

Brief Research-to-Results

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WAYS TO PROMOTE THE POSITIVE DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDREN AND YOUTH

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OVERVIEW

This brief discusses the elements and features that define positive youth development and highlights some ways to support the positive development of children and youth. Specifically, this brief addresses the critical role that particular out-of-school time settings—namely, regular family dinners and organized activity programs—can play in supporting adolescents' development.

BACKGROUND

The Positive Youth Development approach is supported by a growing body of research on families, schools, and neighborhoods as a cutting-edge approach for enhancing adolescent development, and for helping youth reach their full potential. This approach recognizes that all adolescents have strengths and that children and youth will develop in positive ways when these strengths are aligned with resources for healthy development in the various settings in which adolescents live and interact.

Research indicates that the more exposure that adolescents have to positive resources and experiences—and where synergy between multiple settings can be established—the more likely it is that they will develop positively. Therefore, physical and institutional resources present in the social environment (for example, family supports) are just as essential for promoting positive youth development as are individual assets (such as skills, talents, and resiliency). These resources provide adolescents with routines and structure, as well as opportunities for learning, recreation, and engagement with individuals and their communities.

WHAT IS POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT?

Developmental scientists^{3,4} have suggested that positive youth development encompasses psychological, behavioral, and social characteristics that reflect what they call the “Five Cs.” Those “Cs” are competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring/compassion. A child or adolescent who develops each of these Five Cs is considered to be thriving. Moreover, developmental scientists believe that these thriving youth develop a sixth “C”: contribution (to self, family, community, and civil society).⁵

The “5 Cs” of Positive Youth Development^{6,7}

“C”	Definition
Competence:	Positive view of one’s actions in specific areas, including social, academic, cognitive, health, and vocational. Social competence refers to interpersonal skills (such as conflict resolution). Cognitive competence refers to cognitive abilities (e.g., decision making). Academic competence refers to school performance as shown, in part, by school grades, attendance, and test scores. Health competence involves using nutrition, exercise, and rest to keep oneself fit. Vocational competence involves work habits and explorations of career choices.
Confidence:	An internal sense of overall positive self-worth and self-efficacy.
Connection:	Positive bonds with people and institutions that are reflected in exchanges between the individual and his or her peers, family, school, and community in which both parties contribute to the relationship.
Character:	Respect for societal and cultural norms, possession of standards for correct behaviors, a sense of right and wrong (morality), and integrity.
Caring/Compassion:	A sense of sympathy and empathy for others.

WHAT SUPPORTS POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT?

National youth organizations, including National 4-H Council, America’s Promise Alliance, Big Brothers Big Sisters of America, Girl Scouts, and the American Camp Association, have been conducting research that begins to identify the critical elements of social contexts that are important for positive youth development. The 4-H Study of Positive Youth Development,⁸ in particular, focuses on the individual and contextual factors that are associated with positive youth development, and ultimately with young people’s contributions to self, others, and community. In this study, researchers measure each of the Cs using well-validated scales designed to assess the essential elements of the concept. The researchers calculate positive youth development by averaging scores on each of the Five Cs, with higher scores representing higher levels of positive youth development.⁹

Some recent results from the 4-H study indicate that two of the most important factors for predicting positive youth development are: 1) what kind of assets a family has (including household income, accessibility of parents, and collective activity among family members, such as eating dinner together); and 2) how adolescents spend their out-of-school time (such as participating in organized extracurricular activities, watching television, or doing homework).

THE ROLE OF THE FAMILY IN PROMOTING POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

Researchers of the 4-H study examined an array of assets within the family, school, and neighborhood when adolescents were in the seventh grade and found that eating dinner together as a family was one of the most important factors associated with positive adolescent development. In fact, after accounting for the influence of sex, race, and family household income, this collective activity among family members was the strongest predictor of positive adolescent functioning. Results showed that eating dinner together was related to higher levels of positive youth development and contribution and to lower rates of depression and risk/problem behaviors.

THE ROLE OF OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME PROGRAMS IN PROMOTING POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

Researchers conducting the 4-H study also examined the role of organized out-of-school time (OST) activities in promoting the positive development of adolescents. OST activities include time spent in youth development programs, such as 4-H and Boys & Girls Club, after-school clubs (e.g., school government and chess clubs), team and individual sports, the performing arts (e.g., music and drama), arts and crafts, religious activities (e.g., church youth groups), and service activities (e.g., volunteering).

Findings indicate:

- As early as the fifth grade, adolescents had participated in an average of two and one-half different types of OST activities at least a few times a year. By seventh grade, 61 percent were participating in at least two OST activities once a week or more.
- After accounting for the influence of sex, race, and family household income, the number of OST activities in which adolescents participated on a regular (weekly) basis was predictive of adolescent functioning. As shown in Figures 1 and 2, the more activities in which an adolescent participated, the higher the adolescent scored on scales of positive youth development and contribution to family, school, and the community at large.
- There appear to be some diminishing returns to participation in OST activities when participation exceeds four activities. Adolescents involved in five or more activities weekly had outcomes that were similar to adolescents who participated in four activities.

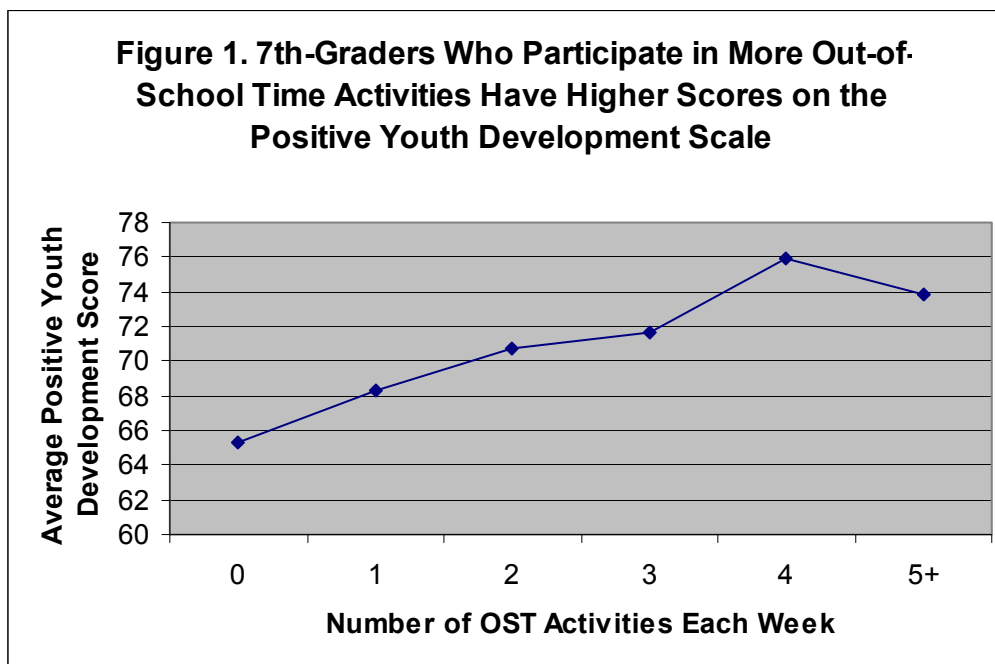
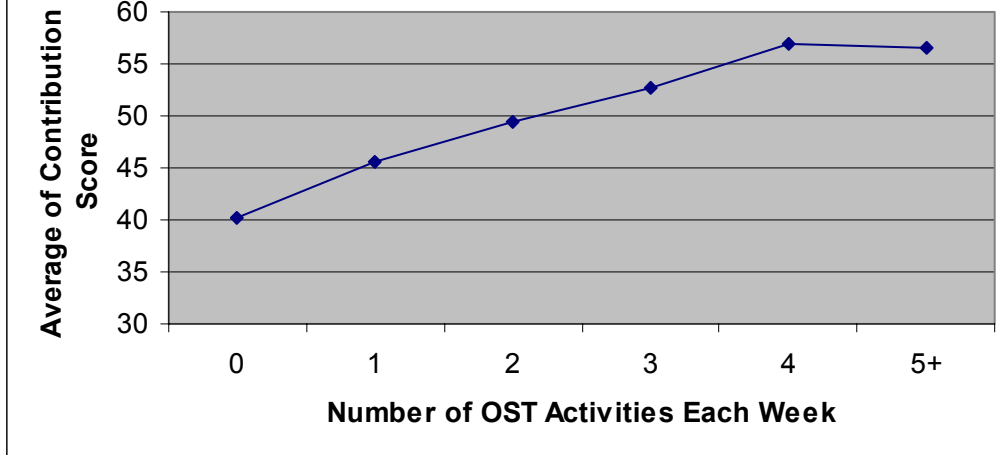


Figure 2. 7th-Graders Who Participate in More Out-of-School Time Activities Have Higher Scores on the Contribution Scale



IMPLICATIONS

Researchers find that children and adolescents who spend their time in several OST activities fare better developmentally than do their peers who are not involved at all or who participate in just one activity. Participation in a variety of OST activities is thought to promote positive development through providing children and adolescents a fuller range of growth-related opportunities, more chances to build supportive relationships with a variety of adults and peers, and opportunities to contribute to the well-being of the community. Engagement in more than one activity is also thought to help buffer children/adolescents against a negative experience in one particular activity (such as a bad experience with a coach) or in other important contexts of their lives (for example, a classroom).¹⁰ However, the present data also suggest diminishing returns at very high levels, but not significantly poorer outcomes at high levels.¹¹

In addition, these data underscore the importance of family for youth development. Together, collective activities in the family—such as eating dinner together—and participation in a variety of OST activities can contribute greatly to the positive development of our children and youth.

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- ³ Eccles, J. S., & Gootman, J. A. (Eds.). (2002). *Community programs to promote youth development*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- ⁴ Lerner R. M. (2004). *Liberty: Thriving and civic engagement among American youth*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- ⁵ Ibid.
- ⁶ Roth, J.L. & Brooks-Gunn, J. (2003). What is a youth development program? Identification and defining principles. In F. Jacobs, D. Wertlieb, & R.M. Lerner (Eds.). *Enhancing the life chances of youth and families: Public service systems and public policy perspectives* (pp.197-223). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- ⁷ Lerner. (2004).
- ⁸ This study was funded by the National 4-H Council.
- ⁹ Confirmatory factor analysis, with structural equation modeling (SEM), assessed the adequacy of the empirical specification of each of the Cs of positive youth development. Latent factor scores for the Cs were calculated in LISREL 8.54 for use in analyses.
- ¹⁰ Eccles, & Gootman. (2002).
- ¹¹ Mahoney, J.L, Harris, A.L, & Eccles, J.S.. (2008). *The Over-Scheduling Myth*. Washington, DC: Child Trends.