

## Are Activities for Youth Effective as a Substance Abuse Prevention Strategy?

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### CONTEXT

A list of substance abuse prevention strategies was made in 2012 for use by DHS grantees in Minnesota, outlining which would *not* likely be approved for implementation. One of the strategies listed was “Alternative Activities” such as a drug-free dance or other recreational activity. This type of strategy is sometimes proposed by communities as a way to address youth boredom or lack of adult supervision, which may contribute to substance use.

Research cited in the 2012 list, for this strategy type, indicated there was no evidence of these activities impacting the intervening variables of the DHS-funded grant project. MPRC was asked to conduct a search for any new or additional research on alternative activities as a prevention strategy.

### ASK MPRC RESPONSE

MPRC was not able to find studies, published after 2012, which directly address this question. MPRC’s search did find several studies and literature reviews, not directly cited in the DHS list, which are relevant to the question.

Themes from the studies MPRC found:

- **Limited adult supervision is a risk factor for substance use and other problem behaviors.** Adult supervision and relationships with caring adults are associated with positive developmental outcomes such as less substance use, academic achievement, and reduced criminal arrests. (Mullhall, Stone, and Stone, 1996; Richardson, Radziszewska, Dent, and Flay, 1993)
- **The association between substance use and participation in activities is unclear.** Several studies found mixed and somewhat contradictory results. (Darling, Caldwell, and Smith, 2005; Mahoney and Stattin, 2000; Jenkins, 1996)
- Several researchers interpreted their **findings to suggest peer behavior is a stronger contributor to use than activity participation.** (Mahoney and Statin, 2000; Jenkins, 1996; Mahoney, 2000)

### ARTICLE SUMMARIES

#### 1) Adult supervision

Mullhall, P. F., Stone, D., and Stone, B. (1996). Home alone: Is it a risk factor for middle school youth and drug use? *Journal of Drug Education*, 26, 39-48.

- This study found that youth “...who were home alone two or more days per week were four times more likely to have gotten drunk in the past month than those youth who had parental supervision five or more times a week.”
- Differences between youth with and without adult supervision were also found for cigarette smoking, inhalants, and marijuana use.

Richardson, J. L., Radziszewska, B., Dent, C. W., and Flay, B. R. (1993). Relationship between after-school care of adolescents and substance use, risk taking, depressed mood, and academic achievement. *Pediatrics*, 92, 32-38.

- This study found youth who were unsupervised at home after school to be slightly more likely to engage in tobacco, alcohol, and marijuana use than those who were supervised at home.

#### 2) Unclear association between use and activity participation

Darling, N., Caldwell, L. L., and Smith, R. (2005). Participation in school-based extracurricular activities and adolescent adjustment. *Journal of Leisure Research*, 37, 51-76.

- Youth who participated in extracurricular activities reported slightly less marijuana use (p. 64, 67, 71). However, this difference was not found when prior marijuana users were removed from the data set. The researchers interpreted this to suggest the difference may be due to extracurricular activities being more appealing to non-users, rather than a result of participation in the activity.
- Youth who participated in extracurricular activities both years of the study showed a larger increase in alcohol use than youth who did not participate (p. 66, 71).
- In a comparison of sports and non-sports activity participation, the data suggested athletic activities may be more associated with drinking than other activities.
- Overall the study found extracurricular activities to benefit academic achievement (p. 72).

Mahoney, J. L. and Stattin, H. (2000). Leisure activities and adolescent antisocial behavior: The role of structure and social context. *Journal of Adolescence*, 23, 113-127.

- The study defined structured activities as those which had an adult leader, met consistently, and convened groups of similar age youth. Unstructured activities were those available at Swedish youth recreation centers which had a wide variety of things to choose from, minimal adult direction, were available to youth of all ages, and did not have a schedule (p. 117).
- Participation in structured activities was found to be associated with low involvement in “antisocial behavior” indicators, which included getting drunk. Participation in unstructured activities was found to have the opposite association (p. 119).
- However, there was no association with antisocial behavior for the category of youth who participated in both structured and unstructured activities (p. 123).
- Youth who participated in unstructured activities, more often than those who did not, reported they had peers who were older, stayed out late, were doing poorly in school, and had been apprehended by police (p. 122 – 123).
- The researchers interpreted these findings to suggest it is not necessarily the type of activity youth participate in but with whom. “...it may be better to be uninvolved than to participate in an unstructured activity... (p. 123).”

### 3) Peer Behavior

Jenkins, J. E. (1996). The influence of peer affiliation and student activities on adolescent drug involvement. *Adolescence*, 31, 297-306.

- The researcher in this study concluded that while extracurricular involvement did correlate with student drug use, a more significant predictor of substance use was whether friends used.

Mahoney, J. L. (2000). School extracurricular activity participation as a moderator in the development of antisocial patterns. *Child Development*, 71, 502-516.

- “Participation in school extracurricular activities was associated with reduced rates of early dropout and criminal arrest among high-risk boys and girls. The decline in antisocial patterns was dependent on whether the individuals' social network also participated in school extracurricular activities.”



## Ask the Minnesota Prevention Resource Center

The Minnesota Prevention Resource Center (MPRC) works to enhance the capacity of substance abuse prevention professionals in Minnesota. MPRC often receives research questions and prepares in-depth answers. Many of these questions, such as the one found above, deserve to be shared widely, and are published as part of this series.

Do you have a question for MPRC? Email [info@mnprc.org](mailto:info@mnprc.org) or call 651-646-3005.