

Motivations and Barriers to Participation in Youth Programs

Janel Digby, Graduate Research Associate & Theresa M. Ferrari, Extension Specialist
Ohio Buckeye Clover Graham, October 2005

Evaluations of some after-school programs show a low level of participation, and consequently, they do not achieve the projected outcomes. Because of the potential benefits that youth experience, there is much interest in ensuring that they participate in programs at a high enough “dosage” to produce the desired results. Positive outcomes of youth program participation may include academic achievement, social development, and fewer risk-taking behaviors. Furthermore, program participation may allow youth to explore new interests while developing friendships with peers and caring adults. Youth also have the opportunity to take on challenging leadership roles and build a sense of self-esteem independent of their academic talent.

Several recent publications have been devoted to the topic of participation in youth programs (Volume 12, Issue 2 of *The Prevention Researcher* and Spring 2005 issue of *New Directions for Youth Development*). The main points are summarized here.

Overall, youth participate in programs to meet their needs for autonomy, competence, and connectedness. Reasons why youth join and continue in youth programs:

- activities are fun
- environment is safe and encouraging
- enjoy developing positive relationships with friends and adult leaders
- participate in meaningful program activities not offered in the regular school day
- learn life skills
- homework assistance and being actively engaged in learning activities
- opportunity to develop character, confidence, and self-esteem

Potential barriers:

- Too busy and lack time to participate
- Responsibilities such as a job or taking care of family members
- Hold negative views towards youth programs, such as they are boring or are perceived to be for “little kids.”
- Parents/guardians may constrain youth from participating, for cultural or other reasons
- Too shy or have a poor self-image
- Desire to relax and “hang out” with friends in more unstructured settings
- Lack of money to pay for programs

Although there are some common motivations and barriers, there also may be those that are specific to a local community. Needs assessment helps to ensure that programs are tailored to local needs, and there is something additional to be gained simply from asking youth their perceptions. Consideration of motivations, barriers, and unique needs will help to ensure good programs for youth.

A copy of this article, with references, may be found at www.ohio4h.org/fferrari/2005publications.html.

References

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