighborhoods.

The classroom teachers we surveyed suggested that they do. The teachers reported that 26% of SACC-program children had developed a new interest in recreational reading, 12% had improved their school attendance, and 27% were turning in more or better quality homework. Not surprisingly, this led to better grades for 30% of the children. Many teachers felt that involvement in the SACC program kept some students either from being held back a grade or being placed in a special education program. The teachers indicated that 7%, or 31 children, had avoided grade retention, and 6% had avoided placement in special education. Principals estimated that 5% of SACC children had avoided grade retention. In both cases, the teachers and principals reported that the improvements were specifically "because of their involvement in the SACC program."

One teacher recounted: "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!"

Such improved academic performance has benefits that extend beyond the individual child or school. The average cost to repeat a year of school was \$3,852 for the school districts we surveyed. We estimate that SACC programs helped to save taxpayers more than \$119,000 last year by preventing grade retention for the 31 children whom teachers considered academically at risk.

A positive change

All three groups of respondents showed considerable consensus in their responses. Surprisingly, in many cases the principals saw even greater gains due to the SACC programs than did the SACC staff.

The SACC programs operated by UC Cooperative Extension appear to have multiple, positive impacts on the children and their schools. As evidenced by this survey, these impacts range from social skills, to reduced problem behaviors and increased academic achievement.

The results of this study do not obviate the need for randomized field experiments, but they provide the most convincing evidence to date that Extension-assisted SACC programs are causing significant, positive changes in these children's lives.

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A variety of factors, including problem-solving skills and social competence, can help children develop resiliency and cope better with their environment.

For children facing adversity . . .

How youth programs can promote resilience

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Some children appear to be able to withstand significant environmental stress and develop into healthy adults. Psychologists call this quality "resilience." Research has shown that children can develop psychological resilience through the fostering of certain protective factors in their lives. This paper provides a brief overview of concepts and findings from recent resilience research, and addresses issues of particular importance to youth program developers. Analysis suggests that youth programs have an important role to play in fostering children's positive development, especially through strengthening individual protective factors.

One of the most active areas of study in psychological research today focuses on how and why children develop differently in stressful situations. The term "resilience" (or "resiliency") has been used to refer to some children's ability to grow up physically and psychologically healthy, despite such adversities as poverty, parents' marital conflict or family alcoholism. Researchers are particularly interested in understanding how a variety of factors can either sustain or undermine resilience. In this article we review some of the major concepts of resilience research, and ways in which nonformal programs for school-age youth might be able to promote positive development. By nonformal programs, we mean out-of-school, community-based programs