

Thriving During the Teenage Years - Importance of After School Activities

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After the school day has ended, it is estimated that 40 percent of young people's time is often unstructured, unsupervised, and unproductive (Carnegie, 1992). Several studies have documented increases in a variety of at-risk behaviors for youth during the hours immediately after school, especially between 3:00 and 6:00 P.M. When youth participate in quality after school programs, the benefits are dramatic.

Dr. Beth Miller (Miller, 2003) summarized the research on after school program participation, which found that after school program participation reduced negative behaviors (e.g. juvenile delinquency, substance abuse, dropout rate, conflicts between youth, school suspensions) and increased attitudes and behaviors linked with school success (e.g. better school behavior, better emotional adjustment, better work habits, improved relationships with parents, improved grades).

While many families routinely involve their elementary-age children in after school programs, there is a significant drop-off among middle and high school youth in after school activity participation. Ironically this is often when after school program participation is most critical, as the percentage of students who are unsupervised significantly increases at this time. For example, 23 percent of 10-year-olds spend some time caring for themselves compared to 44 percent of 12-year-olds (Capizzano et al., 2000). There is also overwhelming evidence that many students experience a marked decrease in school engagement during the middle school years. Data on nearly 100,000 students from the Search Institute suggests "the middle school years are typically a time of lowered interest, motivation, and effort in school" (Scales & Leffert, 1999). During the middle school years, children are also going through dramatic physical, emotional and cognitive changes, transitions that translate into new potential strengths as well as new risks (Dryfoos, 1990; Jackson & Davis, 2000).

Duffett and Johnson (2004), in a survey of youth in middle and high school grades, found that even youth concur with the importance of after school program participation. Seventy-seven percent of the youth surveyed agreed "a lot of kids get into trouble when they're bored and have nothing to do." Eighty-five percent agreed that kids who participate in organized activities such as a team or a club after school are "better off" than those who have a lot of free time on their hands.

In addition to school-sponsored athletic and club opportunities, trusted community agencies offer a wide variety of after school activities for youth including: YMCA of Boulder Valley (www.ymcabv.org), local parks and recreation departments (e.g. City of Boulder: www.BoulderParks-Rec.org), local libraries (e.g. City of Boulder: www.boulder.lib.co.us), September School (www.SeptemberSchool.org), Project YES in Lafayette (www.project-yes.org) and TEENS Inc. in Nederland (www.teensinc.org). In addition, the Boulder Valley School District offers a Community Opportunities for Youth Directory that is available online (www.bvsd.org/coy).

While it is important not to over schedule youth, striking a balance between productive time and down time is an important component to overall emotional adjustment and success in life.