

# THE BENEFITS OF SOFT-SKILLS IN YOUR CURRICULUM

Increase Registration and Retention Rates with Activities  
That Build Emotional Intelligence



The demand for before-and after-school programs is higher than ever before. More than 10 million children participate in after-school programs, and for every child in a program, two more are on a waiting list.

In part, this increased demand is a result of the changing role of after-school programs in child development. For older generations, “out-of-school” programs offered convenient and safe childcare for both dual-income and single-parent households. These traditional after-school programs no longer meet the expectations of parents and teens. According to Afterschool Alliance, one quarter to one third of parents in the United States are unsatisfied with the skills taught in their child’s after-school program.

Today, parents view after-school programs as a way to reinforce the soft skills introduced in their child’s school curriculum, namely:

- + Leadership
- + Social intelligence
- + Technological fluency
- + Healthy lifestyle choices
- + Creativity
- + Community stewardship

Teens may share in their parents’ desire for soft-skills-centered programs, as they hope to give their college applications a competitive edge. Students know that admissions officers consider soft skills when determining an applicant’s potential for success.

Rather than ask what activities class participants would like to do when forming a curriculum, a modern after-school program director’s approach should consider parental and participant motivations for enrollment. A University of Chicago issue brief stated, “A better understanding of the factors motivating students to sign up for the program is crucial for improving enrollment in after-school programs.”

Fortunately for program directors, updating your program to reflect new expectations can be easy. By implementing soft-skills trainings into your existing program, you can increase registration and retention rates.







## WHAT IS A SOFT SKILL?

Soft skills, also called emotional intelligence, made their debut in the 1990s, spearheaded by psychologist and author Daniel Goleman. He defined emotional intelligence as an individual's ability to recognize, understand and manage one's emotions and to recognize, understand and influence the emotions of others. He argued that a person's emotional intelligence is more likely to influence their life success than their IQ is.

Educators embraced Goleman's theory and implemented SEL (social emotional learning) programming in the classroom. They found that soft skills improve a student's chances of success in the classroom and in adulthood. The present -day pillars of social and emotional learning include:

- + Self-awareness
- + Self-management
- + Social awareness
- + Relationship skills
- + Responsible decision-making

Parents may be unimpressed with the after-school opportunities available to their children, but it is easier to incorporate soft-skills learning opportunities into after-school programs than into in-school curriculum. According to the Washington Post:

*"After-school programs have the ability and flexibility to be creative and provide individualized learning. A student might learn engineering principles by building a roller coaster, pick up chemistry lessons by working in a forensic lab, or master fractions and decimals in a baseball game."*

Because of this adaptability, you may be more successful if you build social and emotional learning elements into existing programs as opposed to creating an entirely new schedule of activities. Attract and keep more program participants by incorporating skills that appeal to college admissions officers and future employers.







## THE BEST SOFT SKILLS FOR COLLEGE SCHOLARSHIPS

College admissions officers care less about which extracurriculars students are involved in and more about the skills they glean from the experience. When considering whether to grant a student entrance into the university or award them a scholarship, colleges favor attendance of after-school activities that foster leadership, passion, and community stewardship.

Any after-school program can build development of these skills into their existing program and will likely increase registration rates and retention if they do. Consider the ideas below as you reflect on how best to update your program.

### Empower Class Participants to Become Leaders

In one study, 88 percent of those programs that retained 50 percent or more of their participants for a full calendar year offered leadership activities. Attendees are more attracted to programs when they feel authentically represented and believe they play a role in program success. You can integrate leadership-building components into your after-school program by:

- + Appointing leaders within your after-school program
- + Allowing older participants opportunities to mentor younger participants

### Create Opportunities for Participants to Explore their Passions

Sometimes, the best source of inspiration when jazzing up existing programs is your participants themselves. Participants are more engaged in and excited about after-school programs when they have a say in structuring activities, especially those related to technology and arts. To help build this discussion into your after-school program, you can:

- + Poll participants annually to see which subjects they're most passionate about.
- + Create a physical or digital suggestion box for attendees to anonymously submit ideas.
- + Ask for feedback during each activity and after its completion.

### Give Participants Opportunities to Give Back to Their Community

Only 53 percent of children participated in volunteer work in 2015, but those who did reaped numerous benefits. People who perform community-service activities can experience an increase in self-esteem and often feel more connected to their community.

Kids are also loyal to programs that offer service activities. In a recent study conducted by The Wallace Foundation, 81 percent of high-retention after-school programs offered community service activities. Design community-outreach opportunities into your existing program by:

- + Scheduling regular volunteer days at nonprofits.
- + Introducing community craft projects, such as creating cards and art for nursing homes and hospitals.

- + Hosting “community cleanup” days. Participants can pick up trash from a playground or nearby park.
- + Modeling after the Urbano Project: a studio that encourages participants to brainstorm solutions for community issues through art.



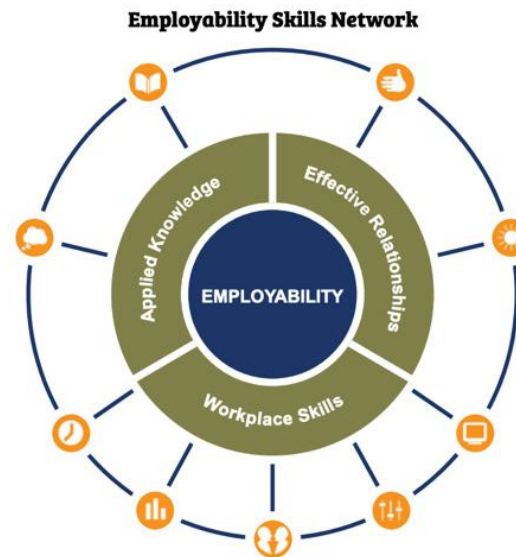
## TEENS LOOK FOR CAREER EXPERIENCE TOO

Both teens and their parents know that future employers will look highly on the development of emotional intelligence. More than two thirds of parents agree that after-school programs can help children gain workforce skills like teamwork, leadership and critical thinking.

Teens are also attracted to after-school programs that expose them to career options. A recent survey conducted by The Wallace Foundation found that 63 percent of programs offering youth employment opportunities or apprenticeships achieved a high retention rate, suggesting teens enjoy, and stick with, programs that expose them to real-world job opportunities. Jodi Grant, the executive director at Afterschool Alliance, says:

*“The whole point of education is to prepare our kids for the workforce. They need academic skills, but they also need social skills, emotional skills, professional skills, confidence and collaboration—these are all things that kids can get in after-school programs.”*

Unsurprisingly, the soft skills that promote academic success mirror those that employers and college-admissions officers seek in qualified candidates.



Source: U.S. Department of Education



Source: Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, (2015)

Give teens the career experience they expect from an after-school program by:

- + Inviting guest speakers to share their experience with students.
- + Deploying a mentorship program with working professionals. Girls Write Now in New York is a prime example. Professional writers from various genres hold workshops for young female writers and provide one-on-one mentorship.
- + Giving participants the ability to volunteer on-site.
- + Hosting “job shadowing” opportunities.
- + Conducting practice interviews and résumé reviews.





## AFTER-SCHOOL PROGRAM TRENDS TO CONSIDER

Don't be afraid to experiment with your programming opportunities. When looking to add soft skills training into your existing classes, take note of trends in schools, industries and society. To start, consider borrowing from these popular trends:

### Trend No. 1: Heritage and Culture

As children age, they form an interest in their community, its origin, and its place in the world. After-school programs that promote community understanding help students develop their sense of self and foster a greater appreciation of art, tolerance and community history.

The Wallace Foundation found that culturally specific programs help sustain participation rates and draw increased attention from older participants in particular. To incorporate community elements into your after-school program, consider adding these regionally specific field trips:

- + Local art and historical museums
- + Guided hikes
- + Regional attractions and landmarks
- + Local farms
- +

### Heritage and Culture Program Example: The Roots of Music

This New Orleans-based after-school program provides children with music-theory education, ensemble-performance practice, and academic tutoring, all with a healthy dose of local flavor. The objective of The Roots of Music is to promote and preserve the distinct musical and cultural history of New Orleans. Participants learn about the city's cultural history and musical heritage, perform in a marching band in the city's annual Mardi Gras parade and receive academic tutoring from Tulane University student-mentors.

### Trend No. 2: Technological Fluency & STEM

Technology often evolves more quickly than school curriculum. Luckily, after-school programs can introduce participants to budding technologies they might not encounter in classrooms by incorporating STEM activities into their programming.

Perhaps this is why 70 percent of parents say after-school programs should offer STEM, and why 80 percent of parents with children in programs offering STEM activities are satisfied with their program's learning opportunities.

### Technological Fluency & STEM Program Examples: Maker Spaces

Maker spaces are collaborative workspaces for students to share, exchange, and test their own creations. For example, one middle school partnered with Carnegie Mellon University to create a "Dream Factory," where students designed chocolate bars using 3D software and created advertisements for them using a green screen. These spaces can be organized into stations and projects can be assigned individually or in groups.

### STEM Programs for Young Women

The modern world more readily welcomes women interested in pursuing careers in STEM, in part thanks to the positive encouragement from mentors in after-school programs like:

#### + TechBridge

This after-school program gives young women in Washington, D.C., California, and the Pacific Northwest the opportunity to explore the real-world applications of STEM studies. Past projects include designing an app to reduce bullying, building a "smart" water bottle, and using the fundamentals of chemical engineering to make lip balm. Of TechBridge participants, 80 percent want to pursue more STEM learning opportunities, 92 percent are more confident using technology and 96 percent believe engineering is a good career for women.

#### + Girls Who Code

Girls Who Code has served more than 90,000 young coders in all 50 states. Past projects include creating websites to map local nature trails, increasing pollution awareness and providing public education on pet-adoption methods.



### Trend No. 3: Mental and Physical Health Connection

Physical and emotional well-being are closely linked, especially during a child's pivotal growth years. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) says that physical activity can improve concentration and memory and raise grades and test scores.

A majority 73 percent of parents say their children participated in sports or athletic activities in the past year. Yet, one in six American children are obese, and many fail to meet the CDC's recommended one hour of moderate exercise daily for adolescents. Thus, it's no surprise that eight in 10 parents want after-school programs to provide opportunities for physical activity.

Program directors should aim to create activities that target physical and mental strength simultaneously. Below, see how you can integrate mind-body connection into existing programs to promote well-being inside and out.

#### Mental and Physical Health Connection Program Examples:

- + **Yoga**  
Skills gained: balance, strength, self-confidence, anxiety reduction.
- + **Cooking**  
Skills gained: self-sufficiency, creativity, health management.
- + **Theater**  
Skills gained: teamwork, public speaking, creative problem solving, self-expression.
- + **Martial Arts**  
Skills gained: self-discipline, confidence, goal setting, coordination.

### Trend No. 4: Entrepreneurship and Financial Literacy

Millennial and Gen X parents, saddled with student debt and affected by the recession, want their kids to be financially savvy. This has led to an uptick in entrepreneurship programs for children, beginning as young as preschool. Consider adding these entrepreneurship activities to your out-of-school programming:

- + Market days when participants can create and exchange crafts and snacks.
- + Guest speakers from various fields and professions.
- + Invention Conventions that allow students to brainstorm new products or solutions. Participants pitch their ideas to one another at the close of the project.

#### Entrepreneurship and Financial Literacy Program Examples:

- + **Acton Children's Business Fair**  
Every year, children flock to this event to set up booths and sell the goods and services they've created, from cookies to software programs. Believe it or not, 4-year-old Mikaila Ulmer's business, Me & the Bees Lemonade, debuted at the Acton Children's Business Fair and is now distributed at Whole Foods Market and Wegmans.
- + **Lemonade Day**  
Lemonade stands may be the common denominator in many people's initial foray into entrepreneurship. Lemonade Day hopes to make that experience more intentional. Kids go through a 14-step process to build their lemonade stand, learning best practices for running a business along the way.
- + **Junior Achievement**  
Lovingly referred to as the "granddaddy of youth entrepreneurship programs" by Inc. Magazine, this seasoned program encourages participants to understand the processes behind modern entrepreneurship. Children learn about crowdfunding, bringing products to market and lean methodology.







# YOUR PROGRAM IS ONLY AS STRONG AS THE SOFT SKILLS IT TEACHES

Fostering soft skills in your after-school program will attract registrants, please parents and encourage retention. Programs that focus on specific skills not only enrich the daily lives of kids and teens but give them a leg up when they apply for college or enter the workforce. Participants feel empowered when they're genuinely listened to, given opportunities to lead and invited to explore future collegiate or professional opportunities.

Let parents and kids know you're thinking of their future, and your program can achieve significant growth.

## Are You Ready for an Influx of Registrations?

After updating your after-school program to include the soft skills parents and teens expect, you'll need to modernize your registration process. Use ACTIVE Network's [Camp & Class Manager Registration Tool](#) to streamline enrollments, save time and create sleek, customized registration forms. This class participant management solution provides a quick, easy and mobile option for the influx of new and returning participants your soft-skills programming will surely bring.

With Camp & Class Manager, you can:

- + Choose from pre-built templates or customize your forms to match the look of your program's website.
- + Offer different pricing options, including discounts and promotions, or obtain additional revenue for extras like merchandise, special activities, meals and transportation.
- + Let customers register multiple people for multiple class sessions in one sitting.

If you have any questions regarding registration in Camp & Class Manager, contact your account manager, and see our [Online Registration Basics User Guide](#).

Speak to a specialist to start upgrading your registration process with ACTIVE's Camp & Class Manager.

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