

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Civilian

How Adolescents Come to see Themselves as More Responsible Through Participation in Youth Programs

Wood, D., Larson, R. W., & Brown, J. R. (2009). How adolescents come to see themselves as more responsible through participation in youth programs. *Child Development*, 80(1), 295-309. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8624.2008.01260.x

SUMMARY: The process underlying youth's development of responsibility was examined through an in-depth qualitative study. High-school aged youth and their leaders were interviewed over several months about their experiences in youth programs and what facilitated the process of development of responsibility. Youth's accounts suggested that this process was driven largely by successfully fulfilling program expectations.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Youth regularly attributed their increased sense of responsibility to fulfilling demands and expectations. These included expectations they had met, obligations they had fulfilled, and challenging circumstances where they had acted in a dependable way.
- In three programs where leaders cultivated youth's experience of agency over their work, youth mentioned changes in responsibility most frequently. For example, leaders expressed that it was essential that youth experience "artistic control" of their work and told the youth, "You have your ideas, follow through. This is your work."
- In program where youth were more likely to talk about responsibility, the task, time, and role demands were unambiguous and clearly defined.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MILITARY PROFESSIONALS:

Military professionals could:

- Encourage military-connected youth to participate in high-quality youth programming
- Provide military-connected youth and their families resources on youth programs in the community

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Provide clear expectations that lay out the task, time, and role demands for military-connected youth participants
- Engage military-connected youth in classes that encourage them to take ownership of projects that engage them in challenging roles and tasks

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend collaboration between DoD programs and local community organizations to support high-quality youth programming
- Continue efforts with each military branch to support military-connected youth programming

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.



Putting Research to Work for Military Families



METHODS

- The 11 youth programs included in the study had diverse foci, including the arts, leadership, and service programs; however, they all had a reputation for being high-quality.
- The data collection consisted of 648 interviews of youth and adult leaders along with 159 site observations.
- Analyses entailed coding and evaluating youth's descriptions of the most salient changes they experienced through program involvement and what may have facilitated this change.

PARTICIPANTS

- Youth were selected, with input from the leaders, to be representative of program participants in ethnicity, gender, and length of prior participation in the program.
- Research included 8-12 youth in each program, for a total of 108 youth interviewed across programs.
- The sample included 59 girls and 49 boys, with a mean age of 16.5 and approximately equal numbers of youth identifying as White (n=36), Black (n=32), Hispanic (n=32), Biracial (n=6), and Asian-American (n=2).

LIMITATIONS

- This study only included youth participating in high-quality programs; therefore, results should be interpreted within these parameters.
- While diverse demographics and length of time in the program were used in the selection of participants, it is not clear what other criteria were given to leaders as they selected youth. Selection could have been biased towards youth who leaders see as models in their program.
- In three of the programs youth were paid about minimum wage for participation in the program, which could have influenced the results of the study.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Examine a broader population of youth and programs, utilizing quantitative behavioral measures of responsibility and repeated assessments
- Obtain assessments of responsible behavior from other contexts of military-connected youth's lives (e.g., at home, in class, or in future jobs) which would deepen the understanding around which changes in youth programs transfer to behavior in other settings
- Broaden the scope through a representative sample of military-connected youth, which would help to evaluate the generality of the process described in this research

ASSESSING RESEARCH THAT WORKS



For more information about the Assessing Research that Works rating scale visit:
<https://reachmilitaryfamilies.umn.edu/content/assessing-research-that-works>