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Extracurricular Activity Involvement and Adolescent Self-Esteem

By Lisa A. Kort-Butler, Ph.D.

Extracurricular activities figure prominently in the lives of adolescents, as most youth report participating at some level in a school-based extracurricular activity (Feldman & Matjasko, 2005). Scholars, practitioners, educators, and policy makers alike promote the potential benefits of extracurricular involvement for personal and prosocial development among adolescents. Researchers from a variety of fields have taken an interest in how participation influences health, well-being, and social development. This research has demonstrated a connection between structured activity involvement and several indicators of positive youth development (Busseri & Rose-Krasnor, 2009).

Of particular interest in this article is the relationship between activity participation and self-esteem. Activities can help young people achieve developmental tasks, particularly personal identity development. The basic theoretical notion is that participation will support or bolster a positive self-concept and a sense of self-worth. In general, research demonstrates extracurricular participation is linked to self-esteem (Mahoney, Harris, & Eccles, 2006). This article focuses on this connection on a theoretical basis, and then it turns to a summary of the empirical evidence. Finally, it offers practical suggestions regarding adolescent extracurricular involvement and self-esteem.

WHAT THEORY SUGGESTS

Extracurricular Involvement, Identity Development, and Self-Esteem

Self-esteem is dynamic during adolescence, such that there is a drop in self-esteem in early adolescence and a recovery between mid- and late adolescence (Baldwin & Hoffman, 2002). Changes in self-esteem during adolescence are responsive to life events, perceived support from family and friends, and school climate. Additionally, developmental experiences, like shifts in responsibilities, social roles, and personal identity as adolescents try to find somewhere to “fit in,” may contribute to the instability of self-esteem in early adolescence and then stabilization in emerging adulthood.

Mirroring the patterns in self-esteem, extracurricular participation is also dynamic. Bohnert and colleagues (2010) proposed a developmental progression of extracurricular involvement. In early adolescence, young people may sample a range of activities, whereas in mid-adolescence, they typically begin intensifying their focus on a few activities, spending increasing time with those activities. In order to master or achieve within an activity domain, older adolescents personally invest in these activities by increasing their engagement and commitment to the activity. As such, they identify themselves, in part, by the activities on which they choose to focus.

As they navigate their social worlds, adolescents are also navigating personal and interpersonal developmental tasks. Their lived experiences occur in a variety of social contexts, including family, peer networks, and education settings. Extracurricular activities are another area in which youth can act out developmental tasks, including the exploration and formation of identity (Hansen, Larson, & Dworkin, 2003). Extracurricular activities offer a context for self-assessment outside the more restricted expectations of school and family settings (Barber, Eccles, & Stone, 2001), allowing an adolescent to establish a sense of identity on which self-esteem is anchored.

If adolescence is a process of solidifying identity and cultivating self-esteem, then structured extracurricular activities can be a key environment for this process. Activities can provide adolescents room to grow, stimulating a sense of identity in a context of skill-building and emotional support, thereby fostering self-esteem (Darling, 2005). The positive youth development model underlines the important role that extracurricular activities can play in promoting personal and social competence, character, and confidence in one's self and abilities (Lerner, Fisher, & Weinberg, 2000).

Family and Community Selection Effects

The relationship between extracurricular activity participation and self-esteem becomes more complicated once we reflect on how adolescents may self-select into activities, how family finances and support may affect the opportunity to participate, and how structural barriers within a given school or community may constrain the available activity options (Feldman & Matjasko, 2005). For example, adolescents who already have a strong sense of self-esteem may be more likely to enroll and stay in activities compared to their peers. Likewise, adolescents whose families can afford the costs of participation are also more likely to enroll. Schools and communities differ in the consistent availability of well-organized activities that cover a range of interests. For example, school arts programs are often under the financial knife, yet cutting such programs limits the available activity options in ways that may particularly impact those adolescents who identify themselves with such activities.

Families, schools, and communities may also differ in the socio-cultural support for certain activities. For instance, a school district may proudly publicize their champion football team but give little recognition to their champion debate team. Activity-based identities are given meaning by specific family, school, or community contexts (Gilman, Meyers, & Perez, 2004). For an identity to be beneficial to self-esteem, it has to fit the context. If it is “out of synch” with family or community expectations, then it may not provide much support for self-esteem or even be detrimental. Thus, self-selection into activities, the available opportunities for participation, and the local socio-cultural



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support for activities may influence the level of benefit adolescents derive from involvement.

WHAT WE KNOW: THE EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

Dimensions of Extracurricular Participation and Self-Esteem

Broadly, extracurricular participation has been linked to self-esteem and related measures of well-being (Feldman & Matjasko, 2005). However, refined analyses reveal nuanced relationships based on how participation is measured and on differences across activity domains. Measurement of activities varies substantially. Researchers may examine yes/no indicators of involvement in a single activity, frequency of participation in a single activity (e.g., baseball, band), participation with a particular domain of activity (e.g., sports, performing arts), duration of involvement (e.g., number of years), intensity of involvement in an activity (e.g., number of hours per week), and breadth or variety of involvement in several domains of activities.

No clear pattern has emerged as to the “best” activity to promote self-esteem.

Although few studies of self-esteem directly examine duration, the literature suggests it is related to better adjustment, perhaps because it is indicative of the adolescent’s personal commitment to or identification with the activity (Bonhert et al., 2010). Intensity of involvement has been linked with higher levels of self-esteem and indicators of positive adjustment. There may be diminishing returns at very high levels of intensity, but the research does not indicate negative effects as a result of “over-scheduling” (Mahoney et al., 2006).

Breadth has one of the most consistent relationships with indicators of psychological adjustment like self-esteem and resiliency. Young people involved in a variety of activity domains tend to fare better than those who do not participate or participate at low levels (Bonhert et al., 2010). One explanation posits that involvement in a variety of activities increases exposure to the factors that promote successful development, including identity validation and self-esteem. Moreover, positive experiences in one activity may extend across domains, potentially compensating for negative self-appraisals in other domains (Fredricks & Eccles, 2006). Breadth can thus foster self-esteem and contribute to its stability. On the other hand, if a young person has fewer contexts in which to validate self-concept, general self-esteem may be more vulnerable to negative experiences.

Domains of Extracurricular Participation and Self-Esteem

Research is equivocal regarding which domain of activities is most beneficial for self-esteem. For example, one study found an association between self-esteem and sports, student service/government, and academic activities, but no relationship with activities like performing arts, vocational groups, or school clubs (Marsh & Kleitman, 2002). Another study found that involvement in prosocial activities like volunteering and faith-based groups was linked to higher self-esteem, but that there was no such relationship for sports and performing arts (Barber et al., 2001). Finally, another study found a relationship between involvement in school clubs and self-worth, but not for any other activities, including sports (Fredricks & Eccles, 2005). As these examples illustrate, no clear pattern has emerged as to the “best” activity to promote self-esteem.

To address this issue, and to better reflect the lived experiences of young people, scholars have begun taking a person-centered approach to quantify participation. These approaches use an “activity portfolio” to describe the combination of extracurricular activities in which a person participates (Feldman & Matjasko, 2007).

Researchers have detected portfolios that are sports-focused, sports in combination with another domain, school club or community group-focused, involvement across several domains, and low involvement (Linver, Roth, & Brooks-Gunn, 2009). Activity involvement may look the same on the surface, but adolescents’ outcomes may differ according to their portfolios. For instance, sports participation may be connected to self-esteem, but may be less beneficial when done exclusively. Rather, a portfolio that combines sports with other activities is associated with higher levels of self-esteem (Kort-Butler & Hageven, 2011). Youth with portfolios characterized by low levels of participation tend to have the poorest outcomes, whereas those with portfolios characterized by cross-domain involvement tend to do the best (Linver et al., 2009). Again, breadth of involvement appears to be most beneficial to self-esteem and other indicators of positive youth development.

Differences by Gender and Race/Ethnicity

Gender is one factor to consider in understanding these associations. There are different patterns of participation, such that boys are more likely than girls to participate only in sports, while girls tend to participate in more activities and have greater breadth (Eccles et al., 2003). However, several studies find no appreciable sex differences in the benefits associated with participation, suggesting that both boys and girls benefit from extracurricular participation. Participation may have different meanings for boys and girls (Crosnoe, 2002), contributing to subtle differences in how participation affects self-esteem. For example, research suggests that athletic participation may be more relevant for enhancing boys’ self-esteem, whereas participation in non-athletic activities may be more relevant for girls’ self-esteem (Gadbois & Bowker, 2007).

A youth’s race or ethnicity is another factor to consider, though research has yielded inconsistent findings. Darling (2005) found that whites were more likely to be involved in extracurricular activities than African Americans, while Hispanics had the lowest rates of involvement. In contrast, Pedersen (2005) found no race differences in activity portfolios. The research is similarly mixed for well-being outcomes. For example, in one study white males showed higher levels of self-esteem associated with sports participation than do African American males, but there was no racial difference for females (Tracy & Erkut, 2002). In contrast, several other studies indicate no substantial differences by race (e.g., Marsh & Kleitman, 2002).

Overall, there is a relatively consistent relationship between extracurricular participation and measures of well-being that transcends gender and race (Mahoney et al., 2006). There may



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be some variation related to the type of activity and the outcome measured, but this remains underexplored. Additionally, not much research specifically explores socioeconomic effects, though studies that take these variables into consideration still find a positive relationship between involvement and well-being (Darling, 2005). Youth from families of higher socioeconomic status participate at greater rates, although youth from families of lower socioeconomic status may benefit more from participation relative to their peers (Marsh & Kleitman, 2002).

What We Need To Know

Having established a basic relationship between self-esteem, similar measures of positive youth development, and extracurricular involvement, we need more information about the nuances of the relationship. First, different domains of activities can have distinct organizational characteristics, emphasize different skills, and vary in the nature and quality of adult and peer relationships. However, research has only begun to explore what experiences within activities may enhance (or harm) an adolescent's self-esteem (Hansen et al., 2003). Second, although benefits may be universal to an extent, age, gender, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, as well as factors related to self-selection and social location, may contribute to participation and self-esteem in ways that are less understood. Finally, extracurricular participation has been associated with a wide variety of well-being indicators. Self-esteem may act as a bridge between participation and physical, mental, and behavioral health outcomes.

WHAT WE CAN DO: PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS

Support but Don't Force Extracurricular Participation

Extracurricular involvement is one social arena in which adolescents can establish and develop personal identity, in part by choosing activities they feel reflect who they are (Barber et al., 2001). When the activities in which an adolescent participates support an identity, particularly when they fit with an adolescent's actual talents, participation validates a sense of self (Feldman & Matjasko, 2005). Based on the empirical evidence, the impulse may be to push an adolescent into an activity for his/her own good; such an approach is unlikely to have any substantial benefits for self-esteem.

Imagine a girl whose parent enrolls her in an art class. The teen may have little interest in art and as time progresses finds she has little talent for it. Each class is met with increasing frustration, exhibiting class projects is unnerving, and the social reaction is discouraging. Or, imagine a teen boy enrolled on a sports team. He may have begrudgingly agreed, but quickly finds he does not have the appropriate skill set. Over the course of the season, he attends games with little enthusiasm, his teammates and coaches may isolate him from play, and he receives negative feedback from a variety of sources. For either of these young people, this specific extracurricular participation would be unlikely to benefit self-esteem and may in fact harm self-worth.

Instead of "making" a teen do some activity, consideration of—and conversation about—the adolescent's interests and talents should guide activity selection. In early adolescence, this may mean experimenting with a variety of activities. In mid- to late-adolescence, this may mean focusing more time and energy on the activities the adolescent thinks best reflects who he/she is. At the same time, adolescents should be encouraged to avoid a narrow focus. For example, the student who only plays sports, even if he/she plays three different sports, is less likely to experience lasting benefits compared to the student who plays a sport, volunteers regularly, and reports for the school newspaper. Experiences across a variety of domains provide more opportunities for personal and interpersonal development. While parents should probably avoid over-scheduling an adolescent, if the adolescent is making that



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Instead of "making" a teen do some activity, consideration of—and conversation about—the adolescent's interests and talents should guide activity selection.

decision, breadth of participation will likely foster and reinforce a positive self-image.

Create and Support a Climate for Positive Youth Development

Taken in this light, individual choice matters, and options are important. The question is not, "Is the teen doing some extracurricular activity in order to 'build character'?" Rather, the question becomes, "How does the interaction among the characteristics of the teen, the chosen activity, family and social network support, and the socio-cultural context promote engagement and well-being?" (Gilman et al., 2004). Asking this question reorients the conversation by placing less focus on what the adolescent is (or is not) doing and more focus on what adults and communities can do. What is necessary is a family, school, or community environment that encourages trying new things, provides access to a variety of activities regardless of individual financial barriers, and places equal social value on those activities. Such an environment is conducive to adolescents' desire to participate, and consequently to their development. This process is facilitated by collaboration across different activity domains within an organization and by communication across different organizations (Pedersen et al., 2005). As much as feasible, adult and youth leadership from groups around the school and community should create partnerships that support a climate for activities directed at positive youth development.

Within extracurricular activities, there should be sincere emphasis placed on positive youth development, including self-esteem. Certainly, young people are more engaged when presented with new, challenging, and interesting activities, but what those specifically entail varies across domains. However, in any activity, teens should have the opportunity to contribute to decision-making (such as providing input on rules and activity plans) to experience leadership roles, and to join in teamwork and/or community service with adults and peers, all of which have been linked to positive results (Abreton et al., 2004).

Beyond providing activities that are fun, challenging, and appropriate to the skill level of the adolescents, the adult leader's attitude and interaction style is central to adolescents' engagement with the activity (Mahoney et al., 2009). When too much emphasis is placed simply on the development of a specific skill or on a finite outcome (like winning), lasting positive results are unlikely. Rather, to promote positive youth development, adults should use an authoritative style, characterized by appropriate expectations

(and consequences) for behavior, emotional support, and a willingness to solicit and listen to adolescent input. Overall, the evaluation literature suggests that activities that provide safe environments (with appropriate rules and expectations), supportive environments (with caring adults), and empowering environments (where adolescents encounter challenging experiences and opportunities for personal growth) yield positive outcomes for young people (Catalano et al., 2004; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). When designed with positive youth development in mind, structured extracurricular activities provide adolescents the opportunities to learn and practice intellectual, physical, and social skills useful across social settings (Eccles et al., 2003). Within such activities, adolescents can find a relatively safe space to experience and manage developmental and interpersonal challenges. Through involvement, they have the opportunity to belong to a socially valued group, to

build supportive adult and peer networks, and to participate in and contribute to their community. We should think about structured extracurricular activities as contributing to an array of developmental, social psychological, and interpersonal factors that together promote well-being and self-esteem. ↪



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