After School Programs in Halton

Results of Parent and Child Focus Groups

July 2016

Introduction

As part of the development of the Early Learning and Child Care Plan, focus groups were held with parents and children aged 4 to 12 years to identify what they value in after school programs, and to generate discussion about what can be done to make it easier to find and access after school programs. Focus groups were held with both parents and children in four geographic areas of the region: Georgetown, Milton, Burlington, and Oakville. A total of 44 parents and 74 children participated in the focus groups.

For the purposes of this plan, parents were asked to think about after school programs for their children aged 4 to 12 years of age. After school programs were defined as being programs that provide supervision and care to children aged 4 to 12 years that are offered in the morning before school, in the afternoon after school, during school holidays, and on school professional activity (PA) days. These programs could be offered by licensed child care centres, recreation programs, or other community-based programs.

The goal of the focus groups was to articulate parents' and children's perceptions and experiences with after school programs and to generate ideas about what can be done differently.

Parents' Perspectives

44 parents participated in the four focus groups held across the region (see the table for more details about participation).

Parents were asked a series of questions about after school programs for their children aged 4 to 12 years. These questions included:

Location	Number of Parents
Georgetown	5
Milton	14
Burlington	14
Oakville	11
TOTAL	**44**

1. What after school programs have you used for your child or are you currently using?
2. What has been your experience in trying to find and access after school programs for your children aged 4 to 12 years?
3. What could we do to make it easier for you to either find or access after school programs you want and need for your children aged 4 to 12 years of age?
4. Complete the sentence: A characteristic of high quality after school programs is… Are there any characteristics that are more important than others? Any less important?
5. If your child could attend any kind of program before or after school, what would that look like?
6. What other comments would you like to make about after school programs?

Responses provided by parents who attended the focus groups were analyzed using a thematic analysis. The analysis was conducted on an aggregate level and then reviewed for any geographic differences. Overall, parents across the region are satisfied with the variety and quality of after school programs available for their children, and have some suggestions for ways to enhance their experience in finding and accessing these programs.

Frequently Used Words

A word frequency query was conducted to identify the most frequently used words during the parent focus groups. A word cloud was created to show these words. Based on the focus of the discussion, it is not surprising that the top mentioned words were:

1. Program
2. Camp
3. School
4. Find

After School Programs Used

Over the course of a year, parents are using a mix of after school programs to meet the care needs of their 4 to 12 year old children.

School Days
- On school days, most parents use a licensed before and after school program for their child. Some parents only use a licensed after school program

Professional Activity (PA) Days
- For PA days, most parents use a licensed school age program. Some parents stay home with their children or use other family members (i.e. grandparents) to care for their children, and others use a combination of camps and staying home
- One parent noted that the extracurricular activity she has her child in also provides programming on PA Days

Summer and Other School Holidays
- During the summer and other school holidays, for the most part, parents are piecing together a mix of after school programs for their children. Some of the programs being used include:
  - Town/city day camps
  - Sports camps like soccer, swimming, gymnastics, tennis, hockey, horseback riding
  - Licensed school age programs/camps
  - Academic programs like Future Scholars, language camps, literacy camps, science camps
  - Art/drama camps
  - Dance camps
  - Music camps
  - Outdoor education camps
  - Chef/baking camps

- A smaller number of parents are staying home all or part of the time with their children, using family/relatives to help care for their children or hiring a babysitter

Experience Finding and Accessing After School Programs

Generally, parents report minimal problems with finding and accessing after school programs for their children. Many parents report there are lots of after school programs available, allowing them to choose a location that is convenient for them (Note: This was especially prevalent in the comments of parents from Georgetown and Milton). Some parents also report that the location and/or hours of the after school program are convenient for them, making access easier. As one parent noted, "*Convenience, being in the same school, so kids don't have to be transported*."

The top two ways that parents are finding after school programs are:

1. Online: searching for information about programs online or via social media (i.e. being part of a Mom's group on Facebook)
2. Word of mouth: hearing about programs from friends, other parents, realtor, etc.

> *"You can check everything online. We have Georgetown Mom's group on Facebook."*

Some of the other ways that parents are finding after school programs are:

- The child care centre provides information about after school programs
- The library has posters and recreation books
- Parents are looking in the recreation book
- The school provides information about camp

Although parents noted that, generally, finding and accessing after school programs is satisfactory, a number of issues and improvements were suggested. The most frequently mentioned issue in all communities is that **programs fill up quickly**. Due to the high demand for certain programs parents must register on the same day that registration opens or they will not secure a spot for their child. This results in waitlists for some programs and/or not being able to choose the program they want for their child. The different registration dates for programs was also named as an issue, forcing some parents to choose programs with the earliest registration date to ensure care for their child in the summer. Some of the comments from parents about this issue include:

"Programs fill up really fast – swimming, lot of the summer programs, dancing camps, cartwheels, first day of registration they had sold out most weeks."

"Find you have to book early, then try to find out about other camps, but worried about wait lists…very stressful…can't pick programs we want as we have to plan asap due to work commitments. We have no flexibility."

"Time wise and getting on lists – if you want Gellert or dance class – you have to be on the

Other issues mentioned about finding and accessing after school programs are:

- **Programs are not always available when parents need them:** The last week of summer is an issue finding licensed after school programs in schools, and the timing of some summer programs (9 am to 2 pm) doesn't work for parents that are employed

- **Some of the programs parents are looking for aren't available:** Programs named by parents that aren't available include: drama group, arts and crafts, and other programs for children 4 to 6 years of age (some parents said it seems more programs are available for children aged 6 and older), flexible, part time after school care (if there are spots available it is for certain days only i.e. Monday, Wednesday, Friday or Tuesday, Thursday), and math programs

- **Finding after school programs (especially for summer) that take children of different ages can be challenging**: Some parents report that it is hard to find information on summer camps when you have children of different ages. Parents also note that they are having to send children to two different programs due to the ages of their children. Some parents would prefer to have the camps go by grade versus age

- **The cost of after school programs can be a factor:** Having subsidy available for all after school programs was mentioned as a way to help with the cost/affordability of after school programs. Some parents reported concern that they only leave their children for half an hour of an after school program and are charged the full rate. Others leave their children for the full time even though they are home to get their money's worth. City/town day camps were noted by parents as being more affordable

- **It is hard to find information about after school programs easily and challenging to coordinate if you are piecing together different programs:** It is hard to find links to all of the after school programs on the internet, and parents want access to more detailed information about the programs themselves (i.e. program schedule, environment, etc.). Coordinating the different after school programs, and coordinating programs and busing is also challenging for some parents

- **Not all after school programs are located in a convenient place for parents:** Some parents in Georgetown and Oakville reported that the community is big, resulting in a fair amount of driving to get to programs as some programming is only offered in other communities (i.e. Acton)

Ways to Improve Finding and Accessing After School Programs

When asked about ways to improve finding and accessing after school programs, parents feel that information is key. The one item mentioned most frequently by parents is the need for an online inventory of all after school programs. This online resource would house information about after school programs in one place, providing parents with one spot to access information about all programs instead of going to different sites.

"Might be helpful to have it online – one place where all programs could advertise instead of going to different sites."

"Even through the Halton website – easy links to all programs."

Other ways that information could be used to assist with finding and accessing after school programs are:

- Providing more detailed information about program dates and registration deadlines (parents are wanting to register for summer programs in January/February and would like information about all summer programs and registration dates in order to make decisions)
- Sending information about after school programs home via the school and/or holding an information night once a year

Other items mentioned by parents to improve finding and accessing after school programs are:

- Providing transportation
- Expanding the subsidy program so that it can be used to access all after school programs

Characteristics of High Quality After School Programs
In addition to asking parents about their experience with finding and accessing after school programs, parents were asked to name what they feel are the characteristics of high quality after school programs. In order to do this, parents were asked to individually complete the sentence, "A characteristic of high quality after school programs is…" on strips of paper as many times as they could. They wrote one idea per strip of paper. This helped to generate a broad range of ideas on this topic. Individual parents then shared their ideas, one at a time, with the larger group. The group added similar ideas to the one presented (themed the responses) and at the end of the sharing, "named" each of the groups of ideas.

Parents named a number of characteristics which they feel create a high quality after school program. These include:

- Staff
- Safety
- Facilities/Equipment

- Activities
- Cost Effective
- Food

- Communication
- Convenience
- Child Experience

- Structure
- Learning
- Flexibility

In May 2015, the City of Toronto published a report entitled, "*Toronto after-school programs: What really matters?*" This report highlights the key characteristics of high quality programs as identified by research. These include:

- Health and safety: safe program spaces in both indoor and outdoor space
- Appropriate environment: Indoor and outdoor spaces are used to best meet activity goals
- Leadership and staff: Caring and committed staff that have experience and training working with children
- High quality and varied activities that meet children's diverse needs
- Positive relationships between staff and children, children and their peers, and staff and each other
- Developmentally appropriate: Support children's social and emotional development
- Affordable and accessible, and address a range of related issues such as transportation, availability and cost
- Families and the community: Parents, family members, and the broader community are engaged
- Evaluation of the program

Many of the characteristics identified through research were highlighted by parents that attended the focus groups.

Across all of the focus groups, parents identified that the most important characteristics of a high quality after school program are: staff and the program activities. Parents made the link between staff and activities, noting that having staff that are engaged, connected, and experienced makes a difference. Staff are the basis of everything, and with great staff the program activities engage the children.

The following table details the comments made about each of these topics.

Staff	Program Activities
- Attentive staff - Brittany running it! - Caring and interested staff - A staff member who adores children - Educated teacher - Good trained and understanding staff - Quality staff - Great teachers - Continuity - Caring instructors/teachers	- Play based learning - Variety of activities - Inquiry based (child led) - Developmentally appropriate - Outdoor time - Homework assistance - Monthly calendar of activities and snacks for parents - PA Day – special activity – trip - Help with homework

Staff	Program Activities
▪ Teachers are friendly ▪ The lead/instructor engagement with kids ▪ Trusting adults ▪ Great teachers who are engaged ▪ The teachers/direct in charge have to be engaged, involved and interested in the kids ▪ Engaged staff ▪ Supervision ▪ Provider engagement/staff quality ▪ Engaged adults ▪ Consistent caregivers ▪ Leadership ▪ Know how to make the kids love them ▪ Proper supervision ▪ Staff that are invested in creative programming – monthly calendars ▪ Staff engagement with parents – connecting/informing families of hose their child is doing ▪ Counsellor interaction/staff ▪ Staff – engaged, connected, experienced	▪ Homework time ▪ Help with homework ▪ Fun ▪ Learning focus ▪ Must be fun ▪ Kids can learn with fun ▪ Organized ▪ Activity based ▪ A good mix of physical and mental activity ▪ High energy (tire them out) ▪ Group activities: puzzle day/ arts and crafts ▪ Group activities ▪ A lot of different things to do – activity ▪ Engagement of activities ▪ Supervision during playtime ▪ Observation making sure students are not left ▪ Dedicated time and space for homework ▪ Way and methods of implementing activities ▪ Educational activities (learning with play) ▪ Diversity of activities ▪ Encouragement to try new things ▪ Variety of activities ▪ Types of activities ▪ Individualized care for the child ▪ Homework corner/helper ▪ A program where the child can learn and experience things that he or she is interested in ▪ Activity variety ▪ Enhance and encourage creativity ▪ Mix of learning and physical activity ▪ Opportunity for physical activity ▪ Help with homework (not doing their homework but guiding them) ▪ Fun activities for children ▪ Engaging activities

In the City of Toronto report referenced above, they found that staffing characteristics were rated the highest amongst all characteristics of high quality after school programs as well.

Ideal After School Program

Parents were asked to describe the "ideal" after school program for their child. In terms of the overall structure of the programs, many parents described wanting programs that are "theme" based, with theme weeks and/or a variety of activities/menu of options with different types of activities offered each week.

> *"Theme weeks- have more of a focus- it makes them really excited and they get hooked."*
>
> *"Menu of options, different things each week, whole variety to pick and choose from."*

Another commonly mentioned program that parents want for their children is an outdoors program/outdoor education. This could be offered as one of the "themes" or options on the menu of activities available. As one parent said, "*I would love to have one where you climb through the forest for the day - eat outside, be outside.*"

When thinking about what they would like the after school program for their child to look like, parents also mentioned that the following items are important features:

- **Inquiry based learning**

- **Integration of after school programs with other extracurricular activities:** Offer extracurricular activities (like sports and music lessons) during the time after school instead of later in the evening. Make school space available for rent so that sports, music, etc. can be offered after school. Parents are willing to pay for this as they pay for the activity anyway and this will save them time and running around. One parent said, "*Sports, music, playing soccer, so that then you don't have to keep running. What about integrating Oakville soccer with the after school program so it is done by the time they are picked up. Prevents long days. Monday soccer night, Tuesday music, Wednesday…*"

- **Seamless:** All of the programs are offered in one spot, the children are picked up and transported to the location, the program/summer camp and transportation are included as one package

- **Less structure than the school day** in programs offered after school: Some parents said they want more structure, especially in summer camp/PA day programs and for the younger children

- **Funding**: All after school programs should be eligible for discounts (financial assistance), so that parents can have more of a choice for camps

- **Safety of children**

- **School based program**

A number of different components which could be included in after school programs were also named by parents. These include:

- Bringing in experts to provide more extracurricular activities like music, sports coaches, especially for older children (note: parents are willing to pay more for this)
- Having a small portion of the time in programs offered after school for homework (especially for the older children), perhaps with tutors to help them (i.e. a homework club with a tutor)
- Having clear and timely communication about the activities and snacks (i.e. monthly calendar, reminder app), and information about teachers in the programs
- Providing transportation to the program
- Ensuring staff are qualified
- Having a skills focus (i.e. social skills, things they can't do at home)
- Enhancing the learning that happens during the school day
- Providing more activities
- Bringing in guests (i.e. reptile, magic, etc.) a couple of times a week
- Providing lunch as well as snacks
- Providing access to technology (i.e. computer lab)

Key Findings
Overall, parents are satisfied with the options available to them for after school programs. A number of things could be done to enhance their level of satisfaction, including:

- Streamlining the program registration dates, so that they are advertised and registration occurs at the same time
- Creating an online inventory of after school programs
- Exploring an expansion/revision to the current fee subsidy program, so that it can be used to access more after school programs
- Revamping some after school programs to create more theme based programs with a variety of options from which children/parents can select more specific activities (i.e. cooking one week, sports the next, etc.)
- Exploring the integration of extracurricular activities with school based after school programs

Children's Perspectives

Children that attended the focus groups were asked to "draw or write what you like about after school programs" and to "draw or write what you want but you don't get at after school programs" on two separate project activity sheets. These sheets were collected and a thematic analysis was conducted to identify key themes.

74 children between the ages of 4 and 12 participated in this activity. The majority of children (73.0%) were between the ages of five and eight. Only a small number of children (6.8%) were aged ten and older (see the table for further details).

Age	Number of Children
4	8
5	10
6	16
7	16
8	12
9	7
10	4
11	1
12	0

What Children Like about After School Programs

Children drew pictures of what they like about after school programs and, if able, provided a written description of their picture. Seven key themes emerged from this activity and are listed in order of priority below. Overall, the highlight of after school programs is the opportunity to get active, do arts and other activities, and play games/with toys.

1. **Getting Active** (40.5% of children): Children like to play soccer, baseball, hockey, basketball, play outside, and the gym. Some children even described these activities as helping them get active
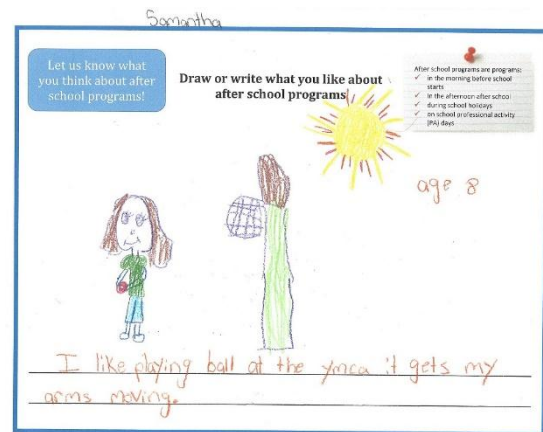
2. **Arts and other Activities** (23.0% of children): Children like arts and other activities like making flowers, dressing up, experiments, drawing, crafts, corking, dancing, and singing
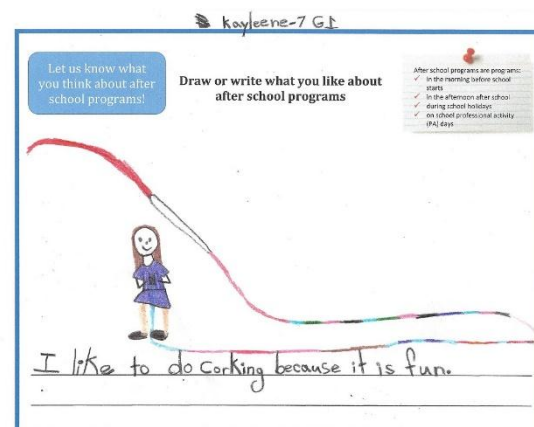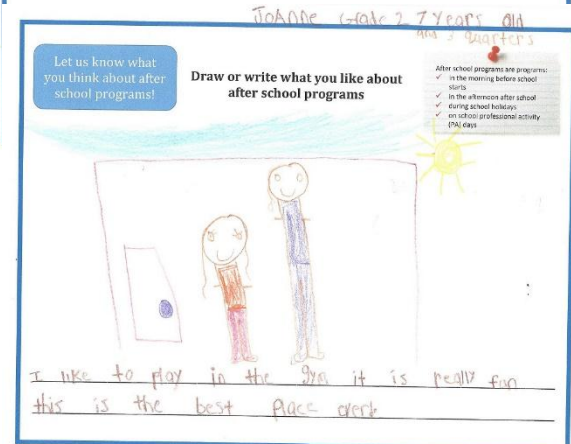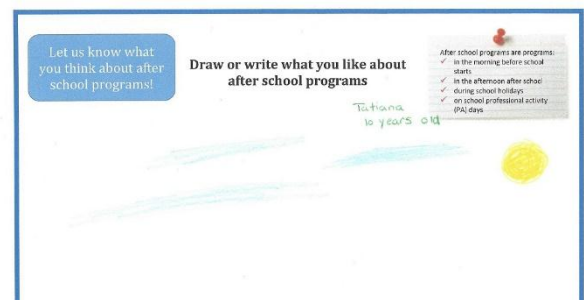
3. **Playing Games/with Toys** (20.0% of children): Children like playing in general, playing in the house centre or quiet room, playing cards, board games, Pokemon, with Lego, cars, and blocks
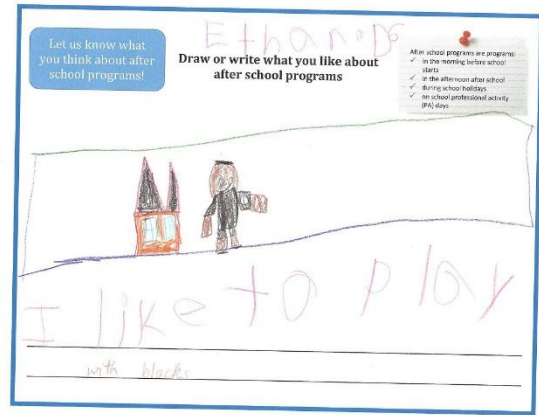
4. **Playing with Friends** (12.2% of children): Children like playing with their friends

5. **Snack Time** (10.8% of children): Children like snacks, making food, eating snack,

6. **Having Fun** (9.5% of children): Children like that many of the things they do at after school programs are fun

7. **The Staff** (2.7% of children): Children like the staff at after school programs

What Children Want in After School Programs

Children drew pictures of what they want but isn't available in after school programs and, if able, provided a written description of their picture. Four key themes emerged from this activity and are listed in order of priority below. Overall, children would like some specific activities to be added to after school programs (i.e. dodgeball), and would like some new amenities to be available (i.e. swimming pool).

1. **Activities** (47.3% of children): Children would like some additional activities to be offered at after school programs. Activities that were named include: dodgeball, flying a kite, video games, trips, gymnastics, movies, bouncing on a trampoline, going to the pool, and being allowed to stay inside and complete homework

2. **Amenities/Equipment** (25.5% of children): Children would like some new amenities/equipment to be available for after school programs. These include: baseball equipment, soccer field, swimming pool, sprinklers, pet bunny, and toys

3. **Food** (14.5% of children): Children would like more "junk" food to be available at after school programs. Some of the food they would like is: popsicles, ice cream, treats, juice other than apple juice, pizza, and candy

4. **Electronics** (12.7% of children): Children would like to be able to use electronics (i.e. phone, internet) as well as play video games at after school programs

In terms of the four geographic areas in which focus groups were held, the following differences were noted in the most frequently named things that were wanted:

Georgetown	▪ Children would like a soccer field
Milton	▪ Children would like a swimming pool
Burlington	▪ Children would like a swimming pool and be able to play video games
Oakville	▪ Children would like to be able to play dodgeball

Key Findings
Overall, children like many aspects of after school programs, with the opportunity to be active and engage in arts and other activities at the top of the list.   The amenities/ equipment list should be reviewed to see if these are required in the named communities.