

## 2. THE USES OF FREE TIME BY YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES

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The adolescent years traditionally are associated with increased independence from parental supervision. Teens increasingly make their own decisions about how they spend their time away from work and school. When at home, they may spend time fulfilling household and school responsibilities by doing chores or homework, or they may choose to read, watch television, play computer games, or talk on the phone. As teens age, they typically spend more time away from home, particularly if they learn to drive and have access to a car. Outside the house, youth may engage in extracurricular group activities at school or in the community or “hang out” with friends.

The choices youth make regarding the use of their free time can have important impacts on other aspects of their lives. Spending time doing homework is an important foundation for academic achievement. Extracurricular activities, such as sports teams or special-interest clubs, can help youth hone skills and explore interests that could shape future educational and career choices. Spending time with friends can have positive or negative consequences for youth, depending on the values shared by friends and the activities they choose to pursue together.

This chapter explores parents’ reports of how youth with disabilities spend their free time. Parents were asked “During the past few weeks, how has (youth) spent most of (his/her) time when (he/she) wasn’t working or going to school?” Parents responded in their own words with one or more activities that they perceive occupied “most” of youths’ free time.<sup>1</sup> The kinds of activities in which youth with disabilities reportedly participate are identified, as well as variations in participation for those who differ in their primary disability category, age, gender, household income, and race/ethnicity.

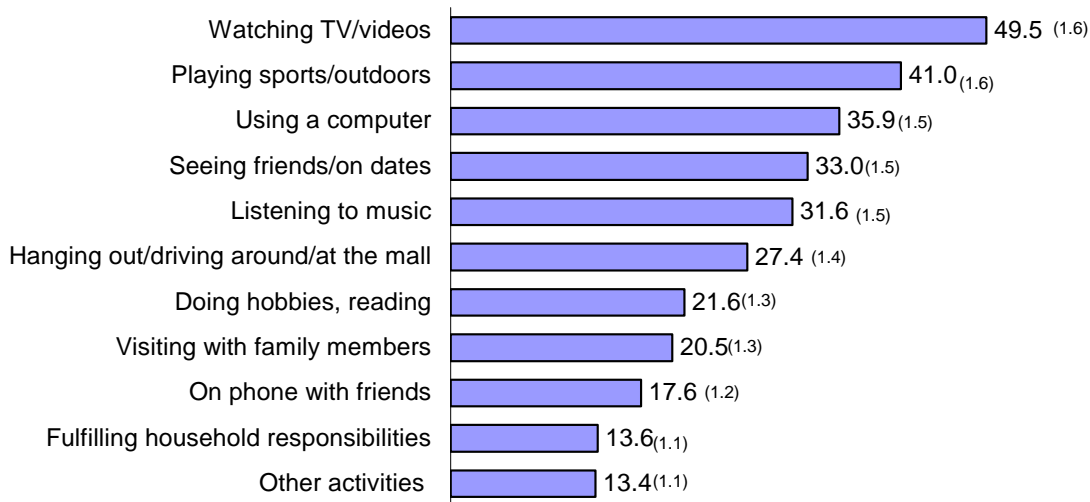
### Uses of Free Time

Youth with disabilities are reported by parents to participate in a variety of activities in their free time that are fairly typical of teens (Exhibit 2-1). Television and video watching is the activity most commonly reported by parents; almost half of youth are reported to spend most of their free time in this activity. Whereas about 25% of youth with disabilities are relatively infrequent TV and video watchers, spending 6 hours or fewer per week watching them (Exhibit 2-2), a similar number spend more than 20 hours a week in front of the television set. Parents report that youth with disabilities spend an average of almost 16 hours per week watching TV and videos, compared with about 20 hours per week for youth in the general population (Roberts, Foehr, Rideout, & Brodie, 1999).

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<sup>1</sup> Note that the question addresses the ways youth spend “most” of their time, and parents could name more than one activity. If parents named more than one activity, each is counted here as an activity in which youth spend most of their time. For example, if a parent said that a youth spends most of his or her time hanging around the mall and watching television, each of these activities is counted as how that youth spends most of his or her time. It is unknown how well informed parents were of the ways in which youth spend their free time.

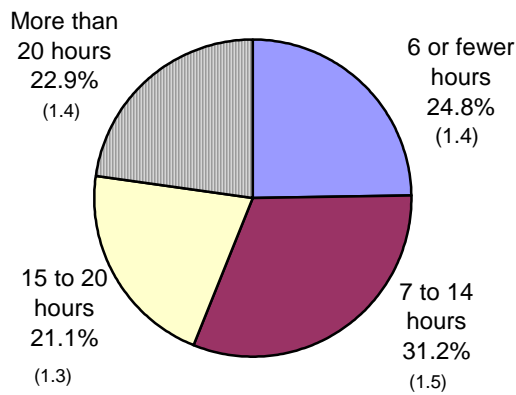
**Exhibit 2-1  
USES OF FREE TIME OF YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES**



Source: NLTS2 Wave 1 parent interviews.  
Standard errors are in parentheses.

Percentage reported to spend "most of his/her time" in activity

**Exhibit 2-2  
HOURS SPENT WATCHING  
TELEVISION AND VIDEOS BY  
YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES**



Source: NLTS2 Wave 1 parent interviews.  
Standard errors are in parentheses.

More than 40% of youth with disabilities are said to spend most of their time outdoors, playing sports, or engaged in physical activities (Exhibit 2-1 above). This is quite similar to the 46% of youth in the general population in grades 7 through 12 who are reported to play an active sport five or more times per week (Udry, 1998).

Parents identify listening to music, spending time with friends and on dates, and using the computer (i.e., "surfing the Web," corresponding by e-mail, or playing electronic games) as other frequent pursuits for about one-third of youth with disabilities.

About 27% of the youth with disabilities spend their time at the mall, hanging out, or driving around. About one in five youth are said to spend most of their free time with family members, on the phone, or doing hobbies or reading. Parents say 14% of youth

spend most of their time doing homework, housework, pet care, or meeting other responsibilities.

## Disability Differences in the Uses of Free Time

Both similarities and differences appear between disability categories in parents' reports of their adolescent children's use of their free time (Exhibit 2-3). Watching television or videos is the most commonly reported activity for all categories of youth, including those with sensory impairments that might make either the audio or video aspects of this activity challenging; between 47% and 62% of youth are reported to spend most of their time in this way. Spending time outdoors or playing sports is the second most frequently reported activity for most youth. Exceptions are youth with hearing or orthopedic impairments, or autism, for whom computer-related activities are the second most common activity, and those with visual impairments or deaf-blindness, 48% and 35% of whom reportedly spend most of their time doing hobbies or reading.

The least common activities for most youth involves fulfilling school or household obligations, such as doing homework or chores. In contrast to this general pattern, youth with hearing impairments, autism, multiple disabilities, or deaf-blindness are the least likely to be reported to spend a lot of time on the phone with friends.

Spending time in unstructured activities outside the house (i.e., at the mall, hanging out, or driving around) is reported as a frequent activity for between 20% and 32% of youth, with those with emotional disorders, traumatic brain injuries, and other health impairments having the highest reported rates of these activities. Using computers is a frequent activity for more than a third of youth in most categories; exceptions are youth with mental retardation (26%) or multiple disabilities (27%).

**Exhibit 2-3  
USE OF FREE TIME, BY DISABILITY CATEGORY**

	Learning Disability	Speech/Language Impairment	Mental Retardation	Emotional Disturbance	Hearing Impairment	Visual Impairment	Orthopedic Impairment	Other Health Impairment	Autism	Traumatic Brain Injury	Multiple Disabilities	Deaf-Blindness
Percentage reported to spend most of their time:												
Watching TV/videos	47.3 (2.5)	50.9 (2.5)	56.5 (2.5)	50.0 (2.6)	52.3 (2.9)	52.0 (3.5)	61.7 (2.7)	48.7 (2.4)	60.2 (2.7)	57.0 (4.5)	58.5 (2.7)	58.3 (5.3)
Outdoors/playing sports	42.9 (2.4)	41.5 (2.5)	40.0 (2.5)	38.9 (2.6)	41.6 (2.9)	30.9 (3.3)	27.0 (2.5)	43.9 (2.4)	33.2 (2.0)	34.9 (4.3)	35.8 (2.6)	30.2 (4.9)
On the computer	37.0 (2.4)	39.2 (2.4)	26.3 (2.3)	34.7 (2.5)	43.1 (2.9)	35.0 (3.4)	47.4 (2.8)	43.8 (2.4)	46.2 (2.7)	35.0 (4.3)	26.6 (2.4)	30.9 (4.9)
With friends/on dates	35.0 (2.4)	34.2 (2.4)	27.3 (2.3)	31.8 (2.4)	32.2 (2.7)	23.9 (3.0)	20.8 (2.3)	38.0 (2.3)	8.9 (1.6)	23.6 (3.8)	17.4 (2.1)	15.4 (3.9)
Listening to music	31.9 (2.3)	32.3 (2.3)	33.3 (2.4)	28.8 (2.4)	23.3 (2.5)	39.3 (3.7)	37.5 (2.7)	27.9 (2.2)	33.3 (2.6)	32.5 (4.2)	35.5 (2.6)	29.2 (4.9)
Hanging out/driving around/at the mall	27.3 (2.2)	24.3 (2.1)	27.7 (2.3)	28.2 (2.4)	26.1 (2.6)	25.8 (3.1)	19.8 (2.2)	31.6 (2.2)	23.7 (2.3)	29.2 (4.1)	25.8 (2.4)	24.0 (4.6)
On hobbies, reading	21.2 (2.0)	26.3 (2.2)	21.0 (2.1)	20.1 (2.1)	24.4 (2.5)	47.7 (3.1)	29.9 (2.6)	21.5 (2.0)	35.7 (2.6)	25.9 (4.0)	25.9 (2.4)	35.3 (5.1)
With family members	20.3 (2.0)	19.4 (2.0)	25.6 (2.2)	16.3 (1.9)	18.1 (2.2)	21.4 (2.9)	22.7 (2.3)	18.7 (1.9)	20.3 (2.2)	24.9 (3.9)	25.4 (2.4)	24.2 (4.6)
On the phone	19.3 (2.0)	16.7 (1.9)	14.9 (1.8)	16.2 (1.9)	13.4 (2.0)	18.3 (2.7)	14.7 (2.0)	14.5 (1.7)	1.9 (.7)	14.2 (3.2)	7.8 (1.5)	8.3 (2.9)
Fulfilling responsibilities	13.6 (1.7)	15.5 (1.8)	14.9 (1.8)	11.2 (1.7)	15.4 (2.1)	13.7 (2.4)	13.2 (1.5)	14.5 (1.7)	7.8 (1.5)	9.1 (3.6)	11.7 (1.8)	13.6 (3.7)
On other activities	13.2 (1.7)	15.8 (1.8)	13.4 (1.7)	13.2 (1.8)	13.9 (2.0)	12.8 (2.4)	17.1 (2.1)	13.1 (1.6)	12.2 (1.8)	12.2 (3.0)	15.0 (2.0)	16.0 (3.9)

Source: NLTS2 Wave 1 parent interviews.  
Standard errors are in parentheses.

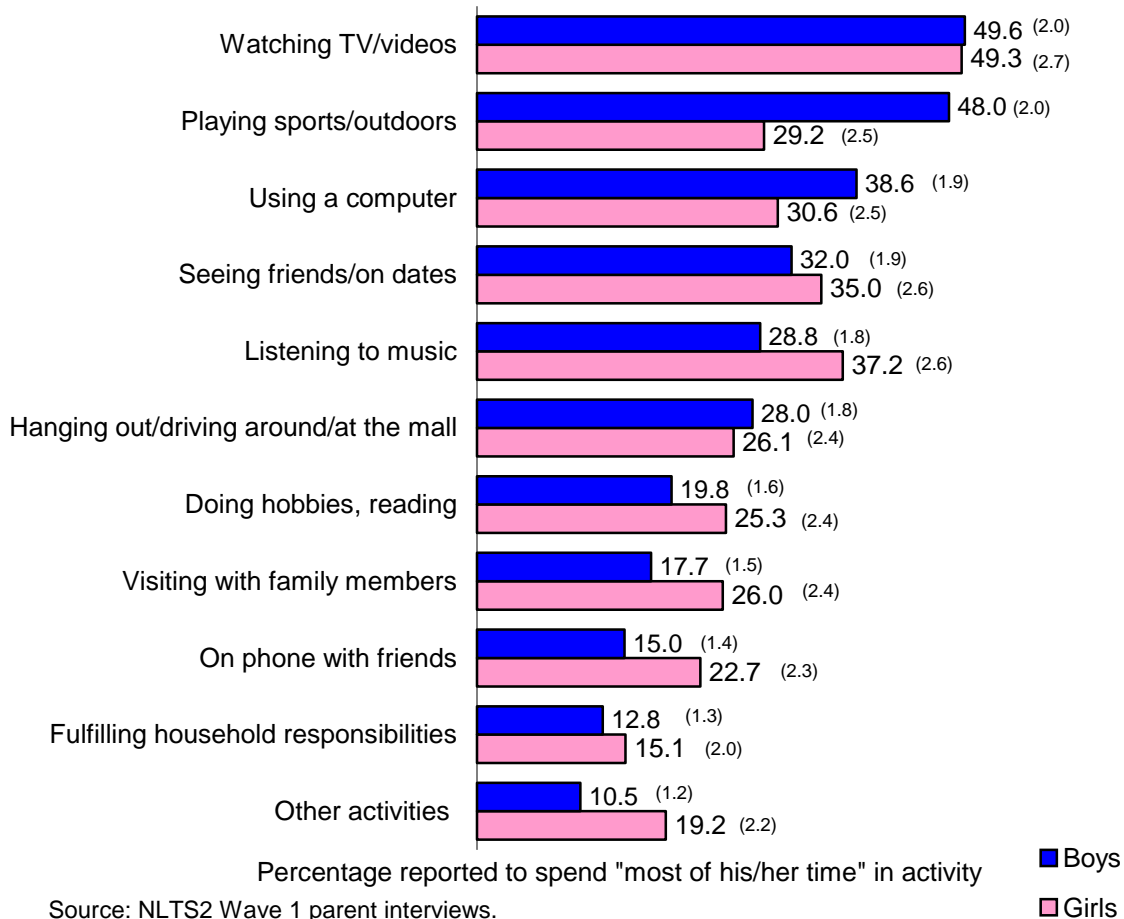
## Demographic Differences in the Uses of Free Time

Differences in the use of free time between youth who differ in several important respects other than disability also are evident.

**Age.** Although there are few marked differences in the use of free time between youth across the 13 through 17 age range, one such difference involves time spent playing sports or in other outdoor or physical activities. The percentage of youth who spend most of their time this way is 46% among 13- and 14-year-olds and 32% among 17-year-olds ( $p < .01$ ).

**Gender.** The time uses of boys and girls are quite similar in many ways (Exhibit 2-4). They share the propensity to spend most of their time watching television or videos, and they are about equally likely to spend most of their time hanging out, at the mall, or driving around; with friends or on dates; or fulfilling responsibilities. However, boys and girls differ in other ways in the use of their free time. For example, girls are significantly more likely than boys to spend time with family members and on the phone with friends ( $p < .01$  for both comparisons). They also are more likely than boys to spend time listening to music ( $p < .01$ ). In contrast, boys are more likely than

**Exhibit 2-4  
USES OF FREE TIME, BY GENDER**



Source: NLTS2 Wave 1 parent interviews.  
Standard errors are in parentheses.

girls to spend time playing sports or in other physical or outdoor activities ( $p < .001$ ), and more boys than girls spend most of their time using the computer for electronic games, communication, or other purposes ( $p < .05$ ).

**Household Income.** Youth who differ in household income are more alike than different in the use of their free time (Exhibit 2-5). There are no differences in such activities as watching television or videos, doing hobbies or reading, spending time with family members or on the phone with friends, or fulfilling responsibilities. However, there is a marked difference in the use of a computer for electronic games, e-mail, or other activities, favoring higher-income youth. About 47% of youth from households with annual incomes greater than \$50,000 are said to spend most of their time using a computer, compared with 26% of youth from households with incomes of \$25,000 or less ( $p < .001$ ). However, youth from higher-income homes also are more likely than lower-income youth to spend significant amounts of time hanging out, at the mall, or driving around (30% vs. 22%,  $p < .05$ ).

**Exhibit 2-5**  
**USES OF FREE TIME, BY HOUSEHOLD INCOME AND RACE/ETHNICITY**

	Income			Race/Ethnicity		
	\$25,000 or Less	\$25,001 to \$50,000	More than \$50,000	White	African American	Hispanic
Percentage who spent most of their time:						
Watching TV/videos	51.5 (2.6)	47.3 (3.0)	51.0 (3.0)	46.9 (2.1)	55.9 (3.4)	50.6 (4.5)
Outdoors/playing sports	37.5 (2.6)	45.8 (3.0)	42.3 (3.0)	44.5 (2.1)	37.2 (3.4)	36.5 (4.3)
On the computer	25.7 (2.3)	37.1 (2.9)	47.1 (3.0)	38.5 (2.0)	32.6 (3.3)	27.5 (4.0)
With friends/on dates	28.9 (2.4)	35.6 (2.9)	35.1 (2.9)	35.4 (2.0)	29.0 (3.2)	24.3 (3.9)
Listening to music	33.9 (2.5)	31.5 (2.8)	29.1 (2.7)	28.5 (1.9)	37.0 (3.4)	36.6 (4.3)
Hanging out/driving around/at the mall	22.4 (2.2)	32.3 (2.8)	30.1 (2.8)	31.5 (1.9)	19.8 (2.8)	17.7 (3.4)
On hobbies, reading	21.7 (2.2)	18.2 (2.3)	23.4 (2.6)	19.9 (1.7)	23.6 (2.9)	25.8 (3.9)
With family members	19.9 (2.1)	20.6 (2.5)	21.3 (2.5)	19.8 (1.7)	19.9 (2.8)	23.2 (3.8)
On the phone	16.4 (2.0)	19.8 (2.4)	17.5 (2.3)	16.6 (1.5)	21.2 (2.8)	18.0 (3.5)
Fulfilling responsibilities	12.8 (1.8)	12.7 (2.0)	16.3 (2.2)	14.0 (1.4)	13.8 (2.4)	11.0 (2.6)
On other activities	12.4 (1.7)	13.8 (2.1)	14.8 (2.1)	13.1 (1.4)	16.6 (2.6)	9.5 (2.6)

Source: NLTS2 Wave 1 parent interviews.  
Standard errors are in parentheses.

**Race/Ethnicity.** White youth are less likely than African American youth to spend most of their time watching television or videos or listening to music (47% vs. 56% and 28% vs. 37%,  $p < .05$ ). In contrast, they are more likely than both African American or Hispanic youth to hang out, drive around, or go to the mall (32% vs. 20% for African American and 18% for Hispanic youth,  $p < .001$ ).

## Summary

According to parents, watching television and videos provides much of the free-time entertainment for adolescents with disabilities, just as they do for other youth of the same ages. Youth with disabilities also are about as likely to spend their time involved in sports and physical activities as youth in the general population, although fewer than half spend most of their time in these active pursuits. These findings could engender an ambivalent response. It is reassuring to know that youth with disabilities spend their time in many of the same ways as youth in the general population. However, their similarity in choosing television or video watching over more active pursuits means that the growing concerns regarding the link of television watching and other sedentary behaviors with adolescent obesity (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2001; Crespo et al., 2001) and, perhaps, with a propensity to injury and violence (Willis & Strasberger, 1998; Donnerstein & Linz, 1995) apply equally to youth with disabilities and to youth in the general population.

More than one-third of youth with disabilities are reported by parents to spend most of their time using a computer. This reported computer use by many youth with disabilities could bode well for their future educational and employment outcomes in a world increasingly dependent on technology and information. However, not all youth share equally in the potential benefits of computer use. Youth with mental retardation or multiple disabilities are less likely than others to use computers, as are youth from lower-income households.

Many youth with disabilities also spend a great deal of time in social interactions with their families and friends, both on the phone and face-to-face. Given the importance of relationships to quality of life (Myers & Diener, 1995), their active social lives suggest that many are experiencing the benefits of relationships. However, some disabilities that can limit social interactions, such as autism, are associated with lower levels of involvement with friends.

All activities reported here are frequent activities for at least some youth in every disability and demographic category, and the rates of participation for many uses of free time are quite similar across groups. However, some understandable differences are noted. For example, some disabilities, such as orthopedic or sensory impairments, appear to influence the choice of less physical activities, such as computer use. In contrast, outdoor or physical activities are more common among youth with learning disabilities or speech or other health impairments.

Gender differences are apparent and continue to reflect old stereotypes, with boys preferring sports, games, and physical activities and girls appearing to prefer less active and more intimate pursuits, such as spending time with family members and talking with friends on the phone. Income and racial/ethnic differences play only a small role in distinguishing uses of free time.

The following two chapters focus on two aspects of the use of free time by youth with disabilities reported here—friendship interactions and involvement in extracurricular activities.