...*Information about non-participation in out-of-school time programs from the youth perspective.*

WHY TEENS ARE NOT INVOLVED IN OUT-OF-SCHOOL TIME PROGRAMS: THE YOUTH PERSPECTIVE

Mary Terzian, Ph.D., M.S.W., Lindsay Giesen, B.A., and Kassim Mbwana, M.P.P.

OVERVIEW

To better understand why youth do not participate in out-of-school time programs, Child Trends invited adolescents who were not affiliated with out-of-school time programs to participate in a Youth Roundtable discussion. [1] This Roundtable provided an opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of what program qualities are important to increase and maintain participation in out-of-school time programs. Youth identified 19 issues relating to barriers to participation and program improvement strategies. Barriers to participation ranged from a program being located in an unsafe or unfamiliar neighborhood to participation in a program being perceived in a negative light by parents and/or peers. Program improvement strategies ranged from teaching youth practical skills and addressing family issues to offering a variety of activities and hiring skilled, experienced staff. These findings should offer valuable insights to program providers and funders about program planning and design.

BACKGROUND

Involving children and adolescents, particularly those from low-income families, in out of school time programs can be a challenging task. It is estimated that children whose families live below 200 percent of the federal poverty line are 3 to 4 times more likely than children from higher income families to not be involved in any out-of-school-time activities.[2] Sustaining participation in out-of-school time programs is another major challenge that out-of-school time program directors and staff face. A recent qualitative study conducted with 70 urban middle-school students suggests that adolescents drop out of out-of-school time programs because of issues related to program quality and content (for example, insufficient structure; lack of quality academic tutoring and access to fun activities, such as dance and photography; long program duration) and because of the presence of competing family and non-family-related activities (such as chores, babysitting, and participating in sports and religious activities).[3] Additional research suggests that black and Hispanic youth, as well as low-income youth, are less likely to participate in out-of-school time activities and that, when they do, they participate less frequently.[4] However, very little is known about why youth choose not to participate in the first place.[5] The Youth Roundtable sought to address this knowledge gap by interviewing urban, low-income, primarily African American adolescents about why they or their friends might not participate in after-school or summer programs.

PARTICIPANTS

Fifteen adolescents (aged 13 to 18) from Washington, D.C., participated in the Roundtable in November 2008. They were recruited by their friends and by youth development staff at local community-based organizations. To encourage discussion, two smaller groups were formed—a younger, co-ed group comprised of adolescents between the ages of 12 and 17 and an older group comprised of 18-year-old males. The majority of the youth (13 out of 15) identified themselves as African American.[6] Many participants noted that they had been in and out of different out-of-school time programs, but only five out of 15 participants (four females and one male) were currently involved in any out-of-school time program.

ISSUES DISCUSSED

During the discussions, Roundtable participants responded to a number of questions about youth participation, or a lack thereof, in out-of-school time programs. The Roundtable was organized around three main issues:
- Why youth do not participate in out-of-school time programs;
- How to recruit youth who do not participate in any programs; and
- How to make programs more accessible to nonparticipating youth.

YOUTH PERSPECTIVES – EMERGING THEMES

Roundtable participants spoke openly and shared opinions on all aspects of program operation. Nineteen themes emerged from this discussion. These themes are organized under the following topic headings: (1) why youth don't attend programs; (2) how to get youth to show up; (3) what youth want in programs; and (4) what youth want in program staff. These topics, and their subthemes, are presented below. See Table 1 for a summary.

TOPIC ONE: WHY YOUTH DON'T ATTEND PROGRAMS

Youth identified several barriers to program participation, including issues related to poverty, family dynamics, and family and peer relationships. These barriers were:

- **Lack of awareness about out-of-school-time programs.** Participants noted that many children and youth are not aware of out-of-school time programs in their communities. Older participants, especially, knew little about programs and services for youth in their neighborhoods. Despite this lack of information, the teens expressed a desire to participate in out-of-school time programs. Among the programs that they knew about and recalled with enthusiasm were those that involved hands-on learning, such as a culinary arts program that teaches students how to cook and a learning center that couples academic instruction with a broad array of enrichment activities.

- **Concerns about neighborhood safety**. Young people in both groups said that neighborhood safety plays a key role in decisions about whether to participate in out-of-school time programs, especially when participation requires traveling through numerous neighborhoods. These safety concerns are compounded by drug and substance abuse problems that are prevalent in some neighborhoods. In one Roundtable member's words,

"Some of the kids' parents probably don't trust that neighborhood, so they don't send them to that program…they just want them to go straight home."

Youth relationship dynamics and a fear of gang violence also impinge upon young people's willingness to participate in out-of-school time programs. Roundtable participants agreed that youth would not go to a neighborhood where they did not know anyone, because they would not be wanted there. Several of the youth also mentioned the existence of "'hood beats" —groups of youth who frequent specific streets and venues. These groups usually do not intermingle; and therefore teens in one group would not want to attend a program located in another group's territory, where they would be viewed as outsiders.

- **Lack of caring adults.** Both groups cited a lack of positive and caring adult role models as a reason for non-participation in out-of-school time programs. One teen mentioned that someone might not want to participate because "no one respected them or paid attention to them when they were younger, and they wonder why people would care now." This perception suggests that having a history of good peer and adult relationships may increase the likelihood that a young person will decide to invest in a program, an idea that is echoed in the section of this brief on ideal program staff. (See Topic Four.)

- **Financial problems; need to work or care for siblings.** Other barriers noted by both groups were inadequate household income and the pressure of family responsibilities. Parents who were at work during out-of-school time hours often relied on their older children to take care of their younger siblings. Other youth used out-of-school time hours to work and supplement household income or earn pocket change. In addition, some teens mentioned the cost of transportation as a hindrance to program participation. Others thought that earning a stipend for attending out-of-school time programs would increase participation rates. The idea of using incentives to boost program attendance is touched on later in this brief. (See Topic Two.)

- **Negative Perception or Stigma**

  Their own perceptions. Roundtable participants in the older group mentioned several other reasons for their own non-participation. Some said youth did not want to participate in out-of-school-time programs because they perceived them to be work-intensive and not fun. Others said youth chose not to participate in some programs because they felt the programs emphasized recreational activities at the expense of activities that had more academic rigor, such as tutoring and homework sessions. These divergent interests suggest a need for varied types of activities and/or programs.

  Parents' perceptions. A parent's poor impression of a program can also be a barrier to youth participation. Roundtable participants mentioned that some parents had reservations about programs that were not clearly structured around enhancing academic achievement by providing tutoring or scheduled time for completing homework. Parents often looked at the quality of the staff and its ability to "provide the right tools" to ensure academic success for their children. Therefore, using parents to increase youth

participation in programs might prove to be an effective strategy if parents are convinced of the benefits of this participation.

Peers' perceptions. Teens in both Roundtable groups mentioned that peers' negative perceptions of out-of-school time programs might dissuade some youth from participation in these programs. In other words, if participating in a certain program, or any program, is seen as "uncool," youth will be less likely to attend. Tutoring programs were mentioned as a potential source of embarrassment because participation runs the risk of sending a message to peers that the person being tutored is stupid or a "nerd". All participants mentioned a need for sensitivity among teachers or mentors who want to enroll students in tutoring services. The teens pointed out that if peers overhear a teacher recommending tutoring services to a student, it could lead to teasing.

TOPIC TWO: HOW TO GET YOUTH TO SHOW UP

Recruitment is one of the biggest challenges that out-of-school time program administrators must address. Teens said they often heard about out-of-school time programs in school announcements geared towards helping them fulfill high school requirements. They also found out about out-of-school time programs by going to community centers in their neighborhoods and by talking to their friends. Overall, Roundtable participants felt that programs could be more creative about reaching more youth. Whereas the teens thought that announcements during school hours and word of mouth could continue to play a key role in program recruitment and advertising, they also suggested some additional strategies to reach more youth. In particular, they recommended that programs:

- **Use peer recruiters.** Peers generate the most buzz about a program, and were deemed the most reliable source of information. All participants agreed that they were more likely to trust peer reviews of a program than almost anything else. The use of program ambassadors—peers who currently participate in the program—is known to be an effective peer recruiting strategy.[7]Although one participant also noted that teens might accept a coach's opinion about a program, most participants agreed that they would be less likely, if at all, to listen to a program recommendation made by a teacher or a parent.

- **Use engaging advertisements.** When asked if flyers are a good way to get young people's attention, Roundtable participants' responses were mixed. Teens in the younger group agreed that, for a flyer to successfully spark their interest and prompt them to follow up, it should be funny, big, and include pictures and text that send the message "There's something here for everyone." Those in the older group echoed these sentiments, stating that flyers should be "flashy" and "cool". They also said that flyers should be distributed at places like concert venues, urban clothing stores, electronics stores, and at subway and bus stops, or should mailed directly to young people's homes. T-shirts were also mentioned as another way to advertise out-of-school time programs, with wearers, in essence, serving as walking billboards for these programs.

- **Use electronic media.** Roundtable participants also noted that the use of electronic media, such as the online social networking sites Facebook and MySpace, could be additional means of reaching youth, as could radio and television programs targeted at

youth. Participants added that out-of-school time programs could be featured in local radio and television programs, and parents could be reached using advertisements aired during community news shows. It was noted that youth are also responsive to local artists and musicians who promote activities to youth. One older student cited a popular rapper's promotion of voting on high school campuses as an example of an effective strategy for reaching and retaining young people's attention.

- **Involve parents.** Some teens in the older group thought that involving parents early in the recruitment process was important in getting teens to participate. For example, parents and teens could learn about different out-of-school time programs in their communities at cookouts or parties, as well as during parent-teacher conferences. Schools could also convene community meetings to talk about varied out-of-school time programs.

- **Improve parents' perceptions.** When asked about how parents perceive out-of school time programs, most Roundtable participants reported that parents generally like having their children involved in such programs—saying their parents were happy to have them participate in any activity that kept them "off the streets." One teen noted that a parent might be willing to give any program a chance if it encourages youth to do positive things and make positive influences.

  However, others mentioned that some parents may have a negative perception of the program, not knowing whether their children would have adequate supervision and/or exposure to negative peer influence.

- **Use incentives.** Finally, Roundtable participants agreed that the use of incentives (such as food, transportation tokens or services, and other "free" commodities or benefits) would encourage them to attend a program. Providing snacks was important because teens are usually hungry after school and are accustomed to eating at this time. Some programs also offer points for participation that youth can cash in for free goods.

TOPIC THREE: WHAT YOUTH WANT IN PROGRAMS

Roundtable participants mentioned several program characteristics that they felt would make out-of-school time programs more appealing to them and to their nonparticipating peers. Several of these characteristics correspond with youth reports already published in the literature on out-of-school time.[8] Roundtable participants agreed that out-of-school time programs would be more successful at engaging and retaining youth if they took the following actions:

- **Build in flexibility.** Teens in the younger group described frustration about the rules established at some out-of-school time program sites. Some programs regulate how much time participants spend doing homework, where they are allowed to eat, what clothes they can wear in the gym, and how much time they are allotted to use certain facilities. Teens in this group described a preference for activities that are less structured and more relevant to their interests. In the words of one participant, programs and staff need to "let kids be kids." However, we know from research on effective programs that it is also important to balance flexibility with age-appropriate supervision and structure.[9]

- **Offer a variety of activities.** Roundtable participants emphasized the need for programs to offer a variety of activities that appeal to both genders and to different ages. Youth in the older group expressed an interest in programs that offer a balance among academics, sports and leisure, and hands-on learning experiences. The younger group suggested activities such as playing video games, working on arts and crafts projects, participating in dance and sports, taking cooking and computer lessons, and receiving some sort of job training. Basketball, football, boxing, weight training, ping pong, and other sports and related physical activities were also mentioned. Sports tournaments were also suggested; teens thought they would offer the opportunity for youth to meet kids from different neighborhoods and make new friends. Roundtable participants also observed that providing youth with opportunities to compose music, learn a musical instrument, act, make movies, or engage in journalism could provide hands-on learning experiences that could offset the rigors of tutoring or completing homework assignments while involved in an out-of-school time program. Participants also repeatedly suggested field trips as a way to boost regular attendance and youth engagement.

- **Portray the program accurately.** Related to the issue above, Roundtable participants emphasized the importance of describing program activities accurately, so that young people could decide to participate based on a true picture of what the program offered. If that does not happen, young people might feel that they have been misled.

- **Teach practical skills.** Participants also stressed a need for opportunities to learn and practice important practical and job-related skills. For example, programs might offer computer, software, and information systems job-skills training, as well as vocational training. Making solar-powered cars was suggested in one group. Participants also noted that young people want programs to connect them with jobs or internships that give them professional experience and skills to help them support themselves after high school. Thus, they were seeking activities and programs that would help them become more self-sufficient, but that were also dynamic and fun.

- **Address family issues.** Participants in the older group suggested that programs could also address family issues, such as dealing with a parent or family member who was addicted to drugs or alcohol, improving communication skills between youth and their parents, and teaching parenting skills to teen parents.

- **Offer a convenient location and hours.** Participants were split on the ideal access to out-of-school time programs. Some preferred that these programs be established in neighborhoods as close as possible to their homes, while others preferred "safer" venues, such as local churches and universities. They also thought that the most convenient times for out-of-time programs were after 4 p.m. and ending between 6:30 and 8 p.m. These times would enable students to have at least half an hour to relax between when school would let out and when a program would start. Participants also expressed the view that convenient Saturday hours for programs to be held would be between 12:30 and 6 p.m., while convenient Sunday hours would be between 2:30 and 4 p.m.

TOPIC FOUR: WHAT YOUTH WANT IN PROGRAM STAFF

Participants in the Roundtable also discussed the need for programs to have high-quality staff. When asked what an ideal staff person might look like, they answered that it would be someone who treats young people with respect and who is skilled at working with youth.

- **People who treat youth with respect.** Participants in the older group noted that youth want to be treated with respect by program staff. To them, being treated with respect meant being treated in a developmentally appropriate way. Thus, staff members would listen to what they had to say and allow them to have more responsibility and freedom than they allowed younger participants in the program. Youth in the Roundtable also described frustration with the occasionally stringent rules that characterized some programs. According to one participant, the restrictions some programs placed on teens' activities and movements conveyed the message that teens could not be trusted.

- **People who are skilled at working with youth.** Participants preferred having program staff members who work well with youth in that they are able to maintain boundaries, are not too strict, and structure program activities in an organized way. Skilled staff members should also be good leaders, role models, and mentors, Roundtable participants agreed. Some teens mentioned that they preferred individuals who have children themselves because "they know how to treat kids." These staff members were thought to be more capable of relating to the issues youth face in their daily lives. Additionally, participants emphasized that youth want program staff to teach them and model how to strike a balance between work and play. A few members of the older group also described an interest in adults who could teach them about parenting. An unskilled staff person was described as someone who has trouble maintaining boundaries (i.e., acting like a peer) or someone youth in the program might consider a peer or in their age group (e.g., a high school student).

Table 1: Summary of Roundtable Themes			
Why Youth Don't Attend Out-of-School-Time Programs	**How to Get Youth to Show Up**	**What Youth Want in Programs**	**What Youth Want in Program Staff**
1. Lack of awareness about out-of-school time programs 2. Concerns about neighborhood safety 3. Financial problems/need to work or care for siblings 4. Lack of caring staff 5. Negative perception of program/stigma of "not cool"	6. Use peer recruiters 7. Use engaging advertisements 8. Use electronic media 9. Involve parents 10. Improve parents' perceptions 11. Use incentives	12. Build in flexibility 13. Offer a variety of activities (age and gender appropriate) 14. Portray the program accurately 15. Teach practical skills 16. Address family issues (e.g., drugs) 17. Offer a convenient location and hours	18. People who treat youth with respect 19. People who are skilled at working with youth

CONCLUSION

Out-of-school time programs can provide valuable supports to the positive development of children and youth.[10] These programs can help cultivate social and emotional skills, and further students' academic achievements. Furthermore, the safe environment provided by out-of-school time programs can offer children and youth, especially those living in disadvantaged urban areas, a welcome retreat from the streets and a place to be with friends.

Analyzing parent report data from the 2003 National Survey of Children's Health (NSCH), Child Trends estimated that ten percent of teens in higher-income families do not participate in any activities, compared with 30 percent of teens in families living below 200 percent of the federal poverty line.[11] Most Youth Roundtable participants implied that they have experienced financial problems, which could decrease the chances that they will participate in programs, as could "'hood beats" and other safety concerns. However, youth in situations and environments similar to those experienced by the Roundtable participants might benefit the most from out-of-school time programs in that they provide stable environments in which young people can meet, grow, and interact with each other.

Overall, Youth Roundtable participants mentioned numerous and varied reasons why youth do not get involved and eagerly shared their thoughts on how program providers can increase and maintain participation. For example, using peer recruiters, involving parents, offering activities for a variety of interests, and hiring competent, respectful staff are all ways to increase program recruitment, participation, and retention. While many at the Roundtable expressed frustrations with available programs, all of the participants voiced a clear desire to be involved in out-of-school time programs and requested that more opportunities be made available to them.

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ENDNOTES

[1] This roundtable was conducted as part of our work with Atlantic Philanthropies and was not intended for dissemination. However, because we felt these findings were of interest to program providers, we decided to share them with the practice community.

[2] Theokas, C., & Bloch, M. (2006, December). Out-of-school time is critical for children: Who participates in programs? (*Research-to-Results* fact sheet).Washington, DC: Child Trends.

[3] Okeke, L. Attrition in adolescent after-school programs: Addressing the concern via interviews with program dropouts. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 3*(3).

[4] Bouffard, S. M., Wimer, C., Caronongan, P., Little, P. M. D., Dearing, E., & Simpkins, S. D. (2006). Demographic differences in patterns of youth out-of-school time activity participation. *Journal of Youth Development, 1*(1).

[5] Borden, L. M., Perkins, D. F., Villarruel, F. A., & Stone, M. R. (2005). To participate or not participate: That is the question. In H. Weiss and P. Little (Eds.), *New directions for youth development: Conceptualizing participation in out-of-school time -programs*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

[6] Six out of eight participants in the younger group and all seven participants in the older group identified themselves as African American. The other two participants self-identified as Moroccan and 'Other'.

[7] Lauver, S. C., Little, P. M. D. (2005). Recruitment and retention strategies for out-of-school-time programs. *New Directions for Youth Development, 105,* 71-89.

[8] Chaskin, R. J., & Baker, S. (2006). *Negotiating among opportunity and constraint: The participation of young people in out-of-school-time activities.* Chicago: Chapin Hall Center for Children.

[9] Little, P. M. D. (2007). The quality of school-age child care in after-school settings. *Research-to-Policy Connections (7).* New York: Child Care & Early Education Research Connections.

[10] Zarrett, N., & Lerner, R. (2008, February). Ways to promote the positive development of children and youth (*Research-to-Results* brief). Washington, DC: Child Trends.

[11] Theokas, C., & Bloch, M. (2006, December). Out-of-school time is critical for children: Who participates in programs? (*Research-to-Results* fact sheet).Washington, DC: Child Trends.

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