

How after-school programmes are boosting SA youths' mental health

Globally, the state of youths mental health and well-being is in the spotlight. There is a rising rate of mood and behavioural disorders, anxiety, and depression, as well as increases in suicide, self-harm, and substance abuse. This has led to urgent worldwide calls for strategies and interventions that can help youth deal with prevalent mental health challenges.



Mental Health



According to 2021 WHO (World Health Organisation) data¹, it is estimated that 13% of the world's 10- to 19-year-olds are affected by mental disorders, while other studies² report a particular pervasiveness of mental disorders amongst the youth of low to mid-income countries of Sub-Saharan Africa. Further to this, half of all adult mental health problems have their origins prior to age 14, and 75% by age 24³, making early prevention and promotion essential.



"The upsurge of South African young people dealing with mental health conditions is alarming," says Programme Director of The Learning Trust, Zoe Mann.

"The majority of South African children are impacted by systemic poverty, high rates of violence and crime, as well as abuse and trauma in their communities. In addition to this, youth are still dealing with covid-related grief, loss of family income, educational setbacks, and doubts regarding their future plans."

'Lights on After School' campaign runs for third year

The Learning Trust, a non-profit organisation that supports and helps develop a network of NGO community-based After School Programmes in South Africa, has joined forces with the Western Cape Provincial Youth and After School Programme Office as well as the Western Cape Branch of Community Chest to drive the third Lights On After School campaign (LOAS) in the country. This annual commemoration, which took place on 20 October this year, aims to highlight the positive impact the after-school sector has on young minds.

After school programmes a force for good in SA communities

Typically, After School Programmes (ASPs) are diverse in their activities. Some focus on academic and homework support,

while others offer sports or team-building activities to immerse vulnerable or at-risk learners in different experiences that enable socio-emotional learning.

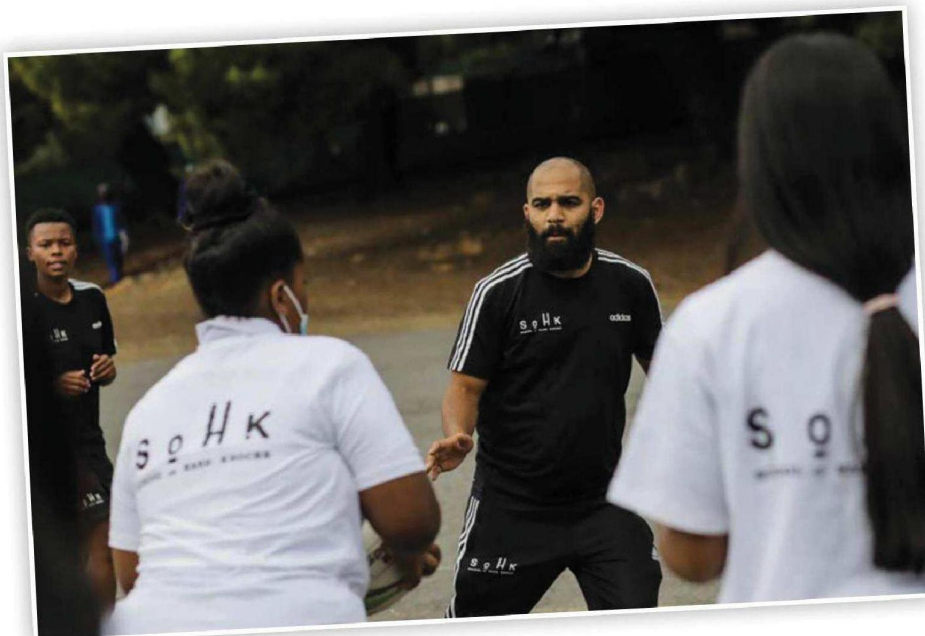
Research has shown that engaging with caring adults in ASPs has wide-ranging positive impacts on youth, and can boost learning outcomes, open up study paths and encourage the sustainable adoption of healthy lifestyles.

In South Africa, ASPs are emerging as a force for good in our communities. For example, The School of Hard Knocks (SOHK), one of the ASPs in The Learning Trust network, combines the game of touch rugby with an international socio-emotional learning curriculum to reach more than 150 at-risk adolescent girls, as well as their teachers and caregivers.

SOHK CEO, Jon Hunter-Parsonage says, "The Lights On After School campaign is important to create awareness in South Africa of how ASPs can engage with youth who are affected by trauma at a critical point in time in their young lives.

"Early intervention is essential as young people's brains are still developing, and no matter what they are going through, they have a better chance of recovering, growing through their

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experiences, and developing resilience than at any later stage of life.

"Good mental well-being, which goes hand-in-hand with developing better coping mechanisms, is a gateway to a better future. It affects their performance in education, sets the scene for their relationships, and is the foundation for a healthy lifestyle."

Increased well-being results in less learner drop-out

One of the well-recorded impacts of consistent participation in ASPs is lower school drop-out rates, which is highly relevant for South Africa in this post-Covid era as learning disruptions and setbacks are predisposing even more vulnerable youth than usual to give up on school.

"The country's drop-out rates are around 40%, which is astonishingly high when compared to global rates. ASPs help learners to develop self-esteem and experience a sense of belonging which are foundational to mental well-being," Mann says.

"Supporting learners so that they can believe in themselves encourages them to stay in school. Learners who drop out of school often do so because they have given up on themselves and their futures. Now is a critical time for catch-up interventions post-Covid."

Waves for Change

Another ASP supporting LOAS this year is Waves For Change, an organisation that harnesses the power of surf therapy. The programme works with over 2 200 at-risk children at six different beach sites.

Founder and CEO, Tim Conibear says, "our most recent independent evaluation has shown that surf therapy measurably improves self-regulation. Self-regulation is a bucket of functions that get negatively impacted when young people are continuously exposed to stress in childhood.

"A lack of self-regulation can lead to poor choices, such as substance abuse and risk of suicide. Our programmes help children build positive social attachments, practice emotional

regulation skills and also develop confidence."

Learner Advancement Group

In Gauteng, The Learner Advancement Group (LAG) is also celebrating the change-making efforts of ASPs in celebration of Lights On After School. They run a weekly Hearts and Minds Workshop nurturing the mental well-being of learners.

"We provide learners with practical tools to manage their thoughts and feelings. We encourage them to understand what worries them, to get to the root cause of any anger they may have, and we teach them how to set goals for themselves and their life," says Mandla Ngcobo, Programme Director for LAG.

ASPS are a lifeline for learners. Just showing up consistently in a learner's life says that you care and that they matter," concludes Mann.

Get involved

To get involved please visit www.enriched.co.za or www.thelearningtrust.org to donate to one or more of the programmes. 📖

References:

- ¹ World Health Organisation. Adolescent Mental Health: 2021. Accessed: 5 October 2021. Available from: <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/adolescent-mental-health>.)
- ² (Jörns-Presentati A, Napp A-K, Dessauvagie AS, Stein DJ, Jonker D, Breet E, Suliman S. The prevalence of mental health problems in sub-Saharan adolescents: A systematic review. PLoS One. 2021;16(5):e0251689.)
- ³ " (Kessler RC, Berglund P, Demler O, Jin R, Merikangas KR, Walters EE. Lifetime prevalence and age-of-onset distributions of DSM-IV disorders in the National Comorbidity Survey Replication. Archives of General Psychiatry. 2005;62(6):593-602.)