

Parents Want Good Eating and Exercise in After-School Programs, Says Survey

By Kathryn Baron on March 12, 2015

Many years ago, I watched as my wiry young daughter climbed a metal ladder to a platform, donned a safety belt, grabbed a trapeze and swung over a net where she linked arms with an instructor who lifted her back to the wobbly safety of the platform on the other side.

This heart-stopping (my heart, that is) circus act took place at her elementary school yard as part of the after-school program. Students could also take martial arts and gymnastics classes, play organized team sports like soccer or do what little kids love to do in the playground—run and jump and screech and chase each other.

In addition to being places where children can do their homework, work with tutors, and take hands-on academic enrichment classes in science, technology, engineering, and math, after-school programs are more and more playing a vital role in reducing childhood obesity and teaching healthy habits, according to a new report from the Washington-based [Afterschool Alliance](#).

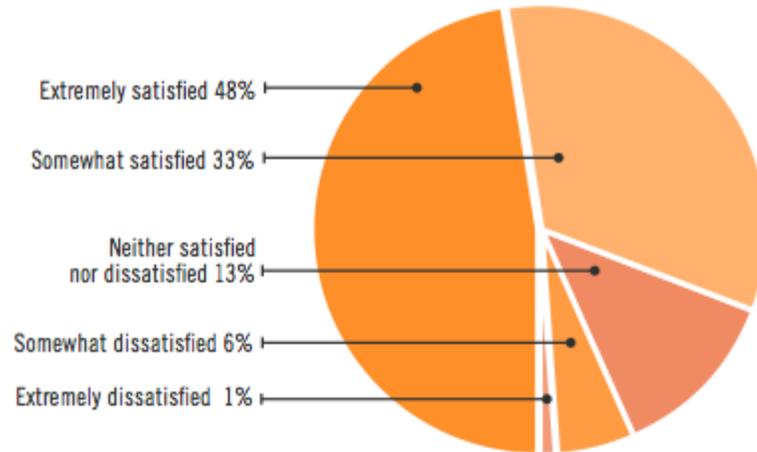
"We've known for a long time that after-school, before-school, and summer programs keep kids safe, inspire them to learn, and help working parents," said Jodi Grant, the executive director of the Afterschool Alliance, in a [written statement](#). "These new data make clear that they also do a tremendous amount to help keep kids healthy, now and for the future."

The findings were released earlier this week in "[Kids on the Move: Afterschool Programs Promoting Healthy Eating and Physical Activity](#)." The Alliance surveyed 30,720 families last year, and followed up by conducting in-depth interviews with 13,709 households that had children enrolled in after-school programs. This is the second report based on results of that survey; the first one, titled "America After 3PM," which we reported on [here](#), focused on access and availability of after-school programs.

Nearly three-quarters of families whose children attended after-school programs —72 percent—said their child received snacks or meals and drinks, and, as the chart from the report indicates, overall 81 percent of those parents felt that the food and beverages were healthy, while 7 percent were concerned about the type of snacks provided, the

How satisfied are you with the snacks and/or meals that are healthy in your child's afterschool program?

(Among respondents whose afterschool program offers beverages, snacks and/or meals)



rest were neutral.

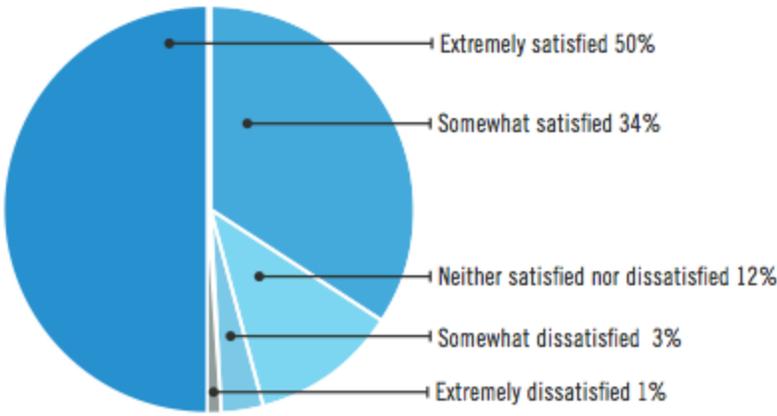
The report notes, "Providing healthy food in an after-school program is especially important to low-income families." Among low-income families with a child in an after-school program, 67 percent said that was a factor in deciding where to send their children, compared to 58 percent of high-income parents.

In 2013, nearly 8.6 million children did not have adequate, nutritious food at least at one point during the year and, of those, 765,000 lived in households with very low food security among children, meaning children were hungry, skipped a meal or did not eat for a whole day because there wasn't enough money for food, according to a [study](#) by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

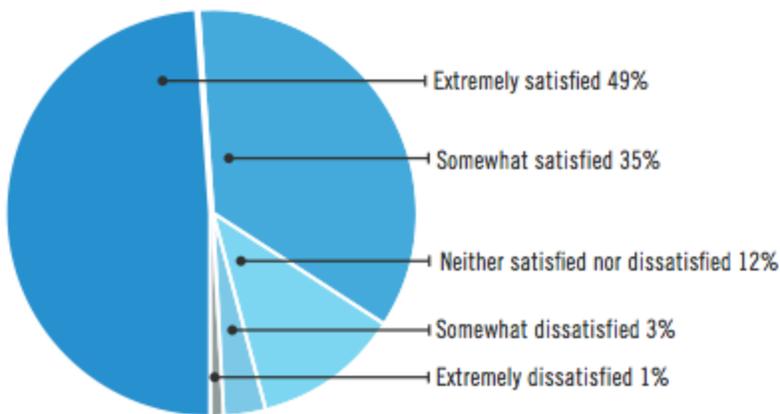
When it comes to keeping fit, 80 percent of the families reported that the after-school programs their children attend should and do offer some type of physical activity. That's an increase of 4 percentage points since the last survey in 2009.

How satisfied are you with:
(Among parents whose child's afterschool program offers opportunities for physical activity)

The amount of physical activity



The variety of physical activity offered:



Two-thirds of parents said their children are physically active for at least 30 minutes a day in their after-school programs and 27 percent said their kids get 60 minutes a day. But it's not clear whether the type and rigor of the activities meet federal guidelines. The U.S. Department of Health and Human services **recommends** that children between 6 and 17 years old should get an hour of moderate to vigorous physical activity every day.

After-school programs are increasingly picking up the physical education slack for elementary schools that have reduced PE, especially under No Child Left Behind, to increase time for reading and math. Even though the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has found an **uptick** in the number of elementary schools requiring physical education in recent years, the CDC also **reported** that obesity rates among children

have not changed significantly. Nearly 18 percent of 6-11 year olds are obese as are 20.5 percent of 12-19 year olds.

Being active doesn't just keep kids physically fit; it also boosts their brainpower. A study that we wrote about [last September](#), found that elementary school kids who exercised for about an hour a day in an after-school program were more focused in class and did better on tasks involving executive function—things like managing their time, remembering things, controlling their behavior, and being organized.

African-American and Hispanic parents are especially concerned about their children getting healthy food and a lot of exercise. The survey found these differences in responses by race and ethnicity:

- 77 percent of African-American parents, 72 percent of white parents, and 69 percent of Hispanic parents said programs should provide healthy food and beverages
- 50 percent of African-American Parents, 45 percent of Hispanic parents, and 39 percent of white parents said PE was extremely important in selecting an after-school program

One concern that showed up throughout the survey is the disparity between programs for young children and teen-agers when it comes to providing healthy food and physical activity. One-third of parents with older children said their after-school programs did not provide food and 21 percent said the programs didn't offer PE, compared to 20 percent and 12 percent of programs, respectively, for younger children.

"This survey is encouraging, but it also identifies some challenges," said Kevin Washington, the president and CEO of the YMCA of the USA, which has after-school and summer programs across the country. "After-school providers and advocates need to do more to keep older youth active... and help policymakers understand the full range of benefits after-school programs provide."

One other key—and consistent—recommendation, is for federal, state, and local governments to work with community organizations and private business to increase the investment in after-school programs, particularly in high-needs communities.