

Helping Them Soar: WINGS for kids

IMAGINE A SAFE PLACE to call home after school, a place where children in kindergarten through fifth grade can play games, have fun, make new friends, and learn social and emotional skills intended to last a lifetime. Now imagine this safe and fun place being reserved especially for low-income children who in most instances would never have access to social and emotional enrichment experiences such as these. No need to simply imagine these things. These places actually exist—thanks to WINGS for kids.

A nonprofit after-school program, WINGS for kids provides low-income children with access to high-quality social and emotional learning experiences. Drawing upon a research-based curriculum comprised of thirty social and emotional learning objectives, lessons are weaved seamlessly into fun group activities that capitalize on teachable moments.

Learning objectives are designed to strengthen five core social and emotional competencies:

- self-awareness
- self-management
- responsible decision making
- social awareness
- relationship skills

Friendship and Understanding in the Wake of Tragedy

Following the murder of nine people at Mother Emmanuel Church in 2015, the people of Charleston, South Carolina, were drawn together by a remarkable outpouring of compassion, support, and unity. WINGS for kids is keeping this movement alive through their **Kindred Kids** initiative. Kindred Kids brings together children from diverse backgrounds in an effort to build friendships and to help them understand one another in new ways. To learn more about this initiative, visit <https://medium.com/@WINGSforkids/amazing-story-of-friendship-understanding-in-wake-of-tragedy-d9b811926212#.ysep3fjju>

Individual lessons are introduced weekly and in sequential order, allowing lessons to build upon one another.

The program also provides regular adult-supervised after-school homework time—a big relief to parents who find homework time to be a major source of family stress. By providing routine check-ins and written academic progress reports, WINGS also keeps parents and teachers connected to their children's after school social and emotional learning experiences.

Intended for children in kindergarten through fifth grade, the program runs for three hours every day, Monday through Friday. Current WINGS sites are located in Charleston, South Carolina, rural Lake City, South Carolina, Atlanta, Georgia, and Charlotte, North Carolina. Since its inception in 1996, the program has served more than 5,300 children. WINGS is staffed largely by college students (known as WINGSLeaders), each of whom go through more than 65 hours of training, including ongoing coaching. WINGSLeaders also include more than fifty AmeriCorps members. The ratio of staff (WINGSLeaders) to students is 1 to 10–12.

A day in the life of WINGS

A typical WINGS day involves the following activities:

- **WINGS Creed.** Children begin by reciting the WINGS Creed (see sidebar), an activity that focuses the group on the program's goals and vision. To become socially and emotionally smart, say WINGSLeaders, we need to first learn the WINGS CREED.
- **Community Unity.** This is a thirty-minute exercise designed to help children connect with one another. This activity consists of four parts:
 - **The Welcome**, where each child is personally greeted by WINGSLeaders
 - **Eat and Meet**, where children are provided nutritious snacks weaved in and around group interaction
 - **Circle Time**, where children are engaged in additional brief interactional activities
 - **Good News and Announcements**, where children share news and information with the group.
- **Choice Time.** This is an activity of about forty minutes in length, where children engage in one chosen activity twice a week for an entire semester. Activities



The WINGS Creed

I soar with WINGS,
Let me tell you why.
I learn lots of skills that help me reach the sky.
I love and accept who I am on the inside
and know my emotions are nothing to hide.
Life's full of surprises that make me feel
different ways.
If I can control myself I will have much better days.
I understand the choices I make should be
what's best for me
and what happens is on me and not any of you.
I understand others are unique.
I want to learn more about everyone I meet.
I want to step into their shoes and see what they
are going through.
I am a friend. I support and trust.
Working together is a must.
Kind and caring I will be.
I listen to you. You listen to me.
I soar with WINGS. I just told you why.
All of these things are why I fly.

include dance, exercise and nutrition, history, music, computer capabilities, reading and writing, science, chess or visual and verbal puzzle-solving, art, sports and photography.

- **Academic Center.** This is a forty-minute period in which children complete the day's homework with guidance from WINGS Leaders and volunteers.
- **WingsWorks.** Occurring each Wednesday, students provide a community service that involves activities to benefit others in and around the school community.
- **WildWINGS.** An end-of-the-week fun activity in which children participate in ninety minutes of games, discussions, and roleplaying, all intended better understand the relationship between thoughts, emotions, and actions.

An innovative program that works

WINGS remains very invested in studying the impact its program has on children's lives. Initial findings are extremely positive. WINGS kids are absent from school far less often than other children, and receive significantly fewer disciplinary referrals. Additionally,

- 82 percent of children and 84 percent of their parents report improved self-control skills
- 74 percent of children and 87 percent of their parents report improvement in the ability to deal bet-

ter with situations and people that were previously problematic

- 76 percent of children and 89 percent of their parents report dealing better with daily problems
- 76 percent of children and 91 percent of their parents report improvements in schoolwork
- 79 percent of children and 90 percent of their parents report doing better during free time
- 82 percent of children and 89 percent of their parents report feeling better about themselves.

WINGS has been recognized as a best practice by a number of national organizations, including the National Association of Out-of-School Time, the National Association of Elementary School Principals, and the Character Education Partnership. **A**

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LEARN MORE

To learn more about WINGS for kids, visit www.wingsforkids.org.

Watch a short video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2u10Lo-WJTg&t=5s>.