

Children And Adolescents In Organized Activities: The Developmental Consequences Of Participation

Participating in organized activities ranging from after-school programs to sports and clubs is a common experience for American children. The National Survey of America's Families suggests that more than 80% of children ages 6 to 17 years spend part of their free time in one or more sports, lessons, or clubs during the year,¹ and nearly 7 million children are enrolled in after-school programs.²

Several factors have led to an expansion of organized activities for children. They are widely seen as offering children of working parents safety and supervision during off-school hours. Local, state, and federal spending to support these activities has also increased significantly. For example, support of after-school programs has risen sharply, with federal grants for 21st Century Community Learning Centers alone increasing from \$40 million in 1998 to \$1 billion in 2002.

More importantly, the majority of studies on organized activities have found that for most children, participation in organized activities contributes to their educational, social, civic, and physical development in positive ways.

At the same time, concern has been raised that some children become too involved in organized activities and that over-scheduling may result in poor psychological and social adjustment and undermine relationships with their parents.

A review of available research, published in the Society for Research in Child Development's *Social Policy Report*, provides an overview of what is known about children's participation in organized activities and the consequences. In addition, the report examines over-scheduling concerns, concluding that only a small group of children appear to qualify as being overly involved in organized activities and, even then, indicators of their well-being tend to be more positive

than, or similar to, those of children who do not participate at all.

The Over-Scheduling Hypothesis

Concern that children's lives today are filled with hurry, stress, and pressure due, in part, to being overly involved in organized activities has been the topic of several news reports^{3, 4} and some popular parenting books.^{5, 6} News reports on the topic, in particular, are largely drawn from anecdotal evidence.

This over-scheduling hypothesis is based on several propositions. One suggests the chief reason children take part in organized activities is perceived pressure from parents or other adults to achieve long-term educational and career goals. Another argues that the extensive amount of time spent in organized activities comes at the expense of traditional family activities, such as dinner together, family outings, and casual conversations between parents and children. A third suggests that these children are at greater risk of having adjustment problems and poor relationships with their families due to the inordinate amount of time spent in organized activities and the disruption to family functioning.

Some scientific evidence does indicate that some children are over-scheduled and the consequences can be harmful to optimal development. This evidence, however, primarily draws on qualitative studies of how participating in organized activities affects family life and quantitative studies that suggest perceived pressure from parents and other adults can result in poor adjustment, particularly among children of more affluent American families. Further, several studies suggest that children are more likely to become involved and

stay involved in activities when their parents value and encourage their participation, provide the resources necessary to participate, and participate themselves.

Other studies suggest that an over-scheduled child may face certain risks. For example, one reported that the time and schedule commitments of organized activities is demanding on parents and participation in many activities tend to limit children's down time and constrain the nature of child-parent interactions.⁷ However, the study relied on a small sample of 12 families and did not examine the children's well-being.

Another study found that 6th and 7th graders from affluent families were at greater risk for substance use, depression, and anxiety than those in less affluent families, and that excessive pressure to achieve and isolation from parents may explain the higher levels of risk.⁸ However, the study did not assess the association between the time children spent in organized activities and achievement pressures or adolescent adjustment.

Children's Participation In Organized Activities

However, the preponderance of evidence suggests such concerns are not pervasive.

Time Spent In Organized Activities

Although participating in organized activities has emerged as a common experience among American children, few appear to be overly involved, according to data related to how they spend their time outside of school.

An evaluation of data from the Child Development Supplement (CDS) of the Panel Study for Income Dynamics (PSID) suggests that, on average, children spend about five hours a week in organized activities. Many alternative activities consume significantly more hours of children's time. The data show that watching television consumes the most, with white children spending an average of 13 hours a week and of African American children more than 17 hours each week. The PSID is a nationally representative sample of 5,000 American families. Data collection began in 1968. Interviews were conducted annually until 1997, then were done on a biennial basis. The CDS was added in 1997 to provide a long-term database of children and their families to support studies on human development.

The number of hours a child has to spend in organized activities to be considered "over-scheduled" has not been defined. However, the PSID-CDS data on adolescents suggest only a small percentage of children likely fall into that category. For example, about 7% of all children ages 12-14 years and only 5% of 15- to 18-year-olds spent 20 or more hours a week in organized activities.

Why Children Participate

Modern perspectives on expectancy-value theory suggest children make choices about participating in activities based on how important and relevant the activity is to them, their expectations for success or failure, and whether they consider the activity interesting and enjoyable.

The over-scheduling hypothesis suggests a more limited reason for children's participation in activities: pressure from parents and other adults – whether real or perceived – to achieve and attain long-term educational/career goals.

Several studies have examined why children take part in organized activities such as sports, art, science, civic activities, after-school programs, and community-based organizations (e.g., Boys & Girls Clubs and YMCA). Children in these studies ranged in age from 9- to 19-years-old and were diverse in their racial/ethnic and economic backgrounds. Researchers typically gathered their data by asking children to describe the reasons they participated.

The most common reasons adolescents and preadolescents gave for participating in organized activities were enjoyment and excitement; encouragement and support from friends or parents; opportunities to challenge themselves, build their skills, and increase their self worth; the desire to interact with other children who were participating; and personal safety. Pressure from parents and other adults was seldom mentioned as a chief reason for participating in organized activities. These results were seen among talented and highly involved adolescents, suburban adolescents from an economically diverse range of families, and those from affluent families.

In one study, for example, the chief reasons affluent 8th grade students gave for participating in organized activities were enjoyment and the perception that participating would benefit them in the future.⁹ Pressure from parents and other adults was mentioned the least often. In another study, 9th and 10th grade students in two large suburban high schools that included students from economically diverse backgrounds reported that the top reasons students gave for participating were that they liked the activity and that it interested them.¹⁰

Benefits Of Participation

Research provides considerable evidence to support the argument that children benefit from participating in organized activities that offer positive developmental experiences ranging from physical safety and supportive relationships with peers and adults to exposure to positive social norms and opportunities for skill building.

Studies that examine youth adjustment in relation to time spent in activities or the number of activities children participate in at the same time have generally reported that participation is associated with positive development. For

example, a study of more than 400 adolescents in grades 6-12 reported a significant positive association between the number of hours spent in organized activities and performance levels on achievement tests.¹¹

Other examples of potential benefits include the findings of a study that examined indicators of adjustment among students in grades 10-12 in relation to the number of activities they were involved in.¹² Most of the students participated in at least one activity. Very few were involved in more than two at the same time. Students who were involved in at least one organized activity showed either more improvement or less decline over time in school achievement – measures such as grade point average, and college attendance and completion – and improvement in feelings of school belonging and self-esteem. Involvement in volunteer activities and faith-based activities predicted lower rates of drug and alcohol use over time. In addition, participating in high school sports predicted higher income and better jobs at age 25.

Analyses involving PSID-CDS data also suggest that involvement in organized activities relates to the well-being of adolescents and that a high level of participation has few negative consequences, particularly when compared to adolescents who do not take part in activities. Reading achievement among both white and African-American adolescents, for example, tends to increase with participation in organized activities up to 20 hours a week.

The analysis of the PSID-CDS data also found that, among white adolescents, self-esteem increased when participation in organized activities ranged between 5 and 10 hours a week, after which the benefits leveled off. Among African-American adolescents, increases in self-esteem were seen among those who spent up to 20 hours a week in organized activities.

Among both white and African-American adolescents, cigarette use declined as the hours they spent in organized activities increased. Their use of alcohol followed a similar pattern, decreasing as their participation in organized activities increased up to about 15 hours a week.

Measures of adolescent-parent relationships also showed higher levels. For example, data suggest that among white adolescents, the frequency of eating meals with their families and having discussions with their parents are higher when they spend between 5 and 10 hours in organized activities, then level off when involvement in activities consumes more of their time. Increases in the same measures were reported among African-American adolescents who spent up to 20 hours a week in organized activities.

Highly Scheduled Youth

Research does suggest, however, that there may be a point

of diminishing returns among the small proportion of adolescents whose involvement in organized activities is extremely high. In most cases, however, measures of well-being, even among highly scheduled adolescents, have been found to be similar to or greater than those who do not participate in activities at all.

For example, a study that reported a significant positive association between the hours spent in organized activities and the achievement test scores of more than 400 adolescents in grades 6-12 noted that the scores of the 2% who spent more than 20 hours a week in activities were only modestly above average. Nevertheless, the scores of those highly scheduled students were higher than the scores of students who were not involved in any organized activities.¹³

Analyses of PSID-CDS data suggest similar patterns among highly involved adolescents. Reading achievement, for example, was found to be higher among white adolescents who spent up to 20 hours a week in organized activities, then declined when their involvement took up more than 20 hours a week of their time. However, no significant differences in reading achievement were found between those who spent more than 20 hours in organized activities and adolescents who did not participate in organized activities at all. Among African-American adolescents, reading achievement among those who were involved in organized activities was always found to be significantly higher than those who did not participate.

Policy Implications

Local, state, and federal spending to support organized activities for children has increased significantly in recent years, resulting in greater opportunities for children and adolescents to participate. An important policy question related to this investment is whether involvement in organized activities benefits children or undermines their development in some way.

The over-scheduling hypothesis as it relates to children's participation in organized activities raises concern. It suggests that children are at greater risk of adjustment problems and poor relationships with their families because they spend an extensive amount of time in organized activities, and that this over-involvement is largely driven by perceived pressure from parents or other adults to achieve long-term educational and career goals.

In contrast, research suggests that only a small proportion of children spend an extensive amount of time in organized activities. In addition, parent and adult pressure is only rarely mentioned by children and adolescents as a reason for their involvement. While some studies suggest that benefits to participating in organized activities tend to diminish when involvement is extremely high, measures of well-being

even among highly scheduled adolescents have mostly been found to be similar to or greater than those who do not participate in activities at all.

More importantly, the majority of studies suggest that for most children and adolescents, participating in organized activities contributes to educational, social, civic, and physical development in positive ways. If existing research on participation in organized activities raises a concern, it is that children who are not involved at all appear to have the most to lose. The well-being of these non-participating children and adolescents is consistently less positive compared to those involved in organized activities ranging from sports to after-school programs.

References

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This Special Report, written by Jeffery Fraser, is based on the publication cited above. It is not intended to be an original work but a summary for the convenience of our readers. References noted in the text follow:

¹ Moore, K. A., Hatcher, J.L., Vandiver, S., & Brown, B.V. (2000). Children's behavior and well-being: Findings from the National Survey of America's Families. *Snapshots of America's Families II*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute. www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/900845_1999Snapshots.pdf

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³ Noonan, D. (2001). Stop stressing me: For a growing number of kids, the whirlwind of activities can be overwhelming. How to spot burnout. *Newsweek*, Jan. 29, 54-55.

⁴ Gilbert, S. (1999). For some children, it's an after-school pressure cooker. *New York Times*, Aug. 3.

⁵ Elkind, D. (2001). *The hurried child: Growing up too fast, too soon*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press.

⁶ Rosenfeld, A., & Wise, N. (2000). *The over-scheduled child: Avoiding the hyper-parenting trap*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

⁷ Lareau, A. (2003). *Unequal childhoods: Class, race, and family life*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

⁸ Luthar, S.S., & Becker, B.E. (2002). Privileged but pressured? A study of affluent youth. *Child Development*, *73*, 1593-1610.

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¹¹ Copper, H., Valentine, J.C., Nye, B., & Lindsay, J.J. (1999). Relationships between five after-school activities and academic achievement. *Journal of Education Psychology*, *91*, 369-378.

¹² Eccles, J.S., Barber, B.L., Stone, M., & Hunt, J. (2003). Extracurricular activities and adolescent development. *Journal of Social Issues*, *59*, 10-43.

¹³ Copper, loc. cit.

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