

## Summary of Findings

This report summarizes preliminary findings regarding the positive impact of social and emotional learning (SEL) during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic for ASM teens:

- **Increased connection with peers and instructors positively correlates with teens identifying their program as a safe space in which to process what they are going through and feeling supported in safely coping with difficult emotions.**
- Teens’ perception of having access to coping assistance appears to buffer self-reported stress levels.
- Findings suggest that fostering emotionally supportive program spaces for teens through remote programming is possible, and **practitioners should aim to connect with youth at least several times per month to optimize benefits.**

## Methods

Multiple online surveys were fielded throughout the spring to capture teens’ needs and experiences during the crisis, trying to gain actionable insights on how to protect and reinforce the critical, core elements of safety and positive relationships for ASM youth during this time. Data analyzed in this brief were collected between May 8 and June 8, 2020. An online survey was distributed by email to 6,475 enrolled teens; 1,433 teens responded to the survey (22% response rate). It is possible that [lack of WiFi](#) or other [technology gaps](#) may have negatively impacted the response rate and/or influenced the findings, as some teens may not have been able to access the survey.

Survey Sample, n = 1,433	
<b>Gender</b>	
Female	71.2%
Male	27.5%
Other gender/chose not to identify	1.3%
<b>Race/Ethnicity*</b>	
Black/African-American	52.8%
Hispanic/Latinx	40.7%
White, non-Hispanic	8.8%
Asian	4.9%
Other	2.6%

\*rows total more than 100% as some respondents selected more than one option

Responding teens were asked to report on the frequency of contact with their program peers and instructors during the spring, and also completed a [validated scale of perceived stress](#) and questions about their own experiences. Two different statements from the survey – “My program helped me safely cope with difficult emotions during this crisis” and “My program provided a safe space for me to talk about my experience” – were compared with the reported frequency of contact with reported frequency of contact with instructors and peers and PSS-4 scores. In both cases, correlation testing was used to determine (1) whether a relationship existed between the variables, and (2) how strong that relationship was. Chi-square testing was used to determine the significance of the relationship for each of these statements with instructor and peer contact and perceived stress scores. Cramer’s V was used in addition to chi-square testing to determine the strength of each relationship that was found to be significant. For this analysis, a p-value of 0.05 or lower was considered significant.

For additional detail or methodology-related questions, please email [res.ev@afterschoolmatters.org](mailto:res.ev@afterschoolmatters.org).

## Background

*The After School Matters (ASM) spring program session had only just begun when Chicago’s citywide shelter-in-place order was issued; most spring programs had completed only four out of ten weeks of the session and a smaller subset of programs had not yet met in-person. Due to the abrupt and unexpected transition to remote engagement in the wake of the pandemic onset, [program instructors and staff prioritized maintaining contact with teens to provide positive support, plus informal remote learning](#). ASM instructors and staff scrambled to find ways to reach teens and jump start planning for a robust remote-engagement strategy to provide young people with the highest quality experiences*

## Programs Create Safe Space

Preliminary analysis indicates that increased connection with peers and instructors correlates positively with teens identifying their program as a safe space in which to process what they are going through ( $p < 0.05$ ). As instructor and peer contact increase, so do teen reports of programming as a safe space for processing experiences (see Figures 1 & 2).

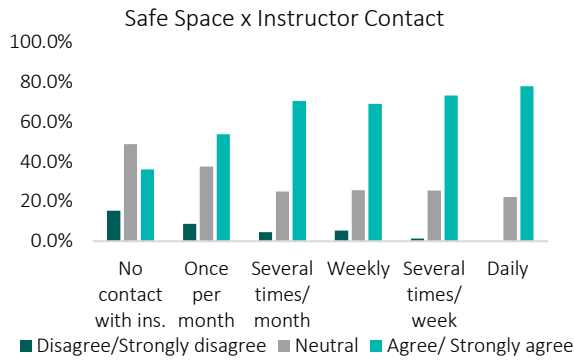


Figure 1: Reports of program as safe space by frequency of contact with instructor

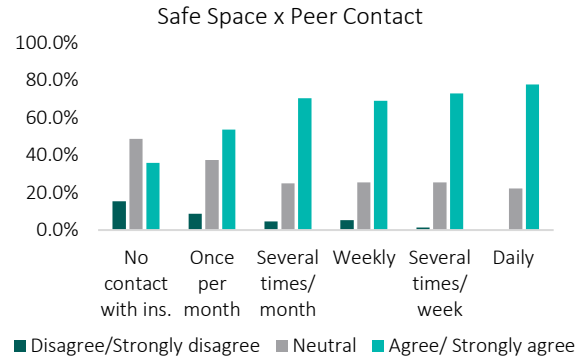


Figure 2: Reports of program as safe space by frequency of contact with peers

## Programs Promote Safe Coping

Contact with peers and instructors also correlates positively with teens’ perceptions of being supported in coping safely with difficult emotions ( $p < 0.05$ ). Figures 3 & 4 illustrate that as contact with peers and instructors increase, so does teen perception of coping assistance. Similar to the teen perceptions of the program as a safe space, it appears that contact with instructors or peers at least several times per month a minimum dosage threshold for teens to report feeling more supported in coping.

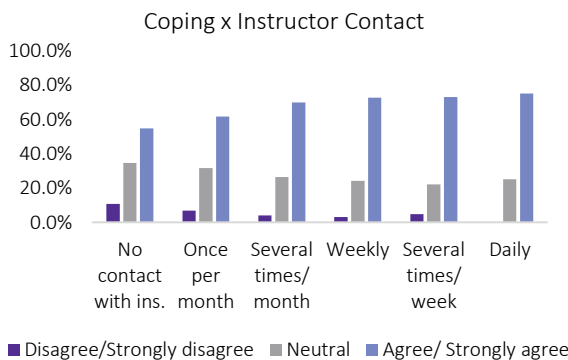


Figure 3: Reports of access to coping assistance by frequency of contact with instructor

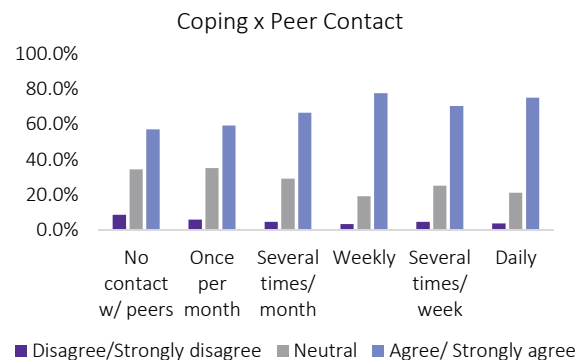


Figure 4: Reports of access to coping assistance by frequency of contact with peers

Additionally, access to coping assistance appears to buffer self-reported stress levels. Teens who agreed that their “program helped me safely cope with difficult emotions during this crisis” scored significantly lower on the perceived stress scale than their peers. Testing shows that the relationship between coping assistance and reported stress is strong – teens who reported access to coping assistance were more likely to report lower stress than their peers ( $\chi^2(32) = 47.3$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ).

## Connect at Least Several Times per Month

The data suggest that contact with instructors or peers at least several times per month is a minimum dosage threshold of sorts for teens to experience more protective benefits – teens who reported contact with instructors or peers at least several times per month were significantly more likely (21 and 25 percent, respectively) to report their program helped them cope than teens connecting once per month or less frequently. Similarly, as instructor and peer contact increases, so do reports of programming as a safe space for processing experiences, especially among teens contacted at least several times per month (42 percent higher than teens contacted less frequently).

## Implications for Practice & Policy

Although schools closed in the spring, out-of-school-time (OST) providers worked throughout the summer to maintain connections and help ensure that youth were as emotionally and socially healthy as possible. Developmentally rich experiences and positive youth engagement are more important [now](#) than ever before, especially for [Black](#) and [Latinx](#) youth who have been [disproportionately impacted](#) due to existing vulnerabilities perpetuated by current and historical inequity. COVID-19 has profoundly exacerbated challenges facing young people of color, and providing them with emotional support and positive conditions is crucial to buffer the effects of stress and trauma and [help them thrive](#).

Relationships with peers and caring adults during a crisis are foundational to teens' feelings of safety within programs, influencing their ability to cope safely and process their experiences. Findings suggest that fostering emotionally supportive program spaces for teens through remote programming is possible, and practitioners should aim to connect with youth consistently to optimize social and emotional benefits. For example, in the newly developed remote-engagement program model introduced for the 2020 summer session, ASM instructors connected with teens between three and five days per week to emphasize and nurture supportive relationships.

Beyond day-to-day practice, policymakers have a vital role to play in ensuring equitable access to high-quality, out-of-school time (OST) programming for youth. As this nation continues to confront the devastating impact of the pandemic, education supports for teens and youth-serving nonprofits must be prioritized in pandemic relief packages, and funds must be secured to stabilize and sustain the OST sector.

Young people can overcome the unprecedented adversity facing them today if they are provided with supportive, safe environments that prioritize social and emotional learning. Even in the midst of social unrest and a global pandemic, [science](#) indicates that youth can learn and even thrive through caring relationships and quality engagement. Now is the time to ensure that teens and the organizations serving them have access to all the resources they need to succeed.

## Future Research

This brief reflects preliminary findings related to ongoing research regarding the quality and efficacy of youth engagement through virtual or remote programming and the lived experience of youth during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additional, deeper analyses of a more robust dataset from Summer 2020 are forthcoming.



## References

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## Acknowledgements & Credits

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