

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Civilian

What Adolescents Learn in Organized Youth Activities: A Survey of Self-Reported Developmental Experiences

Hansen, D. M., Larson, R. W., & Dworkin, J. B. (2003). What adolescents learn in organized youth activities: A survey of self-reported developmental experiences. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 13(1), 25-55. doi:10.1111/1532-7795.1301006

SUMMARY: Extracurricular activities and youth programs can be valuable contexts for positive youth development. Perceived opportunities for development were compared across extracurricular activities, school classes, and time with friends among high school students in a small Midwestern city. Youth may have more opportunities for positive development during extracurricular activities than during time in school or with friends, and different extracurricular activities may provide different developmental benefits.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Students reported more personal development opportunities in extracurricular activities than school classes or time with friends, including learning to take initiative, reflecting on identity, gaining self-knowledge, and building basic emotional, cognitive, and physical skills.
- Students reported more experiences promoting interpersonal development (i.e., building relationships, teamwork, and leadership) in extracurricular activities than school or friend time.
- Certain extracurricular activities (e.g., faith-based, service, academic and leadership activities) provided more development opportunities than others (e.g., arts, vocational clubs, sports).

IMPLICATIONS FOR MILITARY PROFESSIONALS:

Military professionals could:

- Collaborate with programs for military youth to encourage participation in community extracurricular activities, particularly those with ample development opportunities
- Help develop and disseminate information about areas for development among youth and activities that promote youth development for use in programs with military youth

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Educate parents in military families about the benefits of youth extracurricular activities
- Provide military youth with activities that facilitate a variety of types of development

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Continue to provide military families with youth programs that enhance youth's skills and competencies, including those needed to adapt to stress and change
- Recommend education for professionals leading military youth programs to learn about positive youth development and how to provide opportunities and activities for development

This product is the result of a partnership funded by the Department of Defense between the Office of Military Community and Family Policy and the USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture through a grant/cooperative agreement with The University of Minnesota.



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METHODS

- Students in 9th, 11th, and 12th grades at a high school in a small Illinois city were recruited, and 450 of the 646 recruited students participated (70% response rate).
- Students completed surveys regarding their experiences and opportunities for development in a range of extracurricular activities compared to time at school and with friends.
- Students' perceived opportunities for development were compared across extracurricular activities, school classes, and time with friends; types of extracurriculars were also compared.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants included 450 students (56% females), including 156 freshmen, 157 juniors, and 137 seniors from a high school in a small Illinois city.
- Students identified as White (60%), Black (26%), Latino (4%), Asian-American (2%), and Native American (2%); some reported another race/ethnicity or did not report race/ethnicity (6%).
- Students reported that 69% of mothers and 64% of fathers had at least some college education.

LIMITATIONS

- Only youth from 9th, 11th, and 12th grades in one Midwestern school were surveyed, and results may not generalize to students in other grades, schools, or geographical locations.
- Opportunities for youth development were self-reported by youth and may have been impacted by other perceived factors (e.g., enjoyment, importance) of the activities.
- Due to the cross-sectional nature of the data, no causal conclusions can be drawn.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Explore whether youth in multiple types of activities have more positive personal and interpersonal development outcomes than youth in one type of activity
- Examine other factors that may impact the development opportunities youth are provided in each context, such as individual abilities, socioeconomic status, or extraversion
- Compare positive youth development outcomes between male and female students across a variety of activities

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