

What are High School Students' Perceived Mental Health Experiences in Relation to the Duration of their Participation in After-School Programs?

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory mixed-methods study examined high school students' perceived mental health experiences in relation to the duration of their participation in after-school programs (ASPs). Rather than testing whether ASP participation causes long-term changes in mental health, the study described students' self-reported experiences across different participation-duration groups. A survey was completed by 38 students at Mount de Sales Academy, and approximately five students participated in follow-up interviews, with two interviewees' responses included in the final paper. The survey asked about stress and anxiety management, mood, emotional support, coping skills, belonging, social interaction, friendship, emotional safety, and awareness of emotional needs and mental health. Descriptive frequencies, percentages, and duration-group comparisons were used; no inferential statistical tests were conducted. The largest duration group was students reporting more than three years of participation ($n = 24$). Across the full sample, students frequently reported positive experiences with emotional support, belonging, social interaction, and emotional awareness, although responses varied by duration group and individual experience. The interview responses similarly showed both positive and challenging experiences, including one long-term participant who described benefits related to stress management and confidence and a shorter-term participant who described both increased stress and greater awareness of her mental health. Because the study used a single-school convenience sample, self-report measures, and a cross-sectional design, the findings describe perceived experiences and patterns rather than causal or longitudinal effects.

INTRODUCTION

After-school programs (ASPs) have been a part of American communities for over a century. They were initially created to provide children, especially those from working-class families, with a safe place to go after the school day ended (Halpern, 2002). Over time, these programs have evolved from basic recreational centers into more comprehensive environments offering academic support, creative enrichment, and social-emotional learning. A major expansion occurred in the 1990s with the introduction

of the federal 21st Century Community Learning Centers initiative, which aimed to make ASPs more accessible to low-income students (Mahoney, Parente, & Zigler, 2009).

Today, students participate in a variety of ASPs, including academic support programs such as tutoring and enrichment programs such as music, sports, and STEM. Research has examined ASPs in relation to academic, behavioral, social, and developmental outcomes (Durlak, Weissberg, & Pachan, 2010). Access to these programs also remains unequal. Previous research has documented differences in participation by family income and barriers such as cost, transportation, and program availability (Afterschool Alliance, 2014).

The original research question for this study was, “What are the long-term impacts of after-school programs on students’ mental health?” Based on the cross-sectional and self-reported nature of the data, that question was revised to avoid implying that the study could establish long-term causal effects. The revised research question is: “What are high school students’ perceived mental health experiences in relation to the duration of their participation in after-school programs?”

This revised question focuses on how students described their own experiences and whether patterns differed across reported participation-duration groups. The study therefore treats duration as a descriptive grouping variable rather than evidence that longer participation caused better mental health outcomes. A mixed-methods approach was used to combine survey responses with individual interview experiences.

LITERATURE REVIEW

What most researchers focus on with ASPs:

Much of the existing research on after-school programs (ASPs) has concentrated on academic and behavioral outcomes rather than mental health. Zief, Lauver, and Maynard (2006) conducted a systematic review of high-quality studies and found limited overall effectiveness, with many studies showing no significant improvements in academic or behavioral outcomes. Minor benefits, such as increased supervision, were observed, while the authors argue that low participation rates and short program durations likely contributed to the weak results. Similarly, Kremer et al. (2015) reported small and non-significant effects of ASP participation on school attendance and externalizing behaviors among at-risk youth, further underscoring the need for more targeted and rigorous research. While Mahoney, Lord, and Carryl (2005) reported that consistent ASP participation was associated with improved academic performance and motivation, especially among disadvantaged youth, mental health outcomes were not a focus of their study. Daud and Carruthers (2008) explored youth perceptions of growth within a high-risk after-school setting and identified gains in skills and goal setting, but emotional and mental health impacts were not formally measured.

Together, these studies show that ASP research has examined several areas of youth development while leaving students’ perceived mental health experiences less directly examined. The present study narrows

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that focus by describing how students at one high school reported their emotional and social experiences in relation to the amount of time they had participated in ASPs.

ASPs as places where youth mental health can be supported

Research has also examined ASPs as settings in which youth can experience social and emotional support. Frazier, Cappella, and Atkins (2007) argued that traditional mental health services can miss children living in urban poverty because of systemic and social barriers and proposed integrating mental health support directly into after-school infrastructures. Frazier (2021) examined characteristics of after-school programs related to youth well-being, while Hedemann and Frazier (2017) studied an after-school music program incorporating social-emotional learning. Martins et al. (2022), meanwhile, examined young people's perceptions of after-school programs and found that participants described both supportive and stressful experiences.

These findings suggest that ASPs are not uniformly experienced as positive or negative spaces. Program structure, staff relationships, peer interactions, expectations, and the amount of time students spend participating may all shape students' experiences. The current study therefore examines several dimensions of students' self-reported experiences rather than treating participation itself as a guaranteed mental health benefit.

Outcomes on mental health from ASPs

Previous research provides reasons to examine stress management, emotional awareness, social relationships, and belonging within ASP settings. Organized, supportive activities can provide opportunities for relationships, skill development, and structured social interaction. At the same time, program demands can add stress for some students. The current study builds on this mixed picture by comparing descriptive survey responses across participation-duration groups and using interviews to illustrate individual experiences.

THEORY

This study is informed by Ecological Systems Theory, Positive Youth Development (PYD) Theory, and Social Capital Theory. These frameworks provide ways to interpret why students may describe different experiences in settings that involve family, school, peers, mentors, and community relationships. Because the present study is descriptive, these theories are used as interpretive frameworks rather than as evidence that ASP participation caused particular outcomes.

Ecological Systems Theory

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Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) emphasizes youth development is shaped by multiple, interacting environments, including family, school, and community. An ASP can represent another recurring setting in a student's daily life. Students who participate for different lengths of time may therefore have different opportunities to form relationships and experience routines within that setting. The theory helps frame ASP participation as one part of a broader environment rather than as an isolated cause of mental health outcomes.

Positive Youth Development Theory

Positive Youth Development (PYD) Theory (Lerner et al., 2005) emphasizes conditions that allow young people to develop skills, relationships, purpose, and agency. Repeated participation in an activity may provide opportunities for students to practice skills and interact with peers and adults. In this study, PYD helps interpret survey and interview responses involving confidence, coping, emotional awareness, and social connection without assuming that these experiences necessarily resulted from participation duration.

Social Capital Theory

Social Capital Theory (Coleman, 1988) describes how relationships built through ASPs, whether with peers, staff, or mentors, can become sources of social support that benefit youth long-term. Regular, long-term participation gives these relationships time to deepen and become more meaningful. The result is a network of trusted connections that can offer guidance, encouragement, and emotional safety, all of which have been linked to better mental health outcomes over time. In the present study, these concepts help interpret students' reported experiences rather than establish that longer participation produced stronger social capital or mental health outcomes.

RESEARCH DESIGN

This study used a mixed-methods design to explore high school students' perceived mental health experiences in relation to the duration of their participation in after-school programs (ASPs). Quantitative survey data were combined with qualitative interview responses to describe overall response patterns and individual experiences.

1. Participants and Sampling

The final survey sample consisted of 38 students from Mount de Sales Academy, located in Catonsville, Maryland, a high school of approximately 500 students. Participants were selected through convenience sampling because the survey was distributed within the researcher's school community. Participation in the survey was completely voluntary. Of the 38 respondents, 34 reported that they had participated in an ASP before, while 4 selected "No" for that question.

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For the duration variable, respondents reported the following categories: more than 3 years ($n = 24$), less than 6 months ($n = 5$), 1–2 years ($n = 4$), 2–3 years ($n = 3$), 6–12 months ($n = 1$), and never ($n = 1$). Because the duration responses were self-reported, the analysis used the duration category each respondent selected rather than attempting to infer a different duration from other survey answers.

One data-consistency issue should be noted. Three respondents who answered “No” to the question asking whether they had participated in an ASP before nevertheless selected “Less than 6 months” for the duration question. This inconsistency was retained in the dataset and was not silently reconciled. Duration-group tables therefore use the response recorded for the duration question.

2. Data Collection Methods

Survey: A self-report survey was distributed to students at Mount de Sales Academy after permission was granted by the school's Vice President of Affairs. Students were asked whether they wanted to participate, and participation was voluntary. The survey included questions about ASP participation duration, frequency, type of program, stress and anxiety management, mood, emotional support, coping skills, belonging, social interaction, friendship, emotional safety, and emotional awareness. Students could optionally provide an email address if they were interested in a follow-up interview.

Interviews: Approximately 5 students were selected after following up with the researcher on their interest in being interviewed. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore their personal experiences with ASPs and how these experiences may relate to their mental health. The interviews focused on students' personal experiences of ASPs' impact on their emotional well-being, social relationships, and stress management.

3. Data Analysis

Quantitative Analysis: Survey responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Frequencies and percentages were calculated for the overall sample and for participation duration groups. The duration groups were compared using the response distributions for the survey's mental health and social experience questions. Descriptive group means were also calculated from the survey's 1-5 response scales as supplementary summaries, but no inferential statistical tests were conducted. Because the study did not use inferential testing or a longitudinal design, differences between groups are described as patterns in the sample rather than statistically significant effects or causal relationships.

Qualitative Analysis: Interview responses were reviewed for recurring patterns and themes related to students' experiences with ASPs and their mental health. These themes were then used to determine which interview material was most relevant to the research question and to compare the experiences described by the interview participants. The qualitative analysis was exploratory and was not intended to establish

that one duration group caused different outcomes.

4. Instrumentation

This study used two main instruments for data collection: a self-designed survey and a semi-structured interview guide. The survey included multiple-choice and short-answer questions about students' ASP participation and perceived emotional and social experiences. The interview guide was developed to explore students' individual experiences in more detail, with open-ended questions about how they felt ASPs influenced their emotional well-being, relationships, and skills. Both instruments were designed specifically for this research and allowed for flexibility based on student responses.

Because the survey instrument was developed specifically for this study and was not a validated mental-health assessment, the results should be interpreted as measures of students' perceived experiences rather than clinical measures of mental health status. The survey questions were also not designed to establish a diagnosis or independently measure changes in mental health over time.

5. Ethical Considerations

Permission to distribute the survey at school was granted by the school's Vice President of Affairs. Participation in the survey was voluntary, and students were not required to participate. Providing an email address for possible follow-up was optional. For the interviews, only students who followed up to indicate that they wanted to participate were interviewed. Email information was used for follow-up, while names were not included in the final research findings; interview participants were identified as Student 1 and Student 2. Interview responses were stored privately on the researcher's password-protected laptop.

6. Strengths and Limitations

A strength of this study was the use of both survey responses and interviews, which allowed the researcher to describe overall response patterns while also including individual student experiences. The study also included students with different reported lengths of ASP participation.

However, the study also faced limitations on how the findings should be interpreted. First, the sample was a small convenience sample from a single high school and was not randomly selected, so the findings should not be generalized to all high school students. Second, the study was cross-sectional rather than longitudinal; students were asked to report their current or retrospective experiences at one point in time. Third, the data were self-reported and came from a self-designed, non-validated survey. Fourth, the duration groups were uneven in size, with 24 of the 38 respondents reporting more than three years of participation and only one respondent in the 6–12-month and never categories. Finally, the study did not

statistically control for other factors that could be related to students' responses, such as family relationships, socioeconomic background, academic experiences, or differences among ASP types.

RESULTS

The final survey dataset contained 38 responses. Duration of ASP participation varied considerably across respondents. Twenty-four students (63.2%) reported more than three years of participation, five (13.2%) reported less than six months, four (10.5%) reported 1- 2 years, three (7.9%) reported 2- 3 years, one (2.6%) reported 6- 12 months, and one (2.6%) selected never. These group sizes are important when interpreting comparisons because the groups were highly uneven.

Table 1. Distribution of respondents by reported ASP participation duration

Duration Group	n	Percent of Sample
Never	1	2.6%
Less than 6 months	5	13.2%
6- 12 Months	1	2.6%
1- 2 years	4	10.5%
2- 3 years	3	7.9%
More than 3 years	24	63.2%

Note. Duration groups reflect the category selected by each respondent on Question 10. Percentages are based on all 38 survey responses.

Across the full sample, students frequently selected the upper response categories for social and emotional experiences. For stress or anxiety management, 13 of 38 respondents (34.2%) selected "Somewhat better" or "Much better." For mood or emotional state, 20 of 38 (52.6%) selected "Good" or "Very good." Eighteen students (47.4%) reported feeling emotionally supported "Many times" or "All the time," while 24 (63.2%) selected the upper two categories for belonging or community. Twenty-six students (68.4%) selected "Often" or "All the time" for positive social interactions. Twenty-three (60.5%) selected "Better" or "Much better" for friendship ability. Twenty-three (60.5%) said they were "Likely" or "Very likely" to recommend ASPs to peers who may be struggling emotionally or socially. Thirty students (78.9%) rated their ASP environment as "Safe" or "Very safe," and 23 (60.5%) selected "Aware" or "Much more aware" of their emotional needs and mental health.

These overall frequencies describe the experiences reported by the respondents; they do not establish that ASP participation caused the reported outcomes. The duration-group comparison below provides a more

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specific description of how the response patterns varied across students reporting different lengths of participation.

Table 2. Respondents selecting the two most positive response categories within each ASP duration group.

Duration group	n	Stress/ anxiety management	Mood/ emotional state	Emotional support	Skills for difficult emotions	Belonging/ community	Positive social interactions
Never	1	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
Less than 6 months	5	0 (0.0%)	1 (20.0%)	1 (20.0%)	2 (40.0%)	2 (40.0%)	1 (20.0%)
6- 12 months	1	0 (0.0%)	1 (100.0%)	1 (100.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
1-2 years	4	0 (0.0%)	1 (25.0%)	3 (75.0%)	1 (25.0%)	2 (50.0%)	4 (100.0%)
2-3 years	3	1 (33.3%)	2 (66.7%)	2 (66.7%)	2 (66.7%)	3 (100.0%)	3 (100.0%)
More than 3 years	24	12 (50.0%)	15 (62.5%)	19 (79.2%)	19 (79.2%)	21 (87.5%)	18 (75.0%)

Note. Values are n (% within duration group). "Positive" corresponds to response categories 4 or 5 on each 1–5 item. The recommendation item is included as a social-experience measure rather than a direct mental-health outcome. Percentages should be interpreted cautiously because some groups contain very few respondents.

For emotional awareness (Question 23), 16 of 24 students (66.7%) in the more-than-three-years group selected "Aware" or "Much more aware." The corresponding percentages were 60.0% for students reporting less than six months (3 of 5), 100.0% for the single 6–12-month respondent (1 of 1), 25.0% for the 1–2-year group (1 of 4), 66.7% for the 2–3-year group (2 of 3), and 0% for the single respondent who selected never (0 of 1). Because the smaller groups contained one to five respondents, these percentages can change substantially with a single response and should not be interpreted as evidence of a linear duration effect.

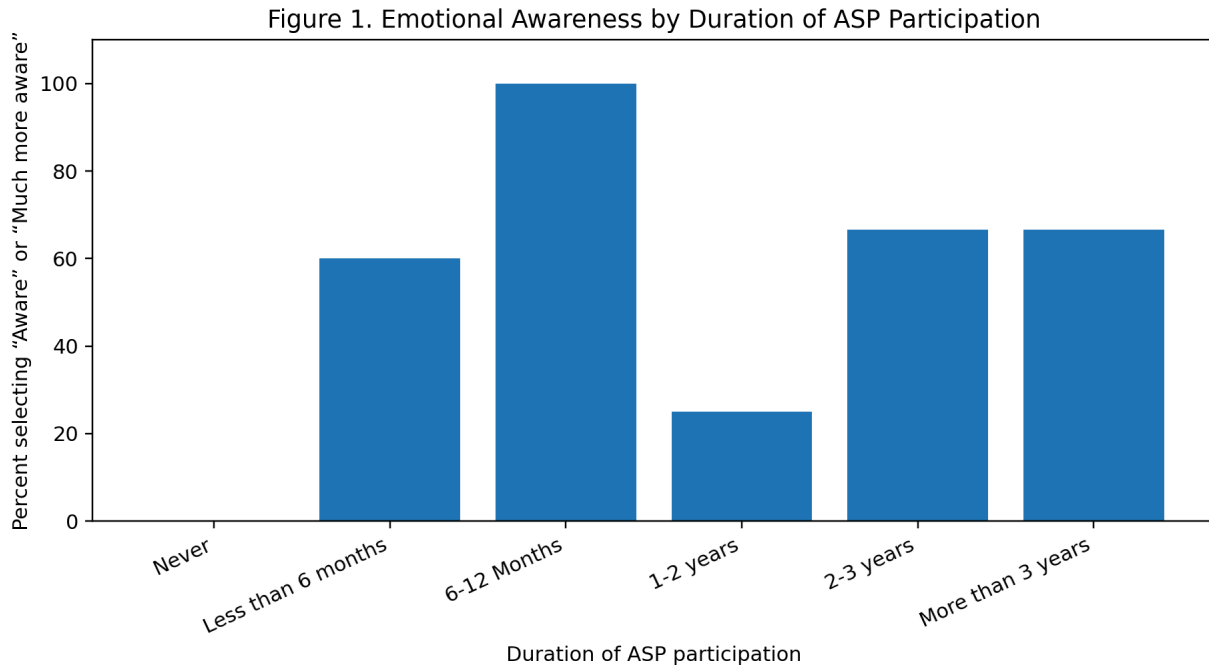


Figure 1. Emotional awareness by duration of ASP participation.

Bars show the percentage within each duration group selecting “Aware” or “Much more aware” on Question 23. The figure is descriptive and does not indicate statistical significance or causation.

The duration-group results show variation rather than a uniform pattern across every outcome. For example, the more-than-three-years group had 62.5% selecting the upper two categories for stress/anxiety management, 66.7% for emotional support, 66.7% for belonging, 66.7% for positive social interaction, 70.8% for friendship ability, 75.0% for emotional safety, and 66.7% for emotional awareness. However, other duration groups sometimes showed similar or higher percentages, and the 1–2-year group had lower percentages on several measures. These differences are descriptive and should not be interpreted as proof that participation duration itself produced the observed responses.

Interview Findings: Student Case Comparison

The interview data provided deeper insight into how students described their experiences with ASPs. Approximately 5 students followed up as interested in interviews, and the final paper included responses from two students. Because only two students’ responses were included in the analysis presented, the interview findings are illustrative,

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Student 1, a 16-year-old sophomore who had participated in an enrichment-based music ASP for nine years, described several positive experiences with stress management and confidence. When asked whether the ASP helped her manage anxiety or stress, she responded: *"It has helped me greatly, especially in managing my time better so that I don't end up as stressed out."* She also described increased motivation and overall engagement in daily life: *"I've been more eager to do things in my daily life."* Regarding emotional awareness, she shared: *"I am much more aware of my needs. My ASP has helped me with my confidence, coming out of my shell, and interacting with various people, allowing me to fully communicate my emotional needs and be aware of what is good for my mental health."*

Student 2, also a 16-year-old, described a shorter period of involvement in her ASP. Her responses indicated more mixed experiences. When asked the same question about stress management (Question 13), she responded: *"Since joining my ASP, in a way, [it] made me a little more stressed as there was more work to do outside of school."* While she reported a slight increase in stress, she still acknowledged growth in emotional awareness: *"Due to my ASP I've become more aware of my mental health. I've needed to manage more stress which affected things like my mood and emotions negatively. This allowed me to realize how the situations around me affected my mental health."*

Both students described growth in emotional awareness, but their experiences differed in other areas. Student 1 described benefits related to stress management, confidence, and communication, while Student 2 described increased stress alongside increased awareness. These responses illustrate why the survey findings are better interpreted as varied perceived experiences rather than a simple positive effect on longer participation.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study provide important insights into how students at Mount de Sales Academy perceived their experiences with after-school programs in relation to participation duration. Many respondents selected positive response categories for emotional support, belonging, positive social interaction, friendship, emotional safety, and emotional awareness. At the same time, responses varied across duration groups, and the smaller groups were too limited in size to support strong comparisons.

The more than 3 years group was the largest group in the sample ($n=24$), and 16 of those students (66.7%) selected "Aware" or "Much more aware" when asked how much more aware they were of their emotional needs and mental health. This descriptive pattern is consistent with the possibility that sustained participation may be associated with opportunities for relationships, confidence, and emotional reflection. However, the study cannot determine whether duration caused greater awareness. Students who participate in ASPs for longer periods may differ from other students in ways that were not controlled for this study.

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The interview responses further demonstrate the variation in individual experiences. Student 1, with nine years of participation in a music ASP, described improved time management, confidence, communication, and emotional awareness. Student 2 described increased stress from additional demands while also reporting greater awareness of how circumstances affected her mental health. These accounts suggest that an ASP can be experienced as both supportive and demanding, depending on the students and the program context.

The findings can be interpreted through the three theoretical frameworks used in this study. Ecological Systems Theory highlights the ASP as one recurring environment within a student's broader developmental context. Positive Youth Development provides a framework for understanding responses involving skills, confidence, relationships, and agency. Social Capital Theory helps explain why students' reported connections with staff and peers may matter to their experiences of support and belonging. None of these frameworks, however, changes the study's methodological limits or establishes causation.

The results also reinforce the importance of considering program quality rather than participation duration alone. Some students reported stress associated with the additional demands of ASPs, while others described support, confidence, or belonging. Future research could examine whether specific program characteristics such as mentorship, social- emotional learning, program structure, or type of activity are associated with different student experiences.

Future research should use more representative samples, clearly defined duration groups, validated measures of mental health or well- being, and longitudinal designs that follow students over time. This would strengthen the evidence base and provide clearer insights into causal relationships between ASP involvement and mental well-being as participation continues. The present study should therefore be understood as an exploratory description of one school's students rather than as evidence of long-term mental health effects.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to examine high school students' perceived mental health experiences in relation to the duration of their participation in after- school programs. Drawing from both survey and interview data, the study found that many respondents reported positive experiences involving emotional support, belonging, social interaction, friendship, emotional safety, and emotional awareness. The duration group analysis showed a variation across groups rather than a consistent pattern that could establish a causal relationship.

The findings are most appropriately interpreted as students' self- reported experiences within a single school sample. The study cannot establish long term impacts because it did not follow students over time, did not use a randomized or representative sample, and relied on a self- designed, non- validated survey. The uneven duration group sizes also limit the strength of comparisons.

Even with these limitations, the combination of quantitative and qualitative data provides a useful exploratory view of how students describe the emotional and social dimensions of ASP participation. Future research should continue to explore these findings by using longitudinal methods, larger samples, validated measures, and more detailed comparisons of program type and quality.

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APPENDIX

A. Survey Questionnaire

1. What grade are you in? (Freshman; Sophomore; Junior; Senior)
2. How old are you? (13–18 years old)
3. What is your race/ethnicity?
4. Have you participated in any afterschool program (ASP) before? (Yes; No)
5. Would you say you are an extrovert or introvert? (1–5 scale)
6. How well do you get along with peers? (1–5 scale)
7. What would you say is your estimated household income? (Optional; 1–5 categories)
8. How well would you say your relationship with your parent(s) or guardian(s) are? (Optional; 1–5 scale)
9. What would you say your academic performance is like? (Optional; 1–5 scale)
10. How long have you regularly participated in after-school programs (ASPs)? (Less than 6 months; 6–12 months; 1–2 years; 2–3 years; More than 3 years; Other)
- Around what age did you start your ASP? (4–6; 7–9; 10–12; 13–15; 15–18; Other)
11. On average, how many days per week do/did you attend ASPs?
12. Which best describes the ASPs you attend(ed)? (Academic Focused; Enrichment Focused; A Mix of both)
13. To what extent has participating in ASPs helped you manage stress or anxiety? (1 = Not at all; 5 = Much better)
14. Since joining an ASP, how would you rate changes in your overall mood or emotional state? (1 = Much worse; 5 = Very good)

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15. How often do you feel emotionally supported by staff or mentors in the ASP setting? (1 = Never; 5 = All the time)
16. How much do you feel ASPs have helped you build skills for difficult emotions or challenges? (1 = Not at all; 5 = Very good skills)
17. How much has ASP participation helped you feel a stronger sense of belonging or community? (1 = Not at all; 5 = A lot)
18. How frequently do you engage in positive social interactions during ASPs? (1 = Rarely; 5 = All the time)
19. Compared to before participating in ASPs, how would you rate your ability to form and maintain friendships? (1 = Much worse; 5 = Much better)
21. How likely are you to recommend ASPs to peers who may be struggling emotionally or socially? (1 = Not likely; 5 = Very likely)
22. How would you rate the emotional safety of the ASP environment you attend/attended? (1 = Very unsafe; 5 = Very safe)
23. Since attending ASPs, how much more aware are you of your emotional needs and mental health? (1 = Not aware at all; 5 = Much more aware)