



WHAT ARE YOUNG PEOPLE DOING WITH THEIR TIME?

Reed Larson, University of Illinois, and colleagues studied how youth used their time using an experience sampling method. Key findings include: 1) Studies by Larson, corroborated by many others, dispels the myth that kids are overscheduled. Young people who are overscheduled tend to be the exception rather than the rule. 2) There are significant group (gender, age, race, community contexts) differences in terms of how young people use their time.

- Productive time (e.g., classroom learning, homework, reading, participating in extracurricular activities, etc.): on average, approximately 22% (inner-city, predominantly African-American youth), to an average of 30% (suburban, predominantly European-American youth) spend their waking hours in productive time. Compare that to Asia where young people spend 35-47% of their time on productive activities (more specifically, in the classroom and doing homework). Young people in the U.S. are spending about 30 minutes per day on homework.
 - Maintenance (e.g., grooming, eating, chores, etc.): Overall, approximately 25% of young people's waking time is spent on maintenance related activities, with girls spending significantly more time on maintenance, especially chores.
 - Leisure (free time): Typically, young people have over half their waking hours for free time—time to do what they want. Their free time is spent predominantly on: 1) watching TV—during the week, young people watch on average, 2 ½ hours of TV per day. Boys and African American youth spend significantly more time watching TV. 2) Talking—young people spend an average of 1.5 hours per day talking. Urban, African-American youth report they are typically talking with family, while suburban, European-American youth typically report talking with friends or peers. 3) Playing (including computer and video games).
- It appears that a large percentage of free time is spent on what one may call “unconstructive” use of time. So what? Are there real consequences to leaving young people alone and letting them “hang out?”
- Comprehensive, longitudinal studies show that indeed, how kids use their free time makes a big difference in their immediate learning and development, and in turn, make a difference in their long-term developmental outcomes.
 - For example, Jackie Eccles and her colleagues have conducted a study that followed thousands of kids from 5th grade till early adulthood (about the age of 23). Results from their study linked constructive use of time like arts, music and creative activities to sports to improved mental and physical health, school performance, graduation rates, college attendance, and positive adult outcomes. Other types of constructive activities such as participation

in religious activities or reading were linked to enhanced pro-social behavior and adult creativity. On the other hand, TV viewing increased aggression, obesity, and poorer performance and “hanging out” was related to increased risk behavior. These findings were echoed by other longitudinal studies.

So what does this mean for structured opportunities or youth programs and organizations? Can structured opportunities be counted as “Constructive?” CAUTION! *Constructive time doesn’t always mean structured activities, nor do structured activities always mean constructive use of time!*

- Research makes a clear link between quality programs and positive developmental outcomes. BUT “quality” is the operational word.
- Researchers looking at quality issues, like Deb Vandell and Deborah Belle, have shown that many existing programs do not meet quality standards. This becomes important in light of study findings that young people spending time in poor quality programs were often worse off than kids in self-care, even for kids as young as 10!
- While structured, quality opportunities appear to be positive for all kids, this positive impact on development may get magnified for young people living in

under-resourced, high risk communities. · Milbery McGlaughlin, followed intensely about 60 young people coming from devastating circumstances. These young people caught her attention because by all accounts, they should have been failing and experiencing poor outcomes, yet were doing relatively well. In exploring factors in their lives made a difference, she found that one critical factor was that these young people were self-selecting themselves into programs that were highly structured, challenging, and supportive. They purposefully did not choose programs where they just let you “hang out and have fun.” But chose programs that were opposite their troubled homes and neighborhoods. Of the 60 young people, at age 25, all but 4 were doing well, had jobs and were active in their communities.

Points to remember:

1. Constructive use of time has real consequences for positive development and learning.
2. Quality programs can make a significant difference relative to young people’s development and learning— but programs, structures and institutions that exist are not adequate.
3. This is especially the case in under-resourced, high-risk communities.
4. Issues, challenges, needs and assets differ by such factors as age, gender, race and community contexts—so there are no one-size-fits-all answers.

The Minnesota Commission on Out-of-School Time (MnCOST) is an action project of the University of Minnesota Presidential Initiative on Children, Youth and Families. The Commission convenes in January 2004 and will meet five times over the next year.

MnCOST is funded by the McKnight Foundation, the Minnesota Department of Education, and the University of Minnesota Extension Service. It is also supported and informed by the Minnesota Out-of-School Time Partnership, a group of organizations and associations dedicated to youth learning and development.



THE MCKNIGHT FOUNDATION

