

**THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN
OUT-OF-SCHOOL ACTIVITIES
AND POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT:
AN INVESTIGATION OF THE INFLUENCES OF
COMMUNITIES AND FAMILY**

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ABSTRACT

There is growing evidence that participation in constructive leisure activities facilitates positive youth development. Empirical evidence also supports the influence of families and communities on positive developmental outcomes for adolescents. This study examined the relationship among attitudes toward family and community, participation in structured out-of-school activities, and pro-social behavior. As predicted, community aspects such as opportunities available and the attitudes the youth held toward the community, as well as their attitude toward family were predictive of activity involvement. Activity involvement, in turn, was predictive of pro-social behavior. Attitude toward family was also predictive of attitude toward the community. Attitude toward community was a direct predictor of the positive developmental outcome of pro-social behavior, although contrary to the original hypothesis, family influences did not have a direct effect on pro-social behavior. Implications for continued practice and change for a variety of sectors in the positive youth development field such as educators and educational institutions, youth-serving organizations, families, and policy makers are discussed, along with recommendations for continued research in this field.

Despite growing evidence that participation in constructive leisure activities facilitates positive development, little developmental research has been conducted on constructive leisure compared to other contexts. Research on youth tends to fall into the realm of "how do things go wrong" versus "what is going right." As a result, we have a multitude of research on how to curb drug use, violence, teen preg-

A version of this manuscript was presented at the 2003 National Council on Family Relations Annual Conference, VanCouver, Canada. The authors gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Erin Chapman in coding the data and providing insightful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

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Family Therapy, Volume 32, Number 2, 2005
Libra Publishers, Inc., 3089C Clairemont Dr., PMB 383, San Diego, CA 92117

nancy and other problem behaviors, but we lack a concrete idea of how to promote positive youth development. In general, studies of adolescent behavior are dominated by naming, measuring, and predicting problem behaviors (Pittman & Irby, 1998; Scales, Benson, Leffert & Blyth, 2000; Zeldin, 1995). This research is useful in prevention work with youth; however, as is oft-quoted in the literature, "Problem free is not fully prepared" (Pittman & Irby, 1998, p. 160). The territory of positive developmental outcomes, as contrasted with that of risk behaviors, has been less explored (Scales et al., 2000); more information is necessary to move beyond prevention and toward preparation for adulthood. More studies need to be designed to expand the developmental knowledge base about various developmental phenomena such as resiliency or role modeling (Oden, 1995). Further exploration can strengthen our understanding of positive activities and the aspects of those activities that protect youth from risk as well as aiding in the determination of how to increase the competencies that adolescents need for the transition to adulthood (Larson, 2000).

Those studies that have looked at positive outcomes (rather than the presence or absence of risk behaviors) tend to look at school achievement or college enrollment (e.g., Eccles & Barber, 1999). While there does appear to be consensus on what outcomes could be considered positive and necessary for a successful transition to adulthood, there is a gap in the literature regarding these outcomes. Additionally, youth outcomes defined by Zeldin (1995, p. 47) as "developmental and career preparation outcomes" have also been overlooked. These include a positive sense of self, a sense of connection and commitment to others, and the ability and motivation to participate fully in community life.

The current study attempts to bridge several of the gaps in the current literature on positive youth development. Rather than focusing on academic achievement that is so often studied, we examine the effects of participation in structured activities on pro-social behavior. Pro-social behavior is characterized by attitudes and behaviors conducive to helping others such as caring, kindness, and altruistic behavior (Roker, Player, & Coleman, 1999). In addition, the roles of community and family as they affect the types of youth activities is examined. Youth live their lives in a variety of contexts and environments—many of them overlapping—such as family, peers, school, work, and community. Circumstances from each of the different environments have an impact on youths' preparation for, and success at, navigating the transitions inherent in their development (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2000). This study attempts to look at the paths between family, community, and activities as they affect positive youth development.

The results of this study and the discussion that follows can be applicable to a variety of sectors in the positive youth development field such as educators and educational institutions, youth-serving organizations, families, and policy makers. Implications for both continued practice and change are discussed, along with recommendations for continued research in this field. We focus on the value rather than the shortcomings of youth with the belief that this emphasis can provide useful starting points for continuing the valuation of our nation's future.

Community and Family Influences

Families and communities are primary venues for youth development, yet the capacity of families and communities to support such development varies greatly (Newman, Smith, & Murphy, 1999). Family influences have a positive impact on youth development in a variety of ways (Larson, 2000). Family values can be transmitted, and parents can have a significant impact on the way in which their children think about responsibility, obligations, and their role in the helping of others (Pancer & Pratt, 1999).

The role of community in the attainment of assets that lead to positive outcomes for youth has been less studied, although it is becoming a more consistent topic in the current literature. Given that some researchers believe socialization strategies in the broader community may be more influential than how youth perceive their families (Benson, Leffert, Scales, & Blyth, 1998), the role of community appears to warrant further investigation. When looking at youth who should have failed but did not, several common characteristics appear: caring adults, high expectations, and opportunities to participate (Pittman & Irby, 1998). Community has an important influence on problem behaviors in that it may provide the context in which problems express themselves; conversely, communities contribute resources to healthy adolescent development in a number of ways.

Community provides opportunities for youth to learn how to act in the world around them—to explore, express, earn, belong, and influence through such venues as school-sponsored programs, national youth-serving organizations (i.e., 4-H, Girl Scouts, Boys and Girls Clubs), and religious and/or volunteer organizations (Newman, Smith, & Murphy, 1999). Other examples of community opportunities conducive to successful development include access to locations for constructive leisure-time activities such as parks, libraries, and community centers (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2000).

In order to develop a sense of connectedness and productivity, and to begin making decisions from a perspective that is less egocentric,

young people need opportunities to participate in groups of interconnected members (such as clubs, teams, churches, and theater groups) which encourage them to take on responsibilities and master challenges (Roth, 2000; Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2000). Youth also need opportunities to try new roles, and contribute to family and community (Pittman & Irby, 1998). When "healthy" opportunities to belong are not found in their environments, youth will create their own (often less healthy) alternatives. Similarly, Zeldin (1995) notes that youth appear to get into serious trouble when they have too much unsupervised time.

Research has demonstrated that young people's self-perceptions, values, and skills are influenced by their relationships and the contextual constraints or opportunities available to them (Leffert et al., 1998). Thus, early adolescence, in particular is a crucial period during which community resources can have a positive impact on them and their families (Scales, 1997). The presence of various ecological supports has been linked to positive developmental outcomes for youth (Scales, Benson, Leffert, & Blyth, 2000). For example, Hobson and Spangler (1999) reported that the religious or spiritual activities available in a community may be resources for positive youth development as they enhance associations among community members, create community unity, and provide sustained sources of activities for youth. Additionally, resilient children have been reported as having more access to supportive teachers, clergy, neighbors, and other caring adults outside the family (Benson, Leffert, Scales, & Blyth, 1998). Youth exposure to multiple settings and connectedness to multiple support networks such as family, school, and community serves as an important protective factor against a variety of risk behaviors such as violence, substance abuse, and sexuality (Benson et al., 1998).

A healthy transition to adulthood results from a complex process that runs through childhood and adolescence. Current theory suggests that young adolescents need opportunities for physical activity, development of competence and achievement, self-definition, creative expression, positive social interaction with peers and adults, a sense of structure and clear limits, and meaningful participation in authentic work (Quinn, 1999). While adults may believe that youth are not interested in spending quality time with them or in structured activities, focus group findings show otherwise. Youth do want to spend their out-of-school time in activities that engage their hearts, minds, and bodies, and they want to contribute to the work of the larger society. They also want to have fun (Quinn, 1999). This congruency between what youth want and what appears to lead to positive youth outcomes

provides us with the opportunity to engage them in the types of activities that lead to a successful transition to adulthood. However, more is needed than just knowing what youth want. We need to determine if the opportunities to meet their needs and expectations exist and if the community at large is accepting of and accepted by the youth.

Activities

Larson (2000) notes that there is a heterogeneous array of extracurricular, community, and self-directed activities that can be part of youth activities—each with distinct opportunities and processes. Various researchers in the positive youth development field define activities in differing ways. Some, such as Leffert et al. (1998), refer to “constructive activities” that can be divided into creative endeavors, participation in youth programs, and with religious community. Structured positive youth development activities have also been defined as those that have established standards of performance (Newman, Smith, & Murphy, 1999) or that require effort and provide a forum for expressing one’s identity or interests, such as sports, performing arts, and leadership activities (Eccles & Barber, 1999). These structured or constructive activities are contrasted with “relaxed leisure” which has no structure and is not demanding (such as watching television).

Ideal activity has been defined by Leffert et al., (1998) as involving at least three hours per week in creative pursuits, at least three hours per week in youth programs, at least one hour per week in religious activities, and at least one hour per week in service to others. Similarly, Roth and Brooks-Gunn (2000) reported that engagement in extracurricular activities of at least one to four hours per week reduced health-compromising and risk-taking behaviors. In addition to the amount of time deemed beneficial, Quinn (1999) discusses assigning youth leisure based on outcomes; programs that have demonstrated successful youth outcomes are those that (1) promote pro-social values; (2) build leadership, decision-making, and problem-solving skills; and (3) involve hands-on education and cooperative learning. In determining if a program fosters youth development, the following can be considered: whether amount of time spent in the program is adequate; whether types of activities build on the strengths of young people and are challenging; whether contact with positive role-models is provided, and whether supervision or structure is available. Based on prior research, it appears that certain questions need to be answered when determining categories of activity. Does the activity provide an avenue for goal setting, developing plans, and empathizing with others? Is competition emphasized? Are their expectations for performance? Are adults avail-

able as role-models and leaders to provide structure? Are connections developed that integrate youth into adult society?

Positive Youth Development

Determining which activities promote positive youth development and which do not is an important focus of the majority of articles on positive youth development. Outcomes considered as positive are frequently defined differently by different authors, although similarities can be found. Roth (2000) describes positive youth development as encompassing five constructs: (1) competence in academic, social, and vocational areas; (2) confidence; (3) connection to family, community, and peers; (4) character; and (5) caring and compassion. These are also known as the five Cs of positive attributes for youth (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2000). Components of positive youth development as defined by Larson (2000) include creativity, leadership, altruism, and civic engagement. Scales et al. (2000) stress characteristics rather than qualities, stating that healthy development reflects some of the developmental tasks of physical health, delay of gratification, valuing diversity, and overcoming adversity.

Positive developmental outcomes are also reported in the literature in terms of types of activities; for example, studies often report on specific activities such as religious participation, school-sponsored activities, sports, drama or performing arts, or volunteer work. Since productive use of time plays a role in successful adolescent development (Eccles & Barber, 1999), by examining each activity separately, we can begin to understand the specific qualities that lead to positive developmental outcomes in youth.

Religious Activities

Hobson & Spangler (1999) found that religious and spiritual traditions support certain values such as the significance of every individual and the importance of giving to others and to the community. Additionally, spiritual practices help individuals to sustain commitment over time and through challenges. Religious participation has also been shown to enhance caring for others and to help reduce multiple forms of risk-taking (Benson et al., 1998). Further, time spent in religious activities was predictive of helping others (Scales et al., 2000). In a study of 10th graders, Eccles and Barber (1999) found that participation in religious activities had the greatest impact on positive youth development resulting in an increase in GPA, greater college attendance, and decreased participation in risky behaviors or association with risk-taking peers.

Extra-Curricular Leisure Activities

Oden (1995) studied school-sponsored leisure activities and determined that there is evidence that participation in structured leisure activities offered in the school or community setting is beneficial to overall development. Nationally, students who spend one to four hours per week in extracurricular activities are 49% less likely to use drugs and 37% less likely to become teen parents than are students who do not participate. Participation in sports is also linked to an increase in self-esteem, positive body image, and self-confidence as well as decreased incidence of depression, pregnancy, and smoking initiation (National Institute of Out-of-School Time, 2001). Posner and Vandell (1999) determined that children involved in organized after-school activities spent more time in learning opportunities, were rated by their teachers as having better work habits and better interpersonal skills, were less likely to endorse aggression as a response to peer conflict, and spent less time watching television. Similarly, time that youth spent each week in after-school activities was predictive of enhanced skill at making plans and decisions and was a meaningful predictor of two or more thriving indicators (Scales, Benson, Leffert, & Blyth, 2000). There is also an established link between adolescents' extracurricular activities and educational attainment as adults, occupation, and income (even after controlling for social class and ability), plus a reduction in delinquent and risky behaviors (Eccles & Barber, 1999).

Volunteer Activities

Demonstrated benefits of participation in volunteer activities include increased respect for others, increased altruism, development of leadership skills, and a better understanding of citizenship; these behaviors appear to carry over into adulthood (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2000). A study employing both quantitative and qualitative methods (Pancer & Pratt, 1999) found that adolescents between the ages of 16 and 20 had short-term outcomes of changes in altruistic attitudes and other personal growth areas and long-term outcomes in the development of a "volunteer identity." A qualitative study of 11th-grade students enrolled in a mandatory school-based service program found that they had increased understanding of social, moral, and political aspects of their own and others' lives during and after participation in the program (Yates, 1999). A study of mandatory participation in volunteerism by Switzer, Simmons, Dew, Regalski, and Wang (1995) examined the effects of participation on altruistic attitudes and behaviors (also defined as seeing themselves as "helpers"). The authors found that males showed im-

provement in self-esteem and depressive affect, had increased involvement in school and community, and manifested less problem behavior after participation in a year-long weekly program. Females in the study were more likely to see themselves as altruistic.

THE CURRENT STUDY

The vast majority of youth do grow into adulthood without lasting problems, although many do not acquire all the competencies they need (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2000). The present study moves away from the problem-focused paradigm that Leffert et al., (1998) point out dominates current theory, research, and practice by focusing on positive youth outcomes. Additionally, this study examines the role communities (in terms of resources and opportunities) play in adolescent development—a line of inquiry that is relatively recent and understudied. Communities are defined here in the social sense—the combination of spheres (the social network) that youth are involved in such as neighborhoods, schools, and youth-serving organizations. Opportunities include access to parks and ball fields, the presence of youth-serving organizations, and after-school activities.

As mentioned earlier, various researchers in the positive youth development field examine different constructs when looking at outcomes. The current study examines pro-social behavior (in terms of helping others). Figure 1 presents the model used to conceptualize the current study. It is based on the identified characteristics of positive youth development and the possible contributors to these characteristics. The central hypothesis is that youth involvement in structured, out-of-school activities is related to both family and community influences (both attitudes toward the community and the opportunities available in the community). Attitudes toward family and community and participation in structured out-of-school activities are related to pro-social behavior.

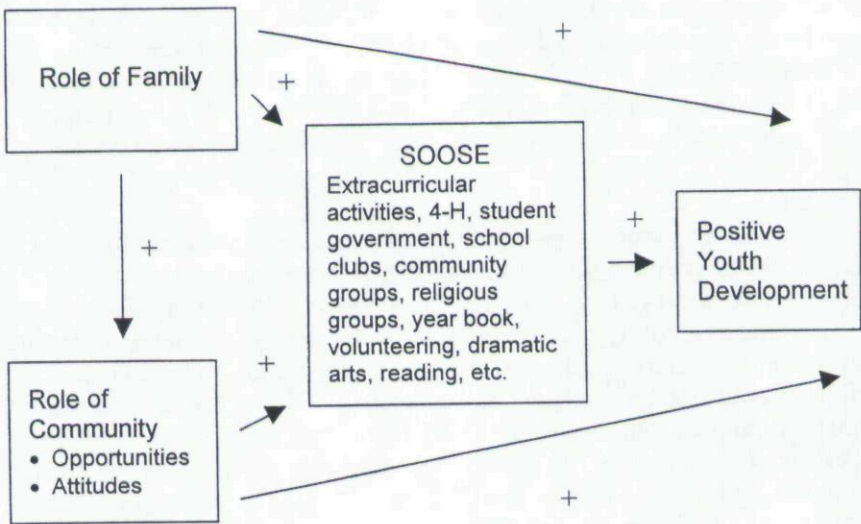
METHOD

Participants

This study used a purposive sample of 5th to 12th grade students at 14 different sites in one midwestern state in the United States. In the youth development field, knowledge of best practices comes mainly from research on youth in urban and suburban contexts (Hobson &

Figure 1

The Role of Community on Positive Youth Development



Spangler, 1999). For this reason, communities selected for this study were both rural and urban. Participants were recruited through school systems, church groups, and youth-serving organizations, and were paid \$15.00 for participation. Potential sites were located using community directories and websites until an exhaustive list of potential participants was developed. Sites were then contacted to explain the study and determine interest. All sites were contacted using a specific script until 300 participants had been located.

The overall sample of 304 youths was comprised of similar numbers of males (44%) and females (56%), with ages ranging from 10 to 18 ($M = 14.9$, $SD = 1.62$). Grade point average ranged from .50 to 4.00 with the median and mode being 3.50. Participants were primarily Caucasian (82%). Fewer numbers of African Americans (11%), Hispanics (2%), Asians (1%), and Native Americans (1%) were represented, mainly due to population trends in the state where the study took place. A small percentage (3%) of youth reported their ethnicity as mixed race. Socioeconomic status was not directly addressed, although 28% of the participants reported that they qualified for free or reduced-cost lunches.

The majority of participants (74%) lived in two-parent homes, with 58% of them residing with both natural parents. A smaller percentage

(15%) lived with their mother only, and the remainder lived in homes with father only (3%); they divided their time equally between two parents (3%), resided with grandparents or other relatives (3%), or lived in alternative situations such as foster homes (2%). Parents tended to be employed either part- or full-time outside the home (79% of fathers and 80% of mothers), and had at least a high school education (86% of fathers and 83% of mothers). Of those parents who completed high school, 45% of mothers and 37% of fathers had a college education.

Procedures

Letters were sent to the homes of the participants informing them that a researcher would be at a designated time and place (depending on the site involved) to conduct the research. Letters explained the procedure and the types of questions to be asked, and gave a contact number if the parent/guardian had any questions. The letter also explained that each participant would receive \$15.00, and informed parents of how to remove their child from the study. The letter also explained that unless the parent signed a slip denying participation, consent would be implied (tacit consent). All youths signed assent forms prior to filling out the survey questionnaire. Upon agreement to participate, the participants were given a questionnaire booklet containing the measures. All questions were filled out in the presence of the researcher.

Measures

Demographic information was assessed through the NC-1002 Pilot instrument portion of the survey. The survey was created through a collaborative effort by researchers, practitioners, and administrators of youth development programs. According to Oden (1995), ideal research on youth programs should be expanded to include research collaborations and partnerships between researchers and program directors or developers. Data on age of participant, year in school, gender, GPA, number of children in the home, current living arrangement, educational level of parent(s), employment status of parent(s), and free/reduced lunch were obtained.

Community opportunities were assessed based on participants' opinion as to whether certain activities existed in their community, such as extra-curricular activities such as sports and cheerleading, school and religious activities and groups.

Attitudes toward community were assessed using a 13-item subscale of the NC-1002. It used a 5-point scale to determine degree of agree-

ment with statements such as, "I think my community is a good place to live," "I care what my neighbors think," "People in this community get along." Reliability for this instrument was .87 coefficient alpha for this sample.

Family influence was assessed using a 5-item subscale on the NC-1002. A 5-point scale was used to determine the degree of agreement with the following statements: "My parent(s) know where I am after school," "I tell my parent(s) who I'm going to be with before I go out," "When I got out at night, my parent(s) know where I am," "My parent(s) think it's important to know who my friends are," and "My parent(s) know how I spend my money."

Structured out-of-school experiences were also assessed using the NC-1002 Pilot Instrument. Questions regarding types of activities, level of participation (such as captain, leader/officer), and amount of time spent each week in structured out-of-school activities were addressed. In addition, questions regarding amount of time spent in religious activities were asked for a total of 17 questions.

Pro-social behavior was assessed using 13 items of the Self-Report Altruism Scale (SRAS). The SRAS is a 20-item instrument that has been shown to predict altruistic behavior (Rushton, Chrisjohn, & Fekken, 1981). The scale was modified to fit adolescents (e.g., Charbonneau & Nicol, 2002).

RESULTS

In order to determine the total number of activities for analysis purposes, the number of activities for each participant was summed. Because leadership roles have been shown to have a significant impact on the benefits of involvement (Eccles & Barber, 1999), more weight was given for this activity. The pattern of activity involvement by grade in school is shown in Table 1.

Descriptive statistics and reliability analysis for study variables are reported in Table 2. Each of the scales used to measure the constructs had adequate reliability, although the Family scale was slightly lower than the recommended .70 Cronbach's alpha.

Correlations for each of the study variables are presented in Table 3. Gender was not significantly correlated with any of the variables. Grade in school was significantly correlated with Pro-social behavior ($r = .12, p < .05$), and opportunities ($r = .30, p < .01$). Grade was also correlated with Attitudes Toward Community ($r = -.16, p < .01$), although this was a negative relationship. Pro-social behavior was cor-

Table 1

Percentage of Youth in Each Activity by Grade in School¹

Activity	Grade						
	6 (23)	7 (15)	8 (38)	9 (84)	10 (97)	11 (25)	12 (18)
Band, orchestra, chorus	91	79	57	47	45	52	33
Team sports	70	93	82	56	55	44	39
Religious or church group	67	46	62	40	50	36	50
Youth or recreation groups	66	50	47	14	10	4	6
School yearbook or paper	53	31	30	9	8	24	22
Individual sports	48	87	45	44	30	24	33
Volunteering	37	14	22	13	22	12	17
Community groups	29	50	47	14	10	4	6
4-H	22	8	15	10	14	26	14
Hobby clubs	25	10	22	5	6	14	14
Academic clubs/societies	25	9	18	10	5	16	33
Service clubs	24	20	21	9	10	8	8
FTA, FHA, FFA, etc.	20	10	10	13	9	17	6
Student government	19	—	7	7	4	13	23
Other (sports-related)	14	31	18	27	30	23	33
Issue groups (i.e., SADD)	5	—	18	11	23	22	50

¹Of those youth reporting the activity was available.

Note. Number in parentheses = *n*.

Table 2

Study Variables: Descriptive Statistics and Reliabilities

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Reliability
Pro-social behavior	14.18	6.19	.82
Creativity	72.96	15.54	.90
Attitude toward community	61.16	11.14	.87
Family	16.10	4.90	.69
Opportunity	12.64	2.41	.80
SOOSE	36.62	6.89	.72

Table 3

Correlations for Study Variables (*N* = 305)

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Site	–	-.10	.14*	-.05	-.01	-.01	.02	-.02
2. Gender		–	.09	.05	-.01	.09	-.07	.03
3. Grade			–	.19*	.16**	-.07	.30**	.05
4. Pro-social behavior				–	.21**	.04	-.10	.11
5. Attitude toward community					–	.34**	-.21**	.15**
6. Family						–	-.13*	.09
7. Opportunity							–	.57**
8. SOOSE								–

p* < .05, *p* < .01

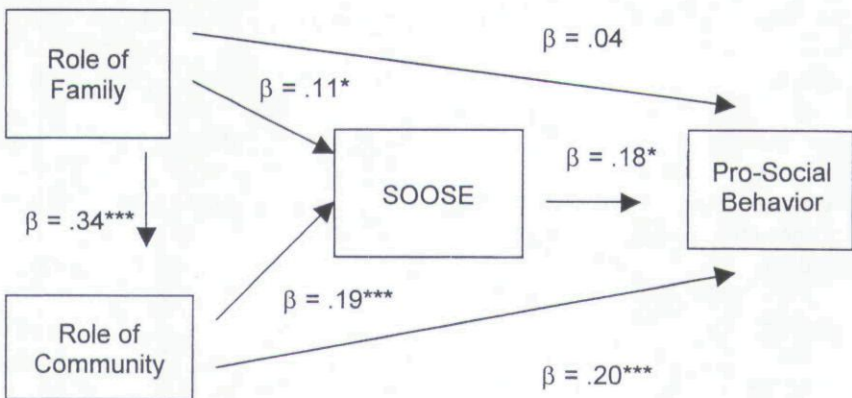
related with Attitudes Toward Community ($r = .21, p < .01$), but not with activities or opportunities. Opportunity was strongly correlated with activities ($r = .57, p < .01$). Opportunity was not positively related to either the role of Family or Attitudes Toward Community, but was actually negatively related at a significant level to both of these variables. Attitude Toward Community was positively related to both Activities ($r = .15, p < .01$) and role of Family ($r = .34, p < .01$).

Causal analysis was conducted in order to determine the amount of influence each of the variables in the model presented in Figure 1 had on the outcome of pro-social behavior. A series of partial regression equations were employed to determine each path in the model. This type of analysis obtains estimates of main path coefficients by regressing each endogenous variable on those variables that directly impinge upon it. The advantages of conducting the analysis in this manner include a measurement of both direct and indirect effects as well as allowing for the decomposition of the correlations between any two variables into a sum of simple and compound paths that may be substantively more meaningful (Asher, 1983). Figure 2 shows the results of the analysis.

The role of Family did have a significant effect on Attitudes Toward Community ($\beta = .34, p < .001$), and both Family ($\beta = .11, p < .05$) and Community ($\beta = .19, p < .001$), had direct effects on Structured,

Figure 2

The Role of Family and Community on Pro-Social Behavior



Note. Adjusted $R^2 = .16$.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Out-of-School Activities (SOOSE). Community also had a direct effect on the positive developmental outcome of Pro-social behavior ($\beta = .20$, $p < .001$). Family, however, did not have a direct effect on Pro-social behavior ($\beta = .04$, $p > .05$). Additionally, Activities mediated the effects of Family and Community on Pro-social behavior ($\beta = .18$, $p < .05$).

DISCUSSION

The current study sought to confirm the hypothesis that youth involvement in SOOSE is related to both family influences and community aspects (both attitudes toward the community and the opportunities available in the community) and that these activities affect the developmental outcome of pro-social behavior. Both the direct effects of family and community on pro-social behavior and the indirect effects of these variables were examined.

Prior to conducting path analysis, variables were examined to determine their relationship to each other. Grade in school was significantly correlated with pro-social behaviors, with students in higher grades reporting higher scores on the SRAS. One interpretation of this finding is that older students are more likely to engage in helping/pro-social behaviors. However, it is also possible that older students are more likely to recognize the behaviors they have engaged in as helpful to others. Although the SRAS was modified to reflect activities that adolescent-aged youth have the opportunity to engage in, it is possible that younger students scored lower due to lack of opportunities to participate in some of the behaviors assessed. Grade in school was also correlated with opportunities to participate—students in higher grades reported more opportunities to participate in SOOSE's. Upon examination of the activities listed in Table 1, one could conclude that several of the activities (such as student government, interest groups, or issue groups) are not available until students enter high school. Grade was negatively correlated with attitude toward community in that students in higher grades were less likely to view their community positively. This is in keeping with recent work by Rich-Harris (1998) suggesting that older adolescents begin to become more skeptical of adults and adult institutions (such as communities, schools, and families).

Pro-social behavior was correlated with attitudes toward the community. Students who scored higher on the SRAS saw their community in a more positive light. Similarly, attitude toward community was related to the number of activities involved in and attitude toward family. While youth in general may become more skeptical of adults

and adult institutions, it is possible that those who report being engaged in helping behavior, are active in SOOSEs and have a positive view of their family may avoid this skepticism.

As predicted, opportunities available in the communities and attitudes of youth toward the community were predictive of activity involvement. Attitude toward family was predictive of activity involvement as well as predictive of attitudes toward the community. Prior research has shown that both family and community attitudes are influential in determining the amount of involvement of youth in activities (e.g., Leffert et al., 1998; Scales, 1997). Families can direct youth into activities, set limits on participation, and can provide support for continued involvement. When youth feel supported by their families, they are more likely to maintain participation long enough to provide positive benefits (Larson, 2000). Communities provide the opportunities and support for activities. When youth have a variety of choices, they are more likely to find an activity that fits for them (Hobson & Spangler, 1999). The current study appears to corroborate past findings, as well as indicate that in addition to community opportunities, the way in which youth perceive their community is also an important predictor of involvement in structured activities. Attitude toward community is also a direct predictor of the positive developmental outcome of pro-social behavior. It appears that when youth have a positive view of their community, they are more likely to have pro-social attitudes supportive of helping others.

Contrary to the original hypothesis, this study found that family does not have a direct effect on pro-social behavior. While families are clearly important in many aspects of adolescents' lives, it was found here that participation in structured activities had the most significant influence on pro-social behavior. The work of Rich-Harris (1998) may provide an explanation for this finding. Adolescents spend a great deal less time with their families and much more time with their friends and in activities outside the family. Youth therefore do not see their families as influential, and may have slightly more negative attitudes toward their family at this stage of development. This is not to say that families are not important in the lives of youth, but that they may be more of a "safety net" or a backdrop to school, peers, and activities.

CONCLUSION

The findings here offer further insight into positive youth development. Rather than looking only at relationships among variables known for being associated with positive youth development, the path

analysis design aids in clarifying the direction of the relationships and pinpoints a mediating effect of activity involvement. Pro-social attitudes such as sharing, helping, and comforting are important in the development of future pro-social behaviors (Switzer et al., 1995), and knowing the factors that predict these behaviors in youth can be very helpful. Continued research is necessary, however, to further define the factors involved in positive youth development. The current study was cross-sectional in design, therefore limiting the types of information that could be assessed. Future studies that employ a longitudinal design can aid in clarifying the benefits of activity involvement and the specific characteristics of the involvement that are beneficial.

While the current study provides a picture of both rural and urban adolescents in the midwest, future studies need to include adolescents from a larger variety of communities. Clearly, this urban setting does not mirror urban settings on the east or west coast; further racial and ethnic differences may exist that were not documented in this study due to the homogeneity of the participants. It would also be beneficial to look further at socioeconomic class as a factor that influences both activity involvement and outcomes directly.

While further research will continue to refine the youth development field, the current study does have useful implications for a variety of audiences. One often hears of growing concerns about the egocentrism, antisocial attitudes, and lack of morals of adolescents. This and other studies show that youth can have caring attitudes and can engage in behaviors that provide assistance to others. Families have been scrutinized and blamed for the behaviors of today's youth, yet this study shows that while family is influential, other aspects of adolescents' environments also have a strong impact.

By fostering an atmosphere that embraces our youth and provides them with opportunities to grow and to demonstrate caring abilities, we can foster positive youth development. For families, this can include becoming involved in the structured activities of their children (perhaps as coaches or group leaders) or by providing new opportunities for activities and volunteerism. Community leaders can help parents and other family members become more involved in local activities and provide the needed facilities. Feedback from youth can be utilized for developing structured activities, and in this process they can be shown that they are valued members of the community.

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