

Adolescent Activities and Family-Related Transitions

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Academic research and popular press accounts note two potentially competing trends in childhood, adolescence and the transition to adulthood: youth are either “growing up too fast” (by being over-scheduled in various extracurricular activities) or “failing to launch” (by returning to their parents’ home and delaying movement into family and career). This paper assesses these two notions by investigating rates of family formation by activity participation in adolescents. Preliminary results using a nationally representative longitudinal sample of over 11,000 respondents (Add Health), suggest that, on average, youth who participate in activities are less likely to be married, cohabiting, or parents by young adulthood, with differences in each transition by activity types.

Two divergent theories of change surround childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood: one school of thought (Mintz 2004; Lareau 2003) suggests that childhood and adolescence have been profoundly changed by the contemporary focus on time spent in organized and structured activities. On the policy end, focus on the role of activities in “positive youth development” (Barber, Eccles, and Stone 2001; Damon, Menon, and Cotton 2005; Eccles, Barber, Stone, and Hunt 2003; Eccles and Barber 1999; Lerner et al 2005) has spawned initiatives aimed to engage youth in out-of-school opportunities in programs such as the 21st Century Community Learning Centers initiative¹ and, in the teen years, in after-school jobs as part of the Preparing the 21st Century Workforce initiative². Critics of this focus on organized activities suggest that youth are “overscheduled” or “growing up too fast” (Elkind 2001).

At the other end of the spectrum, popular press accounts disparage “boomerang children,” adult children who return to live in their parents’ home one or several times throughout young adulthood (Furman 2005; Shaputis 2004) and adult children who never grow up to gain full independence (epitomized by Hollywood in the 2006 film “Failure to Launch”). Here, scholarly interest

¹ See <http://www.ed.gov/programs/21stccclc/index.html> for a description of these programs.

² See <http://www.youthrules.dol.gov/> for a description.

has focused on the changing nature of the transition to adulthood, with consensus on the extended period of “emerging adulthood” (Arnett 2004) and the “age of independence” (Rosenfeld 2007).

According to these theories, young adults are staying in school longer, marrying and starting families later, and delaying entry into career-type work. Moreover, they are enjoying the freedoms afforded by having little dependence on (or by) others through residential instability (between parents, cohabiting partners, roommates, and living on their own).

However, these two lines of research are seldom drawn together (Furstenberg 2000). Does participation in activities really speed up movement into adulthood – are kids involved in numerous activities literally growing up faster than their less-engaged peers? Or are some youth more prone to the instability and extended transition to adulthood *because* they did not build leadership skills or independence through activities (as often cited as benefits of out-of-school activity participation)?

Data

In order to test the proposition that activity participation may actually hasten or delay full movement into adult roles, data are needed that record adolescent activity participation as well as the transition to adulthood – the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health affords the advantage of a large, longitudinal and nationally representative sample that allows for this analysis. Beginning as a school-based sample of over 90,000 adolescents in grades 7-12 in the 1994-95 school year, three waves of in-home interviews have been completed with a fourth wave in process. Data used here are drawn from the in-school survey, the wave 1 in-home interview (conducted in 1994-95 with over 20,000 adolescents) and the wave 3 interview (conducted in 2001 with 15,000 original respondents). My final sample consists of 11,276 adolescents who completed the in-school survey and both in-home interviews. Over half (5699) of these respondents, age 18-26 at the wave 3 interview have transitioned to marriage (10%), cohabitation (30%) or childbirth outside of a cohabitation or marriage (12%). A

fourth wave of data has been collected and is currently being processed on young adults now between 24 and 32 years old. I plan to use this fourth wave, if available, to complete the project.

In the in-school surveys, adolescents report on their participation in thirty-three different school-based athletic and extra-curricular activities, as well as measures of delinquency. These items include:

- Language clubs: French, German, Latin, Spanish
- Academic clubs: math, science, history
- Sports teams: baseball/softball, basketball, field hockey, football, ice hockey, soccer, swimming, tennis, track, volleyball, wrestling, cheerleading/dance, other sport
- Music groups: band, chorus or choir, orchestra,
- Other clubs/groups: book club, computer club, debate team, drama club, Future Farmers of America, newspaper, honor society, student council, yearbook, other club or organization
- Delinquency: tobacco use, alcohol use, drunkenness, truancy, fighting

Preliminary Results

Preliminary results suggest significant differences in family formation by adolescent activity participation. First, adolescents who had ever tried alcohol in high school have lower rates of marriage (relative to other transitions) and this relationship grows stronger when considering frequency of alcohol use. Additionally, adolescent smokers have significantly higher rates of cohabitation than non-smokers (42% compared to 26%). In contrast, those who exercised three or more times per week in adolescence were significantly less likely to make a family-related transition than those who exercised less frequently or not at all.

Results for academic-related extracurricular activities are summarized in the Table 1, indicating significant differences between participants and non-participants. Overall, participants in academic clubs are no different than non-participants in marriage in young adulthood and are more likely than non-participants to have made any family-related transition. Indeed, for nearly every activity listed, participants are more likely than non-participants to have made any family-related transition. Here, the exceptions are debate (where participants are less likely to have cohabited by wave 3) and cheerleading. Cheerleading stands out as the only activity in which participants are more likely to have a child (without marriage or cohabitation) and are less likely than non-cheerleaders to have not made any family-related transition. Likely the hyper-sexualized and highly gendered culture of cheerleading explains this finding.

Planned Additional Analyses

Before the PAA meetings, I will explore these relationships in greater detail using event history analysis to determine the timing of these transitions across activities. Additionally, I will incorporate socio-demographic characteristics of individuals into multinomial regression models to determine the relationship between activity participation and SES. Here, I believe separate analyses by gender may be warranted as participation in many high school sports is restricted (or highly segregated) by gender. In this analysis, I will engage theories of cultural capital (DiMaggio 1982; DiMaggio and Mohr 1985; Hagan 1991; Kaufman and Gabler 2004) to compare my analysis of family-related transitions to these analyses of status attainment.

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Table 1: Family Formation by Adolescent Activities

	<u>Married</u>	<u>Cohab</u>	<u>Baby</u>	<u>None</u>	<u>Participation</u>
Academic					
Math	N	N	Y (-)	Y(+)	3.58%
Science	N	N	Y (-)	Y(+)	3.80%
French	N	N	N	Y(+)	3.92%
Computer	N	N	N	Y(+)	2.77%
Music					
Band	N	Y(-)	Y(-)	Y(+)	13.05%
Orchestra	Y(-)	N	Y(-)	Y(+)	1.95%
Athletic					
Base/Softball	Y(-)	N	Y(-)	Y(+)	17.75%
Basketball	Y(-)	Y(-)	N	Y(+)	21.08%
Football	Y(-)	N	Y(-)	Y(+)	12.83%
Hockey	Y(-)	N	Y(-)	Y(+)	1.99%
Soccer	N	Y(-)	Y(-)	Y(+)	7.88%
Cheerleading	N	N	Y(+)	Y(-)	9.94%
Swimming	Y(-)	N	N	Y(+)	5.28%
Tennis	Y(-)	Y(-)	Y(-)	Y(+)	4.75%
Track	Y(-)	N	N	Y(+)	13.15%
Extracurricular					
Drama	N	N	N	Y(+)	7.29%
Debate	N	Y(-)	N	N	2.36%
Newspaper	Y(-)	Y(-)	N	Y(+)	4.59%
Student Council	Y(-)	Y(-)	N	Y(+)	8.56%
Honor Society	N	Y(-)	Y(-)	Y(+)	10.47%

Source: National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health. N=11276