



Leisure activities and adolescent antisocial behavior: The role of structure and social context

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The goal of this study was to understand better how the structure and social context of adolescent leisure activities relates to antisocial behavior. A representative sample of 703 14-year-olds and their parents were assessed concerning adolescent involvement in community-based leisure activities, peer and adult social relations, and antisocial behavior. Results showed that participation in highly structured leisure activities was linked to low levels of antisocial behavior, while participation in activities with low structure (i.e. a youth recreation center) was associated with high levels of antisocial behavior. Overall the results were similar for boys and girls; however, the combination of involvement in a low structured activity and the absence of any highly structured participation appeared especially problematic for boys' antisocial behavior. Participants of low structured activities were also characterized by deviant peer relations, poor parent-child relations, and they received low support from their activity leader compared to adolescents engaged in more structured community activities. Findings are discussed in terms of their implication for prevention research.

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Introduction

The majority of an adolescents' waking time is spent engaged in leisure activities (Csikszentmihalyi *et al.*, 1993). There are many possible ways that leisure time is consumed, ranging from highly structured (e.g. competitive sports teams) to relatively unstructured pursuits (e.g. watching television). Available evidence indicates that some forms of adolescent leisure activities are correlated with antisocial behavior (i.e. criminality, aggressive behavior, alcohol/drug use, delinquency, school dropout). However, the literature is conflicting with regards to the direction of association. Adolescent leisure pursuits have been linked to short-term and long-term decreased (e.g. Mahoney, 2000), increased (e.g. McCord, 1978), and trivial relations (Hirshi, 1969) to antisocial behavior. The goal of the present study is to identify and evaluate characteristics of leisure activities that may be associated with increases or decreases in adolescent antisocial behavior.

Background

A number of studies have shown that adolescent activity involvement may decrease antisocial behavior and related outcomes. Rationales for why participation may reduce antisocial behavior and related outcomes include: structuring the youth's time (Brown, 1988; Osgood *et al.*, 1996), providing links to competent adults and peers (Csikszentmihalyi *et al.*, 1993; Fletcher *et al.*, 1997), building existing skills and interests (Jones and Offord, 1989; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Mahoney, 2000), and creating opportunities within the social system

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where students feel competent and accepted (Eder, 1985; Eder and Parker, 1987; Kinney, 1993).

Longitudinal evaluation of adolescent leisure activity involvement and adjustment provides the most compelling evidence for an associated reduction in antisocial behavior. Jones and Offord (1986, 1989) conducted a preventive intervention for impoverished youth in Canada. A primary intervention component was opportunity to participate in various community activities directed by highly skilled adults. The findings revealed significantly lower rates of aggression and antisocial behavior among youth who participated. Mahoney (Mahoney, 2000; Mahoney and Cairns, 1997) showed that boys and girls with multiple adjustment problems who subsequently became involved in school extracurricular activities were significantly less likely to dropout of school as adolescents or become arrested for a criminal behavior as young adults. A prevention study conducted by Allen and colleagues (Allen *et al.*, 1997) found that adolescents participating in voluntary community service showed significantly better long-term adjustment than non-participating youth.

Evidence in the opposite direction is also available. Youth leisure activities have been conceived of in terms of "attractive diversions" from school and related academic pursuits (Marsh, 1992), as catalysts for socioeconomic-based exclusion (Hollingshead, 1949) and peer rejection in the school (Evans and Eder, 1993), and have been correlated with increased antisocial behavior (Greenberger and Steinberg, 1986; Osgood *et al.*, 1996). For example, the longitudinal Cambridge-Somerville Study (McCord, 1978; 1992) included an intervention for high-risk youth that involved participation in summer camps and community clubs. Initial assessments showed somewhat higher alcohol problems, mental illness, and poorer physical health for treated youth. A long-term follow-up 30 years after initial treatment showed significantly worse outcomes for treated participants (i.e. crime, psychiatric disturbance and death). Likewise, Helmersson Belmark and Andersson, (1999; Andersson, 2000) found that frequency of involvement in government-sponsored youth centers was correlated with higher rates of alcohol problems and related maladjustment from adolescence to adulthood. Other studies investigating drug use and delinquency have found little evidence for positive benefits related to youth activity involvement (e.g. Hirschi, 1969; Greenberger and Steinberg, 1986; Schincke *et al.*, 1991; Polakowski, 1994; Botvin, 1996).

Structure and social context in adolescent leisure activities

Why the difference in findings between these two sets of studies? At least three aspects of adolescent leisure activities may contribute to the discrepancy: structure, social context and conventionality. In our view, each of these aspects can be considered as continuous dimensions. Youth leisure pursuits can range from having virtually no structure to being highly complex, solitary/non-cooperative pursuits to collaborative group engagement, and societal condemnation to public and financial support by the community or broader cultural unit of influence. Generally, youth leisure pursuits linked to decreased antisocial behavior have offered high structure, emphasized skill-building in the area pursued, and have brought together youth from a range of competencies (cf., Mahoney, 2000). Leisure pursuits associated with no benefit or with negative outcomes for the participants have tended to include, or focus exclusively upon, activities in the low end of one or all of these aspects.

Several features characterize highly structured youth leisure activities. These features include: regular participation schedules, rule-guided engagement, direction by one or more adult activity leaders, an emphasis on skill development that is continually increasing in complexity and challenge, activity performance that requires sustained active attention, and

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