

Watch Study Report

Wisconsin Center for Education Research

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University of Wisconsin-Madison

What is the Watch Study?

The hours right after school—3:30 to 6:30 p.m.—are a critical time in the lives of young teenagers. It is an ideal time of day to discover and develop new interests and talents. It is also the time period when young people are most likely to get in trouble. That is why there's a lot of interest in providing high quality after-school programs for middle school youth, so they can use this time creatively and productively.

Communities offer many after-school options for young teens--from programs at the school to programs at the Y or community centers, sports teams, church related activities, and youth organizations such as scouting or Boys/ Girls Clubs. To see how these programs benefitted young people, a group of scientists at the University of Wisconsin-Madison conducted a study. Funded by the C.S. Mott Foundation, the study compared a group of middle school students who were involved in after-school programs to students not active in any such programs.

Nearly 200 8th-grade students from 8 schools in three Midwestern communities took part in the study. Each one wore a special watch for one week in the fall, and again in the spring. The watch was programmed to beep at random times in the after school and evening hours and on weekends. Each time it beeped, students completed a short questionnaire about where they were, what they were doing, and who they were with. Across all participants, this gave us over 12,000 "snapshots" of the out-of-school lives of young teens. This report provides a first look at our findings, based on the analyses completed so far.

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What Do Teens Find Most Appealing in After-School Programs?

People have hoped that after-school programs give teens a chance to participate in more constructive and exciting activities than they would if left to their own resources. The Watch Study provides strong evidence that this is true. Students were much more likely to be doing homework, participating in sports, involved in academic enrichment or arts activities, and doing community service when they were at programs than when they were home or somewhere else. Watching TV and eating, which were common activities among students not attending programs, were rarely reported while students were at programs.

Of course, students found that some activities were more engaging than others. By engaging, we mean activities that students reported as especially interesting and enjoyable, but that also demanded a lot of concentration. Looking just at the times that participants reported being at after-school programs, they were most

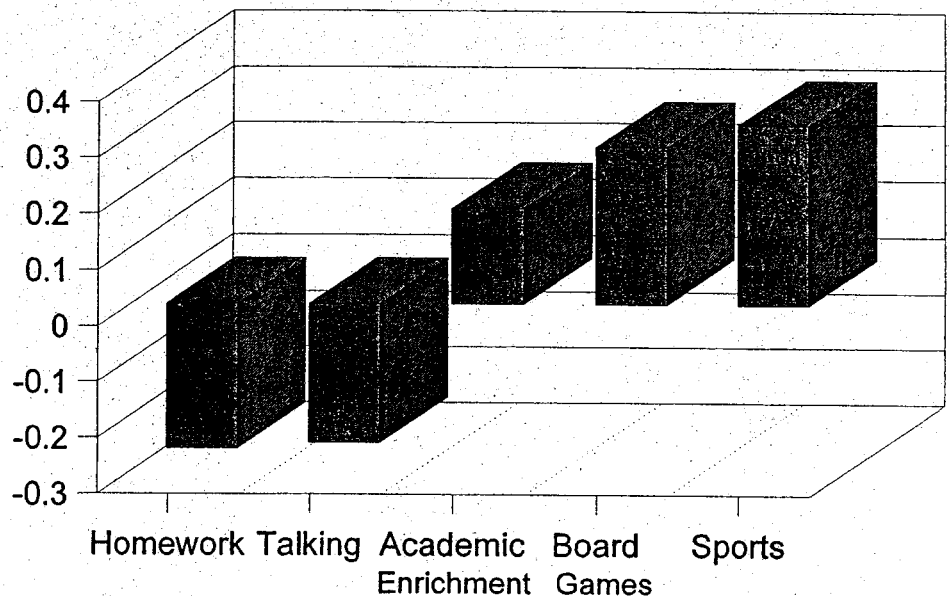
engaged in activities that they rated as highly challenging and offering a lot of choice.

The activities that students found most engaging included organized sports, academic or arts enrichment, and sit-down games. They were less engaged when just talking with peers or waiting for activities to begin. Homework was rated as low in engagement, even though students admitted it was an important thing to do.

The teens in the study were likely to be most engaged when doing something with *both* adults and peers—and least likely to be engaged when doing something just with peers.

What does this mean? To really capture students' interest, after-school programs need to be more than just a place to do homework or hang out with peers. Students become most engaged when they are involved in well organized, structured, and challenging activities with both peers and adults.

How Engaging are Activities?



NOTE: Activities with negative scores were below average in engagement

Is Hanging Out with Friends Really a Bad Thing for Teens?

"Idle hands are the devil's playground," so the old saying goes. There is a lot of concern that youth who do not have something constructive to do after school will hook up with friends and do things that will get them in trouble. Several research studies have found that, in fact, the more time teens spend with peers, the more likely they are to report being involved in illegal activities. Does this mean that hanging out with friends is really a bad thing for teens?

We thought the answer to that question might depend on *where* teens spent time with friends, and how much time they spent in adult-sponsored activities. Our sample included youth who were involved in organized programs after school and teens who reported spending no time in such programs.

Not surprisingly, the activities that teens reported doing with friends while they were in organized youth programs were much more constructive than the

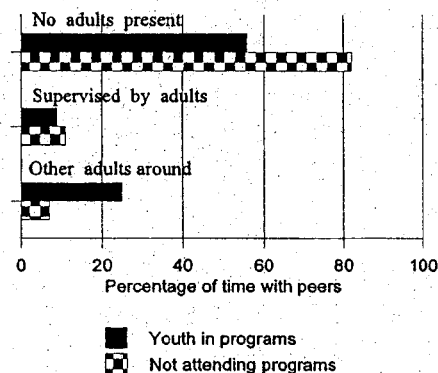
things they did with friends when they weren't in such programs. Activities also varied a lot more.

When they were away from adults, however, teens tended to spend a lot of time with friends just talking. They spent very little time in constructive activities--homework, hobbies, practicing a sport, volunteering in the community, or doing chores. But most importantly, when away from adult supervision, there was a good chance that time spent with friends involved delinquent activity. This was not true when teens were in organized activities. In these supervised contexts, time spent with peers was not related to amount of delinquent behavior.

We also thought there might be a carry-over effect, such that spending time in organized programs after school would protect youth from negative peer influences, even when they were away from the program. This was not true. Whether teens participated regularly in after-school programs or didn't participate at all, the more *unsupervised* time they spent with peers, the more illegal

activities they reported. This means that one of the most important things that after-school programs provide for middle school students is a supervised environment in which they can engage in constructive activities with friends.

How often are adults present when youth are with peers?



Spending Time with Parents Can be Fun, Teens Say.

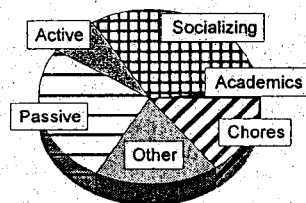
Want a sure-fire way to embarrass a teenager? "Make them go out in public with their parents!" many people might say. But it really isn't true. Doing things with their parents may not be a teen's favorite activity, but adolescents still spend a lot of time with parents--about a quarter of their out-of-school time in our study.

What do young teens do with parents? That depends on whether they are with mom, dad, or both parents. The most common activities done with mothers and with both parents together are eating or talking. Teens also spend a fair amount of time with their mothers shopping, doing chores, watching TV or playing games. Mothers also help with home-work-- a little more often than dads do. It was unusual, however, for students in our sample to report doing more vigorous

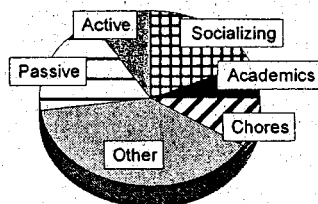
leisure activities, such as sports or dancing, with their mothers. With fathers, teens were most likely to be doing what we called "passive" leisure activities: watching TV, playing board games or computer games. But dads were also more

involved with teens in active pursuits, such as sports. Talking or eating happened much less often with fathers than with mothers or both parents together.

How Teens Spend Time With Parents



Not With Parents



Note: "Active" pursuits include sports, dancing, singing, or other physical activity. "Passive" pursuits include TV, video or board games, leisure reading, attending sports events or concerts.

The activities that teens seemed to enjoy doing most with their parents were

passive leisure pursuits (TV, computer games, board games) and socializing (eating or just talking together). On the other hand, they reported that attending religious services or volunteering in the community were the most challenging and important things they did with parents. Curiously, the things teens most enjoyed doing with parents were activities that they regarded as unimportant. This means that the activities were done, basically, just for the pleasure of parents' company.

What's the bottom line? Young adolescents still spend a fair amount of after-school time with parents, and they enjoy a lot of this time together. But mothers and fathers differ not only in the amount of time they spend with teenage children (mothers spend more) but also the types of activities they do with children.

Of course, not all young people followed the same pattern. For example, the amount of after-school and weekend time teenagers reported being with parents when they were beeped varied from no time at all to as much as three-fourths of the time. These findings show us the important role that families play in their adolescents' lives after school.