**Key principles of developing an afterschool curriculum[[1]](#footnote-1)**

**1. Provide Structure with Flexibility:** One of the most important things to remember in designing a curriculum is that children need a balance between structured activities (such as building a model of a bridge with a group of classmates, or working with a partner to write a scene for a play) and unstructured time, where they are free to choose their own activities and partners. Most school days are highly structured, and kids need some time, particularly in the afterschool hours, to unwind and follow their own inclinations. Time spent in unstructured activities will help them to focus on the structured activities you offer.

**2. Plan a Variety of Activities:** When it comes time to plan your activities, try to provide a wide range of opportunities for learning. Include a mix that develops academic, social, physical, and emotional skills, while giving your students the chance to develop hobbies, skills, and interests they might not otherwise be able to explore. Community service projects and other hands-on activities can help your students cultivate positive character traits, and enhance their sense of community.

The afterschool hours provide an ideal time and place to get your students excited about learning to pursue their own interests, and it helps them develop self-confidence as they explore new talents in areas that may not be addressed by the regular school curriculum. Make sure the activities you offer are fun and engaging, no matter what they are designed to teach. Most kids are tired after a long day at school, and they will be best able to absorb the content of a lesson if it looks more like play and less like a traditional classroom lesson.

**3. Give Students Choices:** You should structure your program so students have daily choices about how they will spend their time. This encourages students to take responsibility for their own learning, and allows the program staff to better meet the needs of all their students.

**4. Provide Opportunities for Student Input:** By working with students to develop curriculum activities, you will allow them to develop a sense of ownership of the program, develop responsibility, and select activities that reflect their interests as they help plan and lead activities.

**5. Pay Attention to the Particular Needs of Your Program:** A thorough knowledge of the needs and desires of your students, staff, families, and community will allow you to fine-tune activities for the best possible fit with your unique population.

**6. Pay Attention to Time, Environmental, and Staffing Constraints:** Make sure activities work within the time allotted for the program, and for the environment in which it will be performed. There should be a sufficient number of qualified staff to meet the requirements of the activities.

**7. Pay Attention to the Budget:** Make sure activities work within the budget allotted for the program.

[Adapted from: The National Institute on Out-of-School Time (NIOST) outline of quality afterschool programming. Standards for Quality School-Age Care developed by the National School-Age Care Alliance (NSACA).]

[](http://www.thirteen.org/edonline/concept2class/afterschool/implementation.html#top)

**Before the planning process begins: things to consider**

**Addressing the needs and interests of students and staff**

Before you start to plan activities for your program, it is essential that you take time to consider the specific needs and interests of the students you serve, as well as the interests of the staff who will supervise and teach them. What do your students like to do? What are the specific interests of your staff? Ideally you want to plan activities that will appeal to both.

It is also important to consider the needs, wishes and distinct culture of the community you live in when designing programming. Are the children or youth in your program from families who are recent immigrants to this country? If so, you could do an activity which focuses on exploring cultural diversity. Students could prepare or bring in native dishes to share with their peers. They could talk about and play games from different countries. Staff could read or provide books to children about what it is like to move to a new place, and the students could follow this up by writing about their own memories of dislocation.

Thus, before we discuss planning activities for your program, it is important for program staff members to take a step back and put some thought into what their own goals and desires are for the program.

Our experts at NIOST developed the following exercise as a way to help afterschool staff approach this introductory stage of the planning process:

**[NIOST Curriculum Design Exercise](http://www.thirteen.org/edonline/concept2class/afterschool/pop_niost.html)**

Here is a list of factors that might influence how you plan afterschool activities:

* your teaching interests and philosophy
* your sense of the kinds of things that appeal to kids of different ages
* the experiences you wish the students to have
* the time, type of space, and materials needed for any given activity
* the number of students
* the program budget

While the list of afterschool activities to choose from is endless, taking the time to consider both your and your students' preferences will bring you closer towards constructing a program that works for everyone.

According to our experts at NIOST, choosing the curriculum activities for an afterschool program should be based on these eight concepts:

1. An understanding of how children develop and learn
2. Attention to children's needs and interests
3. The goals of the program
4. The limitations and assets of the space you are in, and the resources you have
5. The group leader's teaching style
6. The day's schedule
7. The group leader's understanding of the activity
8. A sense of what the kids must know, or be able to do, in order to successfully participate in the activity.

All of these things should play a part in your planning decisions. Choices about which activities to pursue are often made without an understanding of why that particular choice was made. Choosing an activity because you like it, or the kids like it, or because it is easy and fun to do is fine, but this is just a starting point in planning. To be a really effective leader and planner, it is necessary to develop your understanding of why you are doing any particular activity; this will help you choose activities that meet the full range of your kids' needs. As we emphasized earlier, it is very important that the kids in your program have fun, but this should not be the sole criterion by which an activity is judged.

It takes time to learn to choose activities with this level of thoughtfulness. By evaluating the effectiveness of the activities you choose, soliciting and paying attention to the feedback you get from the kids, and looking at your own response to the activity, you will become more sophisticated in your choices and be able to develop activities with greater ease and effectiveness.

**Common Obstacles to Implementation**

Despite your best intentions, there are a number of common obstacles that can stand in the way of implementing quality afterschool activities. It is important to consider these obstacles early in the planning process, allowing time to brainstorm ways of dealing with them. These obstacles include the following:

**Child Dynamics**: There may be challenges associated with the number, ages, gender, or behavior of the children in your program. Do you anticipate any such problems with the children in your own program that could affect the success of your chosen activities? If so, think about ways to address such problems. Maybe you need to divide the group into several smaller groups, or plan activities that allow for a wider range of abilities.

**Environment**: Are the indoor and/or outdoor spaces you have sufficient for the kinds of activities you would like to do? Are there any constraints of the space that would prevent certain activities? For instance, if you are in a classroom with a rug, will that prevent large-scale painting projects that might stain it?

**Content Knowledge**: Do the activities you want to do require specific knowledge on the part of the kids or the instructors that they may not possess? If you want to build rockets that you can launch, for example, you have to know the building and safety requirements such a project demands.

**Storage**: Are there places you can keep projects that are still 'in the works'? Is there space to store materials and reference works? If children can't leave a project and get back to it in the next session, that will limit the kinds of projects you can consider.

**Administration and Staff**: How committed is the staff to the goals of the program? Do all staff members feel they have a stake in its success? If the support of the administration or staff is lacking, you need to address the reasons why they are not supportive.

**Materials**: Is there enough money to buy and space to store the materials your activities will require?

**Time**: How is the program time structured, and how will this affect the kinds of programs you can do? For instance, if no session lasts longer than 50 minutes, you will either have to alter the schedule or eliminate activities that take more time to complete.

 **Scheduling**

Once you've put some thought into the specific interests and needs of your staff, your students, your families and your community, and brainstormed ways to overcome obstacles you may face, it is time to take the next step in designing a curriculum: scheduling. But, before you construct a schedule to fit the needs of your particular program, we suggest you find your monthly planner, or another schedule that you feel comfortable with, and fill it in as you go along.

**1. Structure and Flexibility**
Ideally, this schedule should include daily, weekly, and monthly routines, as well as time for celebrations and special events. Kids like to know what to expect, so it is important to have an established routine that everyone understands. This also allows your students to look forward to regularly scheduled events that they particularly enjoy, such as art, outdoor games, etc.

At the same time, the established routine (that you design for your program) must also allow a degree of flexibility. Structure is essential for making a program work, but when students are not in school, they need time to choose activities, explore their interests, hang out with their friends, and relax. A good schedule will include blocks of time where this is possible.

**2. Transition Time**
The period when kids make the transition from their school day to their afterschool activities is a time when flexibility is particularly important. When adults finish work for the day, most feel the need to unwind--for some this means going for a run or to the gym. For others it means getting together with friends, or reading, or watching television. Different people have different ways of unwinding. The same can be said for children and youth. Some kids need to run around for a while to let off steam. Others prefer to spend some time alone, or have a snack right away. Some kids just want to spend time with friends. An effective schedule recognizes these preferences, and builds opportunities for different types of transitional activities into the program schedule.

An easy way to remember the types of transitional activities kids prefer is summarized below:

|  |
| --- |
| http://www.thirteen.org/edonline/concept2class/images/spacer.gif |
| http://www.thirteen.org/edonline/concept2class/images/spacer.gif |  LAPS -- participating in physical activity SNACKS -- having something to eat and drink RAPS -- socializing with friends and staff members NAPS -- relaxing and enjoying quiet time | http://www.thirteen.org/edonline/concept2class/images/spacer.gif |

The transitional time should last for about a half-hour and -- depending on space constraints -- be organized so that there is a separate space for each of the four different transitional activities (listed above), with staff or volunteers overseeing each area. A well-structured transitional time allows students to participate more fully in the activities to follow.

Once your students have made the transition from the school day to afterschool, there are a few other scheduling concerns to keep in mind:

**Making time for snacks:** If it is possible, set up a snack area where kids can help themselves when they are hungry, rather than scheduling one set snack time. In a traditional school, students' lunchtimes are staggered. One student might have finished lunch at 11:30, while another didn't finish until 1:30. Having an open snack area allows students to eat when they are actually hungry, not just because it's time.

**Making space for homework:** If you have a specific time set aside for students to work on their homework, make sure that students who have finished their work have other quiet activities to participate in. In other words, try not to have students choose between doing their homework and participating in an exciting new activity. Students not doing homework during homework time could be asked to read quietly until homework time is over.

**Creating structured free time:** Use at least one block of time during the afternoon to set up activity choice "stations." Set up enough space so no station is overcrowded, and allow students to move from one to another at their own pace. Activities offered could include such things as arts and crafts, board games, extra homework help, movement or dance, etc. Students often respond well to this form of "structured" free time.

**Adding variety:** Offer different "clubs" -- journalism club, nature club, dance club, or others based on student and staff interests -- that meet once or twice a week for a month or more. This adds variety to your program and it is a way to take advantage of the particular enthusiasms of staff and students.

**Easing the end-of-day transition:** At the end of the program day, think about scheduling more low-key activities so when parents come to pick their children up, they won't have to take them away from an activity that is hard to leave in the middle. For example, it is usually easier for a kid to leave a drawing project he or she can finish the next day than a high-energy game of capture the flag.

**A step-by-step guide to planning activities**

There are several approaches to choose from when planning your activities. In the [Exploration](http://www.thirteen.org/edonline/concept2class/afterschool/exploration_sub2.html) section, the project-based approach was illustrated by the example of students conducting interdisciplinary, student-centered activities culminating in a theatrical production. An activity plan could also be based upon a service-learning approach, where students study particular subject areas and then do a service project to amplify what they have learned. For specific examples of service-learning activities and planning, check out the [National Service-Learning Leader Schools Web site](http://www.learnandserve.org/leaderschools/), [Learn and Serve National Service-Learning Clearinghouse](http://www.servicelearning.org/) (NSLC), the [Compact for Learning and Citizenship](http://www.ecs.org/ecsmain.asp?page=/html/projectsPartners/clc/clc_main.htm), or the [Corporation for National Service](http://www.nationalservice.org/) (CNS).

Another successful approach, in a number of environments, is to anchor your activities to a theme. Using a thematic approach creates a sense of continuity from day to day, helps students develop new interests, encourages students to broaden the breadth of their knowledge, and allows for a broad array of activities. Themes can last for a week, a month, or longer, depending on student and staff interest. This theme-based approach is highlighted in the step-by-step planning guide in this section.

How do you come up with a theme or themes for your program? Some of the best ideas will come from your students. Pay attention to what they are talking about, what they are excited about, and what they are doing in school. Talk to their school-day teachers. And make sure you include your students in your planning session. Not only will they help to come up with good ideas, but they will also take responsibility for their learning.

A terrific way to develop a theme and related activities is to construct an "**activity web.**" An activity web is a visual illustration of the thematic links you wish to create. Once you create your own activity web, you can go on to choose the activities that will work best for your program, decide where they fit into your program schedule, draw up a week-long activity plan, and construct an activity matrix that will serve as your lesson plan. The following steps will guide you through the process.

**Creating an Activity Web**

**Step 1.** Set up a brainstorming session during program time where staff and students work together to come up with possible themes. The following are examples of themes you might consider:

* The Ocean
* Trees
* All About Me
* Factories
* Boats
* Bridges

Basically, the theme you choose will serve as an organizing principle. Activities will be based on the theme you select. Once you have enough ideas, ask the students to help you choose one or two around which to focus your planning.

**Step 2.** Tack a large piece of paper to the blackboard or the wall and make a large circle (or bubble) in the center of it. Write your chosen theme in that circle. For our description of this process, we will use "bridges" as our theme. To follow along with our theme, click on the "bridge" icon in each step.

**Step 3.** Surround the circle containing your theme word with other bubbles. Connect each surrounding bubble to the center circle with a line to show they are related to your theme.

What do these bubbles represent? How many should you draw?

Each bubble should be labeled a specific category of activity. Typical academic categories include math, science, language arts, and social studies. But this is just one collection of categories. Other categories you might choose include art, literacy activities, service-learning activities, health and fitness activities, personal development activities, or science and technology activities. The categories you choose for your program will reflect your priorities: Is the focus more academic? Artistic? Technological? This should show up in your choice of categories. Some programs might want to group activities by the space in which they occur. In this case, categories would be labeled: the gym, the computer room, the playground, the lab, etc. Draw as many bubbles as you have categories, there is no limit. By being as inclusive as possible, you will be more likely to strike a balance of activities.



**Step 4.** Now you are ready to move on to the activities themselves. For each category you have drawn in the previous step, think of as many activities as you can, and write your ideas in new bubbles branching off of the category.



At this stage of designing your activity web, it is helpful to look at the following charts:

* [Summary of the Seven Developmental Needs](http://www.thirteen.org/edonline/concept2class/afterschool/seven_dev_needs.html)

* [Characteristics of Children ages 6 to 10 and Youth ages 11 to 14](http://www.thirteen.org/edonline/concept2class/afterschool/characteristics.html)

Thinking about what children need at certain ages will help you determine appropriate activities. For example, building a bridge might interest younger children, based on their developmental needs, more than it will interest older children. It is also essential to remember that the academic activities you plan should complement and support school day academics, not duplicate them.

**Step 5.** At this point your activity web is complete (see the “bridges” icon below for an example of a completed activity web). However, no one program can 'do' all the activities you have brainstormed. It is now time to choose the specific activities you will focus on. Factors such as time, money, space, children's interests, staff knowledge of the concept, resources, your goals for the children, and program priorities will help you determine which activities to choose. Make sure that you continue to include the kids you will be working with in the decision-making process. Encourage students to choose the activities they most want to try, and accommodate their choices as much as possible within the constraints of the program. You want them to have a sense of ownership of the process itself, as well as of the things they create or do in your program. Something students can include during the planning process is preparing for a culminating activity that involves their families. Students can share what they are doing in the program by inviting family members to an exhibition of their work.



**Step 6.** Now that you've chosen your activities, you have to determine their order. Label the activities you have selected as "beginning activities," "mid-level activities," or "ending activities."

**Beginning activities** help your students gain entry-level knowledge of the topic.

**Mid-level activities** help the students gain understanding of specific facets of the topic.

**Ending activities** would incorporate all the knowledge your students have gained about the topic so far, and allow them to demonstrate what they have learned.



**Step 7.** It is now time to place the activities you have decided upon into the schedule you developed earlier. Some of the activities chosen may occur daily, some once or twice a week, and others monthly. Some activities may happen only once, as part of a special event or celebration. Consider how much time you want to devote to any particular activity, and determine where it best fits into the schedule.

**Step 8.** The final step in this process is designed to give the people who staff your program a larger perspective of the learning that takes place in their afterschool classrooms. Ideally, these educators should be able to take what works for them and their students and dissect it by answering the question, "What exactly is happening in this lesson and why?" Answering this question for each activity planned is a means of professional development. When staff have the answer to this question they will be better able to talk about, to share, and to celebrate the activities that have proven to be successful.

Our experts at NIOST recommend making a matrix to go with the activity web you have developed. This matrix is designed to map out how the activities you have chosen meet the specific needs of your student population. As well as increasing the professionalism of your staff, answering the questions it presents will essentially provide a "lesson plan" for each activity.

For every activity chosen, describe:

**1. The developmental need or needs the activity might fill:**
Choose one or more of the seven developmental needs cited on the chart
in [Step 4](http://www.thirteen.org/edonline/concept2class/afterschool/implementation.html#step4).

**2. The child and youth characteristics to which the activity corresponds:**
Match one or more of the characteristics of children or youth listed on the corresponding charts.

**3. The purpose for the activity:**
Detail your reasons or purpose for doing the activity.

**4. The desired result:**
Indicate what you might see as children successfully accomplish the activity.



Making the extra effort to connect what you do and why you do it will go a long way towards ensuring the quality and success of the activities you plan. It will also encourage the staff in your program to rely less on "cookie cutter" solutions and more on their growing sophistication in planning, while meeting their unique needs.

Congratulations! You have completed the "Afterschool Programs - From Vision to Reality" workshop. You are still only scratching the surface of the myriad of perspectives and resources that are available to you within the extensive field of afterschool programs. Developing and maintaining a quality program requires dedication, enthusiasm, and hard work. We hope that you will leave this workshop not only with practical information under your belt, but also with inspiration to continually learn and improve the quality of your afterschool program.

1. Developed by WNET/Education, http://www.thirteen.org/edonline/concept2class/afterschool/implementation.html#btpp [↑](#footnote-ref-1)