

1. YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES: MORE THAN STUDENTS

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Although school is a critically important learning environment for school-age children and youth, in reality they spend only 20% of their waking hours there (Coltin, 1999). The majority of their time is spent at home with family members, interacting with peers, taking part in extracurricular activities, pursuing individual interests, or engaging in community or recreational activities. All of these activities can provide invaluable opportunities for *experiential learning*—“education that occurs from direct participation in the events of life” (Houle, 1980, p. 221).

The choices students make about how they spend their time outside of school can reap important benefits or result in serious negative consequences that may reverberate for a lifetime. On the positive side, in their nonschool hours, youth can choose activities that allow them to explore a wide range of interests, hone nonacademic skills, try out alternative modes of learning, earn money, or become proficient in increasingly complex activities of daily living. Perhaps most importantly, in their nonschool hours, many youth find multiple arenas in which to develop interpersonal relationships and competencies with youth and adults outside of their families, relationships that gain in importance in adolescence and are, for many, a key factor in perceptions of the quality of life (Myers & Diener, 1995).

In contrast, youth can make choices about activities and relationships that detract from their ability to perform at their best in school or that even cause harm to themselves or others. As peers take on an increasingly powerful role in adolescence, the values they share can spur youth on to positive accomplishments or to unhealthy or antisocial activities in their nonschool hours. It is sobering to note that the rate of violent juvenile crimes reportedly triples between the hours of 3:00 and 6:00 p.m., relative to earlier in the day when students are in school and supervised (Sickmund, Snyder, & Poe-Yamagata, 1997; Fox & Newman, 1998).

Opportunities for positive experiences in their nonschool hours are important for all youth, but they may be particularly critical for youth whose disabilities present challenges to their academic learning, social engagement, or functional independence. Yet, little recent information has been available on the lives of youth with disabilities in their nonschool hours.¹ This report addresses that gap in knowledge about youth with disabilities in the 21st century by addressing the following questions:

- How do youth with disabilities spend their free time—time not devoted to school or work? A broad look at the use of free time of youth with disabilities, as reported by parents, provides a general context within which to take a more in-depth look at specific experiences of youth outside of school.
- What social experiences do youth have? Friendships can enrich lives in valuable ways, and relationships with peers can contribute importantly to the social development of children and youth. Through interactions with friends, youth can learn much about themselves, as well as about negotiating skills and an appreciation of personal differences

¹ The original National Longitudinal Transition Study (NLTS) investigated some aspects of students' activities in their nonschool hours, using data collected in 1987 and 1990.

and wider perspectives. They also can engage in activities they cannot do alone, and enjoy the pleasures of shared interests.

- What organized extracurricular activities do youth with disabilities engage in at school and in the community? Taking part in organized activities can have a wide range of benefits for youth, including improved academic performance, avoidance of risk behaviors, skill development beyond the classroom, and expanded social skills.
- What are the early work experiences of youth with disabilities? As teens age, their developmental task is to gain experience with roles they will take on in adulthood. Working during adolescence, whether through a work-study program, in informal jobs such as babysitting, or in regular paid employment, can be an important introduction to the labor force and can provide a variety of experiences and opportunities to learn new skills, including the art of balancing the demands of work and school.
- How does participation in friendships, extracurricular activities, and employment relate to the level of social skills youth possess, as reported by their parents? Examining the relationships between social competencies and engagement in activities and relationships with others can aid our understanding of the choices and limits youth with disabilities have regarding the use of their nonschool hours.

These questions about the nonschool experiences of youth with disabilities are addressed with data from the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2).² NLTS2 is one component of a portfolio of longitudinal studies that span the age range of children and youth with disabilities. These studies are sponsored by the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) of the U.S. Department of Education in response to requirements of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Amendments of 1997. The legislation authorizes the “production of new knowledge” [Sec. 672(b)(1)] through a variety of federal activities, including “producing information on the long-term impact of early intervention and education on results for individuals with disabilities through large-scale longitudinal studies” [Sec. 672(b)(2)(H)].

NLTS2 is a rich source of information on the characteristics, experiences, and achievements of youth with disabilities who were ages 13 through 16 in 2000. Information will be collected about these youth five times from parents, school staff, and the youth themselves, as they transition from secondary school to early adulthood. This document is one in a series of reports from NLTS2 that will emerge over the next several years. It presents information from parents and guardians³ of NLTS2 students gathered through telephone interviews and a mail survey conducted in 2001.

Chapters 2 through 5 of this report address the dimensions of adolescent experiences outlined above: use of free time, friendship interactions, participation in extracurricular activities, and employment. Chapter 6 briefly discusses the relationships between the friendship and extracurricular experiences of youth and their social skills. The final chapter identifies key points about youth’s nonschool hours and how those experiences vary for different groups of youth. Details of the methods used are included in Appendix A. Appendix B briefly describes key characteristics of the youth with disabilities who are represented in NLTS2 and of their households. This context is important for interpreting information about them and making

² Additional information about NLTS2 is available at www.NLTS2.org.

³ For simplicity, parents and guardians are referred to as parents in this report.

comparisons with the general youth population. The final appendix provides unweighted sample sizes for the analyses reported in the data tables.

Findings reported in these chapters are presented in several ways. First, the means of continuous variables (e.g., the average hourly wage of working youth) or the overall frequency distributions of categorical variables (i.e., the weighted percentages of youth with disabilities who had different kinds of jobs) are presented. Then the distribution of each variable for important subgroups of youth is described, including those who differ in their primary disability category and selected demographic characteristics.

Readers should remember the following issues when interpreting the findings:

- **Results are weighted.** All of the descriptive statistics presented in this report are weighted estimates of the national population of students receiving special education in the NLTS2 age group, as well as each disability category individually.
- **Standard errors.** A standard error is presented for each mean and percentage in this report (usually presented in parentheses), which indicates the precision of the estimate. For example, a variable with a weighted estimated value of 50% and a standard error of 2 means that the value for the total population, if it had been measured, would, with 95% confidence, lie between 48% and 52% (plus or minus 2 percentage points of 50%). Thus, small standard errors allow for greater confidence to be placed in the estimate, whereas larger ones require caution.
- **Small samples.** Although NLTS2 data are weighted to represent the population, the size of standard errors is influenced heavily by the actual number of youth in a given group (e.g., a disability category or racial/ethnic group; those group sizes are reported in Appendix C). Findings are not reported for groups with fewer than 35 members. For groups that are reported, those with very small samples will have comparatively large standard errors. For example, there are relatively few youth with deaf-blindness, so estimates for that group have relatively large standard errors. Therefore, the reader should be cautious in interpreting results for this group and others with small sample sizes.
- **Significant differences.** Only differences between groups that reach a level of statistical significance of at least .05 are mentioned in the text; significance levels generally are noted in the text. A method for using standard errors to calculate the significance of differences between groups of interest is outlined in Appendix A.

The following chapters provide the first national picture of the nonschool experiences of adolescents with disabilities. These data will be augmented in the next few years of NLTS2 with additional reports on the schools they attend, the courses they take, their classroom experiences, and their academic performance. In later years, as youth transition to early adulthood, NLTS2 reports will focus on their experiences with postsecondary education, employment, and independent living.