9 Adolescent Participation in Organized Activities

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There is good evidence that participating in school and community-based activities is associated with both short- and long-term indicators of positive development (e.g., Barber, Eccles, & Stone, 2001; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Eccles & Templeton, in press; Larson, 2000; Mahoney & Cairns, 1997; Roth, Brooks-Gunn, Murray, & Foster, 1998; Youniss & Yates, 1997). Sociological research has documented a link between adolescents' extracurricular activities and adult educational attainment, occupation, and income (Otto, 1975, 1976; Otto & Alwin, 1977). Participation in organized activities is also positively related to achievement, educational aspirations, self-esteem, ability to overcome adversity, active participation in the political process and volunteer activities, leadership qualities, and physical health (e.g., Barber et al., 2001; Holland & Andre, 1987; Marsh & Kleitman, 2002; Scales, Benson, Leffert, & Blyth, 2000; Youniss, Yates, & Su, 1997).

There has been far less developmental research on constructive leisure activities than on other contexts such as family and school (Kleiber, 1999), but some progress has been made in understanding the mechanisms whereby constructive organized activities facilitate healthy development. First, they provide a developmental forum for initiative and engagement in challenging tasks, and allow participants to express their talents, passion, and creativity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1991; Klieber, 1999; Larson, 2000). Second, organized activities help adolescents meet their need for social relatedness, providing a broad range of opportunities for social development (Fletcher & Shaw, 2000; Youniss et al., 1997). Third, participation may also promote the development of assets such as social, physical, and intellectual skills, meaningful roles and empowerment, positive identity,
constructive peer networks, and clear expectations and boundaries (e.g., Eccles & Barber, 1999; Marsh & Kleitman, 2002, 2003; Perkins, Borden, & Villarruel, 2001).

Activity Participation, Social Identity, and Peer Group

To explain the connection between activities and positive development, we have proposed a synergistic system connecting activity involvement with peer group composition and identity exploration (Barber, Stone, Hunt, & Eccles, in press; Eccles & Barber, 1999). Specifically, we believe that enhanced outcomes result for adolescents who experience a confluence of activity participation, activity-based identity adoption, and a benign peer context. Previous research, including our own, has demonstrated the pervasive connections between each of these three factors and numerous outcomes.

The activities adolescents choose can reflect core aspects of their self-beliefs. Therefore, voluntary participation in discretionary extracurricular activities provides an opportunity for adolescents to be personally expressive and to communicate to both themselves and others that “this is who I am” or “this is what I believe I am meant to do.” In addition, extracurricular activity settings provide the opportunity to enhance identification with the values and goals of the school (Barber et al., in press; Marsh, 1992; Marsh & Kleitman, 2003).

Activities also help structure one’s peer group: Adolescents in extracurricular activities have more academic friends and fewer friends who skip school and use drugs than adolescents who do not participate in activities (Eccles & Barber, 1999). In turn, having more academic and less risky friends predicts other positive outcomes for adolescents. Conversely, being part of a peer network that includes a high proportion of youth who engage in, and encourage, risky behaviors predicts increased involvement in risky behaviors and decreased odds of completing high school and going on to college. Some activities facilitate membership in positive peer networks; others facilitate membership in more problematic peer networks (Dishion, Poulin, & Burraston, 2001). The critical mediating role of peer affiliations in the link between extracurricular activities and youth outcomes has also been documented by Eder and Parker (1987), Kinney (1993), and Youniss, McLellan, Su, and Yates (1999).

Measures of Activity Involvement

Participation in school and community activities can be measured in a number of ways. Mahoney (Mahoney, 2000; Mahoney & Cairns, 1997) has used the approach of coding participation from school yearbook information available for the participants in his local area study. He uses the photographs of participants in extracurricular activities, and a record of student names and positions of status within the activity. Yearbook activity photos overlapped closely with lists provided by school personnel. Mahoney has categorized activities into nine