

**PATTERNS OF EARLY ADOLESCENTS' PARTICIPATION IN YOUTH  
DEVELOPING PROGRAMS HAVING POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT**

**GOALS<sup>1</sup>**

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## **Abstract**

Theory and research suggest that structured, out-of-school-time (OST) activities, and in particular youth development programs aimed at promoting positive youth development (PYD), are key developmental assets for such development. Using longitudinal data from 945 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> graders participating in the 4-H Study of PYD, initial descriptive information is presented about early adolescent participation in youth programs having or not having PYD goals. Within each grade, early adolescents participated in multiple programs (overall mean for Grades 5 and 6 are 3.8 and 2.9, respectively). In Grades 5 and 6, 44.1% and 35.8% of youth, respectively, participated in PYD-related programs, but typically in combination with other program types. Researchers and practitioners should consider implications for healthy early adolescent development of participation in multiple programs, only some of which seek to promote PYD.

The key hypothesis derived from the developmental systems theory-based model of positive youth development (PYD) that has evolved over the last decade (Damon, 2004; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Lerner, 2005) is that the features of PYD (the “Five Cs” of competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring; Lerner, et al., 2005) will emerge when the strengths of youth (e.g., their abilities to select healthy, valued goals, to optimize the presence of resources or use strategies to attain the means needed to reach these goals, and to compensate when goals are blocked or when optimization strategies fail; Gestsdottir & Lerner, 2007) are aligned across adolescence with the resources (“developmental assets;” Benson, Scales, Hamilton, & Sesma, 2006) in families, schools, and communities that can enhance PYD (e.g., other people, institutions, opportunities for collective action, and access; Theokas & Lerner, 2006). A subsidiary hypothesis has been that community-based, structured, out-of-school-time (OST) activities (e.g., youth programs rich in organized time, adult supervision, and scheduled, developmentally-appropriate skill-building opportunities; Bartko & Eccles, 2003; Mahoney, Larson, Eccles, & Lord, 2005) are key institutional assets linked to PYD (Lerner, 2005). Organized sports, arts, youth organizations (such as 4-H or Boys & Girls Clubs), and volunteer opportunities at local community settings all represent different types of structured activities.

In addition, a specific instance of such structured, OSTs – youth development (YD) programs -- has been identified in meta-analyses (Blum, 2003; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003a, 2003b) as especially effective in fostering PYD. In contrast to what Roth and Brooks-Gunn (2003b) term youth programs, they note that YD programs are marked by a theory of change having (1) as inputs at least three key features (i.e., the “Big 3” of positive and sustained adult-youth relations; activities that build life skills, and opportunities for youth participation in and leadership of valued community activities; Lerner, 2004) and (2) as outputs the characteristics of

PYD. Accordingly, following, Roth and Brooks-Gunn (2003b), in the present research we differentiate between OSTs that have a stated theory of change involving PYD (e.g., as does 4-H, Boys & Girls Clubs, Big Brother/Big Sisters, YMCA, and Boy and Girl Scouts) and structured activities that do not have an explicit, PYD-driven theory of change.

To illustrate this distinction, in YD programs activities such as sports or arts and crafts are used as vehicles to implementing the theory of change; it is the context (the “program theory”), as compared to the program content, that is most important. Thus, a YMCA program that teaches basketball skills, a 4-H program that teaches a young person to raise a cow, or a Boys & Girls Club program to instruct adolescents in computer use are not trying to create professional basketball stars, create the Future Farmers of America, or foster the development of the next Bill Gates. Rather, they are using these activities to promote PYD and, ultimately, to foster better citizenship and responsible adulthood. For instance, the 4-H website says that “4-H is a community of young people across America who are learning leadership, citizenship and life skills” (4-H website, 2006). Similarly, the Boys & Girls Clubs website indicates that their “club programs and services promote and enhance the development of boys and girls by instilling a sense of competence, usefulness, belonging and influence” (Boys & Girls Clubs website, 2006).

In contrast to YD programs, Little League baseball, soccer, playing in a school band, or participating in debate clubs are typically directed toward enhancing particular skill sets; any interest in PYD, citizenship or responsible adulthood are not explicitly tied to the activities fostered in youth as a consequence of their participation (in fact, there is rarely an explicit theory of change or logic model in these programs, e.g., see Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003b).

Roth and Brooks-Gunn (2003b) report that evaluations of OSTs indicate that YD programs are in fact more likely to be associated with one or more of the Cs of PYD than are

youth programs. Similarly, Scales, Benson, Leffert, and Blyth (2000; see too Benson, et al., 2006) reported that among the youth studied by Search Institute in periodic national surveys, YD programs represent major community-based assets increasing the probability of indicators of positive development.

Across the adolescent years, the majority of American youth participate in OSTs at high rates (Mahoney, Larson, & Eccles, 2005; Phelps, et al., 2007), often engaging in several different types of activities (e.g., sports, arts, service clubs, religious groups, YD programs) within and across years (e.g., Fredricks and Eccles, 2006a, 2006b; Zarrett, et al., in press). However, despite the potential significance of YD programs as developmental assets for PYD, little is known about the participation rates of youth in such programs, alone or in combination with other types of OSTs, especially within the early adolescent period, a time when the potential impact of YD programs may be especially important for launching youth on a trajectory that will afford resiliency to the subsequent challenges to healthy development normative in later portions of adolescence (Lerner, 2004).

Accordingly, the purpose of the present report is to provide initial, descriptive information about the participation of early adolescent boys and girls in YD programs, either alone or in combination with other OSTs. Using the first two waves of data from the 4-H Study of PYD (Jelicic, et al., 2007; Lerner, et al., 2005), which involves longitudinal data on the patterns of OST activity participation among male and female fifth and sixth graders from across the United States, we will describe patterns of participation among early adolescent boys and girls in youth programs having or not having a PYD-related theory of change, that is YD versus non-YD programs, respectively.

## Method

Data for this report derive from the 4-H Study of PYD, a longitudinal investigation that began with the study of fifth grade youth in the United States and their parents (Lerner, et al., 2005). The 4-H Study was designed to test a theoretical model about the role of developmental assets in promoting PYD, as conceptualized by the “Five Cs” and the “sixth C” of contribution, and in the diminution of problem and risk behaviors. Full details of the methodology of the 4-H Study have been presented in prior reports (see Gestsdottir & Lerner, 2007; Jelicic, et al., 2007; Lerner, et al., 2005; Theokas & Lerner, 2006). Accordingly, we present here those features of methodology pertinent to the focus of the present report.

### Participants

At Wave 1 of data collection, participants came from sites located in 13 states that provided regional, rural-urban, racial/ethnic, and religious diversity. Schools were chosen as the main method for collecting the sample. Assessment was conducted in 57 schools and in four after-school programs. The sample consisted of 1,720 fifth grade adolescents (48% males; mean age = 132 months, SD = 6.20 months; 52% females, mean age = 131 months, SD = 5.54 months) and 1,139 of their parents.

Attrition in the 4-H sample is not randomly distributed across schools. In Wave 2, some principals withdrew consent for their schools to participate, and, thus, these students “dropped out” without our having had the opportunity to ask them if they wanted to remain in the study. For example, in one state where we were unable to collect data in Wave 2, principal withdrawal of consent resulted in the loss of over 250 participants. Overall, we lost 561 participants in Wave 2 because of the absence of principal or superintendent permission to continue. In turn,

however, attrition from Wave 1 to Wave 2 for students who *were* allowed to be asked to remain in the study was only 10%. As a result, 982 youth were retested in Wave 2.

Of these 982 youth who comprise the longitudinal sample of the 4-H Study, 945 youth (those who have responded to questions pertinent to after-school activity participation and who were in 6<sup>th</sup> grade at Wave 2) were included in the analyses described in the present report (45.2% males, 54.5% females; European American = 56.2%, Latino/a = 13.8%, African American = 4.6%, Asian American = 4.2%, American Indian = 2.5%, Multi-ethnic/racial = 2.4%, Other = 16.1%; mean for mother's education = 14.16 years (*sd* = 2.45 years); mean for average family per capita income = \$11,931 (*sd* = \$7907). Since family per capita income as measured in Grade 5 was found to be highly correlated with family per capita income at Grade 6, ( $r = .917$ ,  $p < .001$ ), average reported income was used to estimate missing information at either Grade 5 or 6.

## Measures

Activity participation. As shown in Table 1, 18 structured OST activities were assessed. Those 18 activities were also categorized into five (5) activity types, i.e., YD programs, sports, arts, interest clubs, and service groups. The set of 18 activities shown in Table 1 was based on Eccles and Gootman (2002).

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Insert Table 1 about here

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Initially, participation in 20 and 26 potential OST activities was assessed in Wave 1 (i.e., 5<sup>th</sup> grade) and Wave 2 (i.e., 6<sup>th</sup> grade), respectively. However, for the present report, we used a list of activities that matched across waves. To do this, a few individual activities were excluded or, if introduced in Wave 2 only, collapsed and given labels that matched equivalent activities in

Wave 1. Religious education and paid work were excluded from the original list of activities because religious education after school was not differentiated from regular school classes, and paid work is not an OST activity in the sense we are discussing here. School newspaper and hobby clubs were excluded because they were introduced in Wave 2 and there was no match in Wave 1. In addition, in Wave 2, the following activities were combined in order to match them with similar activities in Wave 1: 1. Drama, Drama club, School Play, and Acting/Drama were collapsed into “Drama;” and 2. Music and Chorus were collapsed into “Music.” In short, as a result of two items being excluded from Wave 1, four items being excluded from Wave 2, and several Wave 2 activity items being collapsed, the original lists of activities was reduced to 18 structured activities for both Wave 1 and Wave 2.

For each of the 18 structured OST activities, youth reported if they participated in them during the current school year or summer. Data from the responses to the activities survey were scored in two ways. First, overall participation was the total number of individual activities in which a youth reported being involved at each time of testing. Second, in order to begin to describe differences in patterns of participation between YD programs versus non-YD programs, we assessed also type-defined participation, which was the number of different types of activities (out of a possible five) in which a youth was involved during each of the two grades.

## **Procedure**

Participants were tested in groups within their schools (in more than 95% of the cases) or after-school programs. In both the fifth and sixth grades, teachers or program staff gave youth an envelope to take home to their parents. The envelope contained a letter explaining the study, consent forms, a parent questionnaire, and a self-addressed envelope for returning the parent

questionnaire. Trained study staff or assistants, who began all testing sessions for youth by reading the instructions to the participants, conducted data collection.

## Results

The goal of the present report was to describe the patterns of participation of early adolescent boys and girls in youth development programs having or not having PYD goals. Participation was indexed through scores for overall and type-defined participation in structured OST activities. We sought to use longitudinal data from the first two waves (Grades 5 and 6) of the 4-H Study of PYD to address the issue of the rate of participation of early adolescent boys and girls in YD programs, either alone or in combination with other youth programs. In addition, because participation in OST activities varies in relation to socioeconomic status (SES) (Mahoney, et al., 2005; Scales, et al., 2000), this variable was controlled in the present analyses.

In Grade 5, 95.6% ( $N = 904$ ) of youth participated in at least one of the 18 OST activities, and in Grade 6, 92.4% of youth ( $N = 874$ ) participated in at least one structured activity. In these two grades, respectively, the overall number of OST activities in which youth engaged were 3.8 ( $sd = 2.4$ ) and 2.9 ( $sd = 2.1$ ). While within both the fifth and sixth grades, the rate of OST participation for girls (Grade 5 mean = 4.0,  $sd = 2.5$ ; and Grade 6 mean = 3.1,  $sd = 2.2$ ) was greater than the corresponding rates for boys (Grade 5 mean = 3.5,  $sd = 2.2$ ; Grade 6 mean = 2.6,  $sd = 1.9$ ), a 2 (grade) x 2 (sex) repeated measures ANCOVA (covarying on average per capita income) showed a significant decline in overall breadth of participation between Grades 5 and 6, ( $F(1, 761) = 10.69, p < .001, \eta^2 = 0.014$ ) but no significant effects of sex or SES with respect to change. However, for mean participation, girls were significantly higher than boys ( $F(1,761) = 14.29, p < .001, \eta^2 = 0.018$ ), and there were no significant SES effects.

Overall, then, from fifth to sixth grade there was a decline in the number of different activities in which male and female youth participated. However, this mean trend obscures the increase in participation shown by some youth. Using a conservative definition of change, by considering change to occur when participation increases or decreases by two or more activities, 39% of youth participated in fewer activities, 12% participated in more activities, and only 49% maintained their approximate level of participation from Grade 5 to Grade 6. There were no significant sex differences in this pattern ( $\chi^2(2) = 1.963, p > .10$ ).

We also assessed type-defined participation patterns among the boys and girls in the sample. The five program types presented in Table 1 were used for analysis. Table 2 presents for each grade the percentages of youth engaged in each activity type. YD programs were a prominent features of the OST activity experiences of youth, but typically in combination with other types of activity (in the main either sports or arts OST activities).

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 Insert Table 2 about here  
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Consistent with the findings regarding overall rates of participation, a 2 (grade) x 2 (sex) repeated measures ANCOVA (covarying on family income) showed a significant decline in overall breadth of types of participation between Grades 5 and 6, ( $F(1, 761) = 12.36, p < .001, \eta^2 = 0.016$ ), and no significant effect of sex or SES with respect to change. However, for mean participation, girls were again significantly higher than boys ( $F(1,761) = 7.54, p < .001, \eta^2 = 0.010$ ), and there was no significant SES effect.

## Discussion

Within the first two waves of longitudinal data within the 4-H Study of PYD, the fifth and sixth grade early adolescents participated, on average, in about three OST programs a year, although participation rate showed a decrease across the two years in regard to both overall OST program participation and in all of the five types of programs we studied. Nevertheless, girls have generally greater rates of participation than boys. Moreover, across the two waves of data collection rates of early adolescent participation in YD programs alone were low but, when the participation in such programs along with other programs was considered, then more than 40% of youth in Grade 5 and about a third of youth in Grade 6 has YD programs as part of the ecology of the OST activity experiences.

These findings are of course limited by particular features of our methodology (i.e., in regard to the specific characteristics of our sample and the set of measures we use). Thus, our data do not enable us to be certain why OST participation rates declined across the two years of early adolescence that we studied. For instance, it may be that youth are beginning to focus their interests more or that specific program characteristics and/or the quality of youth experiences in these programs moderate the decrease we observed or, as well, the particular patterns of participation observed within and across grades. Clearly, addressing such possibilities is an important direction for future research.

However, the present analyses do provide useful, albeit initial, descriptive information about the task facing researchers and practitioners who wish to assess what is regarded theoretically as a key asset in the promotion of PYD, that is, engagement in a community-based, program having a theory of change marked by inputs consonant with the “Big 3” features of program design (Blum, 2003; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003b; Lerner, 2004) and outcomes linked

to the Five Cs of PYD and or to youth contribution to communities (Jelicic, et al., 2007; Lerner, et al., 2005). That is, relatively few youth participate in YD programs alone and, when they are engaged in such programs they are also likely to be involved in two to three other programs, most often sports and, after this, arts programs.

Given that the messages about youth development, if any, may not be congruent across different types of programs, it is essential for leaders of YD programs to recognize the need to collaborate with practitioners leading other types of OST activities and to attempt to provide youth with a common message about the nature and importance of the development of the Cs of PYD. To the extent that the descriptive data presented in this report may be generalizable, then, in order to impact the positive development of young people during the initial years of adolescence, practitioners in YD programs may have no recourse other than to seek collaboration and, possibly, integration with colleagues conducting other types of OST activities.

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Table 1. The 18 Structured Activities and Five Activity Types Assessed in Grades 5 and 6 of the 4-H Study of Positive Youth Development

Type of Activity	Individual Activities
<u>YD Programs</u>	4-H Club; Boys Scouts and Girl Scouts; YMCA and YWCA; Big Brothers/ Big Sisters; Boys & Girls Clubs
<u>Sports</u>	Team sports (such as soccer or football); Individual sports (such as martial arts or tennis)
<u>Arts</u>	School Band; Drama; Dance; Music; Arts and Crafts
<u>Interest Clubs</u>	Academic Club; School Government
<u>Service Groups</u>	Tutoring; Mentoring/Peer Advising; Volunteer Work; Religious Group

Table 2. Types of Activity Participation: Activity Types and Percentages for Males and Females

Activity Types	Grade 5 (%)			Grade 6 (%)		
	Boys (n = 430)	Girls n = (516)	Combined (n = 946)	Boys (n = 430)	Girls (n = 516)	Combined (n = 946)
None	5.1	3.9	4.4	7.4	7.8	7.6
YD programs	45.3	43.0	44.1	33.7	37.6	35.8
Sports	76.3	67.4	71.5	78.1	67.1	72.1
Arts	67.0	79.5	73.8	52.6	72.7	63.5
Interest						
clubs/groups	30.2	40.9	36.0	6.3	9.7	8.1
Service groups	38.6	47.1	43.2	28.6	37.8	33.6