



Activity-specific pathways among duration of organized activity involvement, social support, and adolescent well-being: Findings from a nationally representative sample



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ABSTRACT

Using data from $N = 10,148$ American youth ($M_{\text{age}} = 15.18$) who participated in the National Comorbidity Survey Adolescent Supplement, we tested whether duration of involvement in specific organized activities was associated with different sources of social support, and whether these links explained the health-related benefits affiliated with participation. Duration of involvement in certain activities was differentially associated with support from peers, teachers, and other adults, and many of these links partially mediated associations between involvement and well-being. Specifically, greater duration of sports involvement was indirectly associated with higher self-esteem and greater physical activity through greater adult support. Greater duration of club involvement was indirectly associated with greater physical activity through higher adult support and greater duration of music involvement was indirectly associated with lower substance use and greater self-esteem through greater teacher support. Prolonged engagement in specific activities may cultivate certain types of supportive relationships, which may promote adolescent well-being.

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Participation in organized activities such as sports, music, honor society, student council, yearbook, and clubs is an important component of positive youth development (PYD; Mahoney, Larson, & Eccles, 2005). Organized activity involvement provides youth with opportunities to learn new skills and abilities, develop self-confidence, and establish high-quality social relationships. Research supports the promotive effects of organized activity involvement, and has shown that greater participation is associated with multiple indices of health and well-being, including higher self-esteem, lower depression, and lower substance use (Darling, 2005; McHale et al., 2005). The benefits of organized activity participation may be especially pronounced for youth who have been involved for a greater duration of time, which may allow continued exposure to the social and developmental assets affiliated with the activity (Darling, 2005; Fauth, Roth, & Brooks-Gunn, 2007).

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One health-related benefit of prolonged engagement in organized activities is the ability to establish broad networks of social support. Sustained involvement in organized activities may provide youth with the time and opportunity to cultivate supportive peer and adult relationships, which may in turn promote physical and psychological health (Bohnert, Fredricks, & Randall, 2010). Some evidence suggests that supportive relationships with activity leaders may partially explain associations among overall activity involvement and lower engagement in substance use (Viau, Denault, & Poulin, 2015). However, specific types of organized activities provide distinct developmental benefits (Farb & Matjasko, 2012), which may include differential access to social support from peers, teachers, and other non-parental adults. Less is known about whether duration of involvement in specific organized activities offer opportunities to cultivate a diverse network of social support, and whether these associations explain the health and well-being benefits of involvement. Using a large nationally representative sample, we examined whether duration of participation in specific organized activities (sports, music, newspaper/yearbook, student council/honors society, clubs/organizations) was associated with multiple sources of social support (peer, teacher, other adult), and whether these associations partially explain the health and well-being benefits affiliated with activity involvement.

1. Organized activity involvement and positive youth development

The majority of research examining organized activity involvement within a PYD framework has been guided by ecological theoretical models. These models posit that development occurs through bidirectional interactions between individuals and multiple elements of their contexts, including families, peers, schools, and communities (Overton, 2013). Organized activities represent one element of youths' micro-ecological context that encompasses several adult-led organizations, including sports, music, honor society, student council, yearbook, and clubs. Participation in these activities is theorized to provide adolescents with several resources that promote positive adjustment (Mahoney et al., 2005), and youth involved in organized activities report lower internalizing and externalizing symptoms, higher academic achievement, and higher levels of civic engagement compared to those uninvolved (Darling, 2005; Ferris, Oosterhoff, & Metzger, 2013; Fredricks & Eccles, 2006).

Researchers have also argued that organized activity involvement is multidimensional, and adolescents may participate in organized activities at varying levels of breadth, intensity, and duration (Bohnert et al., 2010). *Breadth* of organized activity participation refers to the number of specific activities in which youth are involved. *Intensity* typically refers to the average number of hours or weeks spent within each activity, and *duration* references the number of calendar or school years spent in each activity. Greater breadth, intensity, and duration of organized activity involvement are theorized to provide youth with distinct benefits, and each of these dimensions may independently contribute to PYD (Vandell, Larson, Mahoney, & Watts, 2015).

2. Duration of organized activity involvement and adolescent health and well-being

The majority of research on organized activity involvement has focused on breadth or intensity (Farb & Matjasko, 2012), thus the focus here is on duration. Duration of activity involvement may be particularly relevant for adolescent self-esteem, physical activity habits, and substance use. Developing skills and abilities that promote health and well-being often requires time. Greater duration of organized activity involvement provides youth with longer exposure to the benefits affiliated with participation, which may allow greater time to acquire resources that enhance well-being and practice health-related skills. This may include assimilating with the cultural milieu of certain activities, building self-competence within a given craft, and establishing positive relationships with peers and community members (Bohnert et al., 2010). Additionally, greater duration of activity involvement (as opposed to breadth or intensity) increases the likelihood that the assets affiliated with participation will overlap with developmental differences in youths' motivations for adopting certain skills such as positive physical health habits (Garcia et al., 1995). Empirical evidence supports links between duration of specific organized activity involvement and adolescent health and wellbeing. Whereas greater duration of involvement in clubs (including student government) and arts is associated with lower substance use and higher self-worth, greater duration of involvement in sports is associated with higher levels of substance use but lower depression (Fauth et al., 2007; Fredricks & Eccles, 2006). Prolonged engagement in sports, clubs, and arts may offer youth distinct contexts, features, and structures that differentially promote health and well-being (Farb & Matjasko, 2012).

3. Duration of organized activity involvement and social support

One way duration of organized activity involvement may promote health and well-being is by providing opportunities to acquire social support from community adults, teachers, and peers (Simpkins, Eccles, & Becnel, 2008). Some evidence suggests that greater duration of overall activity involvement is associated with greater support from activity leaders and better integration into activity peer groups (Viau et al., 2015). However, it is unknown whether these links extend to a broader range of social support and whether certain activities facilitate the acquisition of social support better than others. Involvement in specific activities may provide youth with opportunities to cultivate social support from several diverse sources. For instance, involvement in sports, music, and student council may offer more frequent opportunities to talk with teachers outside of the classroom (Broh, 2002), which may include conversations about upcoming or past performances or ways the student body can improve the curriculum. In contrast, adolescents' involvement in clubs often provides opportunities for community

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