

7. LIFE OUTSIDE OF SCHOOL

By Mary Wagner

A look at youth with disabilities ages 13 through 17 and their activities in their nonschool hours reveals youth involved in a wide variety of activities both at home—listening to music, watching television, using a computer, doing homework, talking on the phone with friends—and outside the home—getting together with friends, participating in sports, taking part in organized groups, working.¹ Thus, the majority of youth with disabilities appear to be “typical teens” outside of school in many ways.

Key themes from the analyses documented in this report are noted below.

Active Youth

More than 90% of youth see friends outside of school at least weekly, and almost as many are invited by other youth to their social activities. About three-fourths participate in extracurricular activities, including lessons or classes outside of school, various groups sponsored by the school or community organizations, or volunteer activities. Those who are active with individual personal friends also are more likely to be involved in extracurricular activities. However, because rates of these kinds of extracurricular activity fall somewhat short of those of the general student population, benefits associated with such activities accrue to youth with disabilities less than to their nondisabled peers.

An exception is paid employment. More than half of youth with disabilities have paid jobs in a given year, and almost one-fourth earn at least \$6.50 per hour—rates of employment and earnings that are virtually the same as for youth in the general population. Most employed youth with disabilities work during both the school year and in the summer, although the average number of hours they work per week is higher in the summer than the school year. Among younger teens with disabilities, informal work in personal care (e.g., babysitting) or maintenance (e.g., lawn mowing) dominates, but among 16- and 17-year-olds, many of these freelance jobs give way to regular paid employment.

Social Skills: Important, but Not Limiting

Not surprisingly, there is an association between the social skills and the social activities of youth with disabilities. For most kinds of friendship interaction and extracurricular activity, including employment, a larger proportion of youth with high social skills are found among active youth, whereas a larger proportion of less socially skilled youth are found among those who are less active. However, this is not a defining relationship. Youth with low social skills still are found among those with very active friendships and among participants in all kinds of extracurricular activities. Limited social skills may challenge youth in interacting with friends and in extracurricular pursuits, but do not prevent them from doing so.

¹ Analyses similar to those reported in this document were conducted for elementary and middle school students with disabilities as part of SEELS and were summarized in Wagner and Blackorby (2002).

Widespread Computer Literacy

Most teens with disabilities, like their nondisabled peers, appear to have acquired skills and familiarity with computer technology and use the technology in a variety of ways. The vast majority of youth with disabilities are reported by parents to know how to use a computer for educational purposes, and more than 80% do so. Almost three-fourths of youth have a computer at home, and computer use is reported by parents to take “most” of the free time of more than one-third of youth. One in six youth use a computer at least daily for e-mail or other electronic communication. This high level of computer literacy could provide a foundation for developing a variety of career interests or employment opportunities in the future.

Possible Causes for Concern

These findings depict an overall picture of youth actively engaged at school and in their communities, using their nonschool hours for enrichment, recreation, social activities, and employment. Yet, despite this positive general view, there are some causes for concern.

At the broadest level, we must recognize that the information reported here is provided by parents. Their perspective on what is happening with youth at home and in their social and extracurricular pursuits may be their best assessment of actual activities, but it also may reflect parents’ hopes or desires for their adolescent children. Thus, it may be wise to interpret the positive picture painted for the large majority of youth with some caution.

In addition, a minority of youth appear not to be experiencing the positive supports and activities that are reported for most. For example, more than one in four students participate in no organized extracurricular activities, and 2% have no interactions with friends of the kinds explored in NLTS2. Further, youth with different disability and demographic characteristics vary widely in the extent to which the generally positive picture characterizes them. Important variations for particular subgroups of youth are noted below.

Differential Effects of Disability

Across the disability categories, students demonstrate differences in some of the activities that fill their nonschool hours but are quite similar in others. Watching television and videos, participating in sports or other physical or outdoor activities, and using a computer are the most common activities of youth in their free time, regardless of disability category. Large majorities of youth in all disability categories also are involved with friends. They get together outside of class with friends at least weekly and are invited to take part in other youth’s social activities. However, autism and multiple disabilities, including deaf-blindness, are disabilities that appear to present significant obstacles to these kinds of interaction. Overall, only 2% of youth with disabilities are reported by parents not to have any of the kinds of friendship interaction explored in NLTS2, but this rate increases to between 15% and 28% of youth with autism, multiple disabilities, or deaf-blindness.

The frequency with which youth interact with friends suggests that these kinds of individual relationships may be less affected by variations in disability than the more complex interactions required to take part in extracurricular activities. For example, youth participate in lessons or enrichment classes outside of school at fairly uniform rates, regardless of disability. Many of

these may be individual lessons or classes in which the primary interaction is with the teacher. However, there is much wider variation in the extent to which youth take part in school-sponsored groups. These include such groups as sports teams and performing groups, in which interactions with a number of peers probably are expected. Youth with mental retardation, multiple disabilities, deaf-blindness, autism, or emotional disturbances are less likely than others to take part in these group activities. Variations in employment generally mirror those of participation in extracurricular groups.

Among youth who do participate in extracurricular groups, disability differences may affect the kinds of groups that are attractive or open to them. For example, youth with visual or orthopedic impairments are among the least likely to play on sports teams; still, about one-third of group participants with those kinds of disability do so. Some other kinds of groups, such as religious groups, seem to be fairly uniformly accessible to youth, regardless of the nature of their primary disability. These findings suggest the natural drive of teens with all kinds of disability to live like other teens—to have and be friends, pursue a variety of activities in their free time, join groups that interest them, and earn money.

Shifting Uses of Time with Age

The personal preferences and aptitudes of youth can be expected to change as they age. Not surprisingly, therefore, there are important age differences in some of the kinds of activity that occur in youth's nonschool hours.

Younger and older students are equally likely to spend their free time at home watching television or videos, listening to music, or using a computer. Similarly, there are no important differences in the frequency with which older and younger youth interact with friends, but the forms of interaction differ. Telephone calls between friends and using a computer for communication are more common among older teens. However, it is in their activities outside the house that the most notable differences occur.

Older youth are less likely than younger students to spend a significant amount of their time playing sports or engaging in other kinds of outdoor or physical activities. Instead, an increasing amount of their time is spent working. Employment among youth with disabilities involves fewer than half of 13- and 14-year-olds but two-thirds of 17-year-olds. Older teens also are much more likely to work more hours, and earnings reflect the greater experience of older youth.

These differences in age groups among youth with disabilities are quite similar to those documented for youth in the general population, affirming the developmental importance of age in understanding variations in their experiences, regardless of disability.

Gender Makes a Difference

Differences between adolescent boys and girls with disabilities emerge in areas in which social, cultural, or family values or norms may come into play, or in which personal preferences are exercised. For example, boys and girls do not differ in their overall level of involvement with friends, but boys are markedly more likely than girls to get together with them in person, whereas girls are more likely to interact with friends by phone. Similarly, boys and girls with disabilities are equally likely to be involved in extracurricular activities, but they choose different kinds of activity, reflecting their aptitudes or social norms. Boys are much more likely to be

reported by parents as having a particular aptitude for athletics and to be involved with sports teams as their most common extracurricular activity. They also are more likely than girls to be reported to spend a significant amount of their time playing sports or engaging in other physical or outdoor activities, through which they may learn how to cooperate in teams or maintain physical fitness. In contrast, parents of girls with disabilities report significantly more often than those of boys that their daughters have a particular aptitude for the performing arts; consistent with this pattern, taking lessons and participating in performing groups are significantly more common extracurricular activities for girls with disabilities than for boys. Girls also are more likely to spend significant amounts of their free time with family members, talking on the phone, doing hobbies or reading, or listening to music. These kinds of difference mirror those found in the general student population, confirming that personal aptitudes and preferences can be important influences on choices of activities for all youth.

It is possible, however, that gender differences in the employment domain are less reflective of personal preferences than of social norms. Girls are more likely than boys to engage in informal jobs, particularly personal care (much of which is babysitting)—jobs that may not build the same kinds of skills or employment “track record” as the regular jobs for licensed employers that are more common among boys. Even in work-study jobs, for which schools often give credit, girls are much more likely than boys to engage in personal-care activities. These differences in the kinds of early work experience of girls and boys may contribute to the pattern of substantially lower earnings for girls with disabilities than for their male peers, a pattern that has been shown to continue into adulthood for many girls (Wagner, 1992).

Money Matters

Not only are youth from low-income households a larger proportion of youth with disabilities than of youth in the general population,² their experiences in their nonschool hours are distinctly different from those of youth in wealthier households in important ways. Friendship interactions of many kinds are less common among youth from lower-income households. Although the majority of youth in all income groups interact with friends, those in the lowest-income group are more likely to be reported “never” to visit with friends outside of class and not to be invited by other youth to their social activities. Youth from lower-income households also are less likely to participate in extracurricular activities of every kind. Employment, too, is less likely to fill the nonschool hours of youth from poorer households, and when they work, they are likely to earn less.

Influences of Culture

Differences between racial/ethnic groups are apparent with regard to some factors explored in this report, but no consistent or pervasive pattern emerges. For example, white youth are the most active participants in organized extracurricular activities overall and in volunteer or community service activities in particular. Hispanic youth generally are less involved with individual friendships than other youth; they are significantly more likely than white students, for example, to be reported “never” to see friends outside of class. Employment also is significantly

² Please see Appendix B for a discussion of the individual and household characteristics of youth with disabilities.

more common for white youth than African American or Hispanic youth, and when white youth work, they tend to earn more.

Looking to the Future

These findings from NLTS2 provide the most comprehensive look yet at the activities of youth with disabilities in their nonschool hours. The important question remains, however: what differences does having these nonschool experiences make in helping youth succeed in school and in the transition to adult life? Future NLTS2 analyses will address this question in depth.

For example, research on youth in the general population suggests that participation in extracurricular activities can have a variety of benefits. However, it is unclear whether this also is true for youth with disabilities. NLTS2 analyses will explore that issue. Similarly, future analyses will examine the relationships between employment and school performance. The longitudinal nature of NLTS2 also provides data for examining such important issues as the development of the labor market experiences of youth with disabilities as they age and transition out of high school into early adulthood.

Results of these extensions of the analyses reported here will be forthcoming from NLTS2 over the next several years, as will important analyses of issues involving students' academic programs and performance in high school and postsecondary school.