



Expanding **minds** and Opportunities

Leveraging

the Power of Afterschool and Summer Learning for Student Success

This article is an excerpt from the groundbreaking book, ***Expanding Minds and Opportunities: Leveraging the Power of Afterschool and Summer Learning for Student Success***. This landmark compendium, edited by Terry K. Peterson, PhD, is composed of nearly 70 research studies, reports, essays, and commentaries by more than 100 researchers, educators, community leaders, policy makers, and practitioners.

Collectively, these writings boldly state that there is now a solid base of research and best practices clearly showing that quality afterschool and summer learning programs—including 21st Century Community Learning Centers—make a positive difference for students, families, schools, and communities.

Together, the collection of articles demonstrates the power of quality expanded learning opportunities to:

- **promote student success and college and career readiness;**
- **build youth assets such as character, resilience, and wellness;**
- **foster partnerships that maximize resources and build community ties; and**
- **engage families in their children's learning in meaningful ways.**

For information on how to order the full book, download sections and individual articles, or explore the topic areas, visit www.expandinglearning.org/expandingminds.

About the Expanded Learning and Afterschool Project

The Expanded Learning and Afterschool Project is a 50-state initiative harnessing the power of networks and leaders to help schools and communities leverage the time beyond school to accelerate student achievement. A partnership of funders led by the C.S. Mott Foundation support the Expanded Learning and Afterschool Project. More information about the book and the project, as well as additional resources, can be found at www.expandinglearning.org.

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Providing Access to Training and Resources to Afterschool and Summer Learning Professionals to Promote Full and Meaningful Inclusion for All Children

A growing number of parents of children with disabilities, as well as the regular classroom teachers who work with their children, are recognizing the value of including these children in afterschool and summer learning programs. Such programs often provide more natural environments where children with disabilities can experience joyful learning and develop genuine friendships with same age peers without disabilities.

While there is not yet nearly enough access to summer and afterschool programs for children with disabilities, programs that provide expanded learning opportunities are reporting notable increases in the enrollment of children who require some type of accommodation or support. As a result, the need has never been greater for afterschool and youth development professionals to have access to resources that will support them in successfully welcoming and making accommodations for students with disabilities or special needs, including those with learning differences or those who exhibit challenging behaviors.

Extensive research has been conducted on the benefits of training afterschool and summer learning providers. The relationship between high quality professional development and child and youth success in programs that extend beyond the school day has been well documented in the literature (Bouffard & Little, 2004).

With 15 years of providing support to afterschool and summer programs, Kids Included Together (KIT)—a national nonprofit organization—has witnessed major cultural transformations in afterschool and summer learning programs when staff begin to recognize and acknowledge the value of inclusive programs. The process for staff is often described as a journey: The first step involves adopting a philosophy of inclusion

followed by learning the skills and best practices to include all children meaningfully. By receiving high-quality professional development on inclusion and accommodations, staff will better the lives of children, families, and programs, and they will even see a positive change in their own lives. It is vital, however, that the training and resources are research based and validated to ensure that caregivers are receiving the most effective professional development possible.

KIT has recently conducted a series of efficacy and validity studies to generate evidence that its training and resources lead to the full and meaningful inclusion of children with disabilities in out-of-school-time programs. It was KIT's expectation that validating its services and strategies would help promote their implementation throughout the country and overseas, with an eye towards allowing more children of *all* abilities to be fully included in expanded learning programs worldwide. These studies found that there is a statistically significant positive relationship between KIT's partnership with an organization and the beliefs, attitudes, practices, policies, and relationships with families within those organizations (Smith, 2011).

In a large-scale needs assessment, KIT collected data from caregivers in expanded learning programs in four different regions of the country. After an analysis of the data, a number of themes emerged. KIT established that, in general, caregivers did not feel prepared to include children with disabilities, they were unsure what types of accommodations to utilize in the program, and they were unsure how to communicate with parents and families about challenges their children were having in the program. After 1 year of participating in KIT training and utilizing KIT, however, providers reported that they felt more comfortable including children with disabilities, felt more supported when including children of all abilities, were more likely to partner with families to ensure the success of their children, and were implementing accommodations in the program on a daily basis (Smith, 2011).

Unfortunately, the same barriers that exist in the delivery of traditional in-school professional development also exist in the expanded learning field, including restricted budgets, a lack of necessary resources, time and geographical constraints, and inflexibility in caregivers' demanding schedules. To ensure that all caregivers have access to training, KIT has developed a program to combat those barriers. KIT has adopted a blended learning style that allows caregivers to access training at a time and in a way that is most appropriate for them.

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Studying in more depth the KIT delivery system can provide strong clues for afterschool and summer learning intermediaries and professional development providers regarding the range of learning opportunities and supports needed to improve professional practices. KIT delivers research-based professional development through face-to-face training, eLearning modules, webinars, print materials, KIT Support Center phone calls and e-mails, and one-on-one assistance. When participants complete live trainings, eLearning modules, or webinars, they are eligible to receive continuing education units (CEUs). KIT's National Training Center on Inclusion is an authorized provider of CEUs through the International Association for Continuing Education and Training.

KIT trainers travel both domestically and overseas to deliver 2-hour face-to-face trainings to afterschool and summer learning staff. Prior to the visit, an inclusion specialist discusses the needs of the program with a director and determines the training that will best meet the needs of the staff. Trainings are interactive, include a great deal of movement, and allow for collaboration between participants.

KIT also offers training modules through interactive, self-paced online modules that are designed to take about 30 minutes to complete. KIT tracks participant progress on the eLearning modules and provides certificates for completion of the "Opening Doors to Inclusive Programs" series. Completers can, in addition, receive CEUs for the successful completion of the four core modules.

Research has revealed that the benefits of KIT's training and resources extend well beyond the expanded learning program itself (Smith, 2011). For example, communication is a key component of all of KIT's professional development. Caregivers are provided training on communicating with parents, teachers in the child's school, and other caregivers that work with the child. One communications tool that has been found to be effective is a "Communication Journal for Parents and Providers." This tool is designed to facilitate communication between program staff and parents of children with disabilities who exhibit challenging behavior. Caregivers implement accommodations for a specific child in the program; when the accommodation is found to be successful, the provider documents it in the communication journal and sends it home to share with parents. The journal supports consistency, celebrates successes, and encourages collaboration and trust between the home and the caregivers.

In presenting at more than 20 state afterschool and 21st Century Community Learning Centers conferences, KIT has often been the only organization providing assistance and support for inclusion and accommodation. While KIT welcomes more organizations working in this important area, we are also pleased with comments from afterschool providers who have participated in our training. The following comments help frame how providers have found KIT's training to be helpful.

From a staff member from a large provider that runs 21st Century Community Learning Centers in San Diego County, as well as other afterschool and summer learning programs:

After I attended a KIT training this summer, I realized that you have to be willing to accommodate every child with a positive attitude. Taking the time to know the children and know what the children like to do and incorporating it in the program can make them feel connected.

From another staff member from the same San Diego provider:

KIT trainings over the summer helped me understand that accommodations such as visual rest spots in the classroom can improve the outcome of behavior in some of my students, I like that all the information is applicable to my work area and I truly learn and enjoy KIT trainings.

From the director of United Youth Theater in Hartford, Connecticut:

There are so many misconceptions around disabilities, and too many people approach inclusion with a formulaic, often misguided, approach to this is how things “should” be done. KIT and NTCI help partners move away from those things. They not only “get inclusion” but they understand the behaviors, strategies, and best practices that can help their partners make inclusion a reality.

The most regularly noted benefit of KIT’s training and resources, however, are the clear, easily communicated recommendations for accommodations in the expanded learning time environments, whether classrooms, stages, or outdoor spaces. Commonly suggested recommendations for including all children in the program include the following: The most regularly noted benefit of KIT’s training and resources, however, are the clear, easily communicated recommendations for accommodations in the expanded learning time environments, whether classrooms, stages, or outdoor spaces. Commonly suggested recommendations for including all children in the program include the following:

- *Staff should become more intentional and skilled observers by documenting what environmental influences impact a child’s learning or behavior, e.g., ratios, the physical, sensory and/or social-emotional environment.*
- *Staff should ensure attention to transitions and use appropriate tools to support transitions, as well as provide visual supports to increase comprehension and processing.*
- *Staff should be intentional and clear about behavioral expectations for children with challenges; however, they also should consistently and descriptively reinforce appropriate behaviors every time a child complies with direction or a staff request.*
- *Rather than assign a single, dedicated staff member to support a child with special needs, KIT recommends that staff who are inclusion facilitators design accommodations that will naturally include several other staff peers, thereby changing staff-to-child ratios, as well as modeling respectful interactions between children with and without disabilities.*
- *That said, program staff and leadership should also be cognizant of shifting caregivers throughout the day, particularly in a summer learning program. This limits consistency and predictability, which can be particularly difficult on young children or youth who might be more emotionally vulnerable.*

Conclusion

Providing training and resources to program staff ensures that children with and without disabilities have an equal opportunity to participate in expanded learning and recreational opportunities. Although there is a great deal of support for children with disabilities during the school day, similar supports should be available in the expanded learning field so that this group of children can take advantages of the benefits of afterschool and summer learning and enrichment opportunities. It is imperative, therefore, that afterschool and summer programs both reach out to include children with disabilities and provide the professional development for their staff to make these essential learning opportunities engaging and effective for all children and youth.

The professional development experiences offered by KIT have generated overwhelmingly positive responses from afterschool and summer learning professionals who have participated. With the new empirical evidence validating the efficacy of KIT's training and resources (Smith, 2011), it is imperative that KIT and others like them disseminate resources and communicate trainings to afterschool and summer learning programs across the nation. By arming all caregivers with the tools necessary to fully and meaningfully include children with disabilities, the field can ensure that all children have the opportunity to benefit from expanded learning opportunities in their communities.

For More Information

Additional information and recommendations on including children with disabilities can be found at www.kitonline.org. You will also gain access to KIT's eLearning modules, online instructional videos, sessions from KIT's National Training Center on Inclusion, and a variety of other resources.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Kara N. Smith began her career working as a high school history teacher and tennis coach. Her subsequent work has included providing professional development training and conducting evaluations of large-scale, federally funded grants. She has presented research findings at numerous conferences and has published articles in various educational research and online technology journals. She holds a doctorate from Boston College in educational research, measurement, and evaluation.

Mary M. Shea has served in nearly every professional capacity at Kids Included Together (KIT) over the past 14 years. She currently serves as an organizational and leadership consultant and regularly represents KIT at regional and national conferences. She has keynoted at several conferences and has published articles in a number of professional journals. Shea holds a doctoral degree in education sciences and leadership studies from the University of San Diego.

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