

**NATIONAL RESEARCH COUNCIL/INSTITUTE OF MEDICINE
BOARD ON CHILDREN, YOUTH, AND FAMILIES
COMMITTEE ON ADOLESCENT HEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT**

**WHAT DO YOUTH PROGRAMS DO
TO FOSTER CONNECTEDNESS AND WHY?**

Background Paper by

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Final Draft

February 2005

Prepared for the Planning Meeting on
Connectedness and Adolescent Health and Development

October 8, 2004

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Common sense and psychological research tells us that connections to adults—parents and others—are integral to the process of normal human development. A substantial research literature exists on the role of the parent-child relationship in development, and there is a smaller, but growing body of research that explores the effects of non-parental relationships. Adolescents, in particular, are open to non-parental adults as they strive to create for themselves lives more independent from their parents while still valuing advice from those more experienced than they. The most commonly examined nonparental relationship is that of a teacher and a student (e.g., Birch and Ladd, 1996; Pianta, 1999). One of the less explored areas of investigation is the importance of relationships youth have with adults they find in their weekend and after-school activities.

This paper examines field research that has been conducted over the past 15 years on youth programs, primarily by Public/Private Ventures (P/PV), to address what has been learned about “connectedness” as it manifests itself in the field. By connectedness, we mean primarily the attachment youth have to the adults in the programs.

In this paper, four major topics are addressed:

- n What is the prevalence or character of adult connectedness in youth programs?
- n What types of staff interactions enhance adult connectedness with youth?
- n Which program-level features enhance connectedness?
- n Why is connectedness important for youth programs?

In the next section we describe in broader detail the range of programs we are considering. Next, we examine the prevalence of adult-youth relationships by program type. The third section describes the programmatic factors that promote connectedness.

In this section, we discuss three levels of practice: the one-to-one interactions between individual staff members and youth; factors pertaining to the structure of group interaction, and what policies a program can have in place to enhance the likelihood that youth participants bond with staff. In the last substantive section, we present quantitative evidence on the effects of adult-youth connectedness on a program's ability to engage the youth served.

Data

In 1988, after years of disappointing findings from youth program evaluations, P/PV did an exploratory study to investigate why so many youth programs failed (Higgins, 1988). This study found that in most failed program, participants do not stay in the program very long. This prompted P/PV to hold a series of focus groups with youth participants to investigate why some youth stick with programs while others leave. The resounding answer to this question was that the “stayers” developed a supportive relationship with staff, while “leavers” did not. Since that study, P/PV researchers have been collecting information in all our studies on how youth relate to adults in the programs. Thus, over the last 15 years, we have amassed a significant amount of information about “connectedness” in youth programs.

In this paper we have examined evidence of connectedness for a wide variety of youth programs:

- n One-on-one programs (community-based mentoring, school-based mentoring, tutoring, apprenticeships),

- n Small group programs (group mentoring, small group activities), and

- n Traditional center-based youth programs (Boys and Girls Clubs, Ys, youth community centers)

Across these three program types, there is tremendous programmatic variation. One-on-one programs deliver very individualized content with a 1:1 ratio of adults to youth. Group mentoring or small group programs deliver somewhat less individualized content but the adult-youth ratio is still quite high, generally one adult for three to five youth. Regular youth programs typically operate activities with ratios of one adult to 10 to 20 youth. Youth may have some choice about the set of activities they participate in, but not always. Thus, we will be able to examine how likely it is that adults form relationships with youth in a very diverse group of settings.

Table 1 summarizes the range of programs from which the discussion in this paper draws, as well as the types and numbers of respondents from which the information was collected. All of the programs served—either primarily or exclusively—youth from low-income neighborhoods. The participants in our studies range from ages 10 to 24; the majority of studies focus on youth in middle and high schools. All are from low-income households and most were members of minority groups. Some of the programs we include targeted high-risk youth, those “in trouble” either with the law or their schools, and involved in gang activity. Generally, these youth are older than the other program participants.

CHARACTERIZING ADULT-YOUTH CONNECTEDNESS ACROSS PROGRAMS

We start by considering whether there is any variation in connectedness with adults across settings, for if there is no variation here, it may be that program characteristics are not correlated with connectedness.

We have examined adult-youth connectedness in two ways. Across most of P/PV's mentoring studies—traditional community-based mentoring, one-on-one school-based mentoring and small-group mentoring—we have asked youth how close they felt to their mentor (“very close,” “somewhat close,” “not very close,” “not close at all”). In our studies of other programs, we ask whether there was a staff member actively providing support and encouragement (“pay attention to me,” “understand me,” “make me feel like part of the group,” “care for me”). Our results are shown in Table 2.

As expected, the rate of positive relationships with adults was positively related to the adult/youth ratio; the more adults per youth the more likely positive adult/youth relationships were formed. In one-to-one programs (either community-based or school-based) 90 to 95 percent of youth felt “close” to the adult. “Very close” relationships were, however, more prevalent in community-based programs than in school-based programs (45% vs. 33%), perhaps because community-based mentors spend more time with their mentees. Somewhat fewer participants in small-group mentoring programs felt “very” or “somewhat” close to an adult (70%) and only 25% felt “very close.”

While we did not ask the same closeness question in our studies of “regular” youth programs, we did ask whether the participant had one adult at the program they could go to for support (“could go to if you are really upset about something,” “pays

attention to what's going on in your life,")). In the typical program we studied, only between half and two-thirds of youth said they have at least one supportive adult. However, if the program consciously promoted and encouraged staff to befriend participants, this rate can be as high as 90 to 95 percent, even among older teens.

Thus, it appears that connectedness does systematically differ by program characteristics. But it is not as straightforward as varying only with respect to the adult-youth ratio. Intentionality and what happens in the program are also quite important factors. Some of these observed differences undoubtedly are related to the types of youth that join different types of programs and their inherent need for adult relationships. For example, youth who are referred to a mentoring program by their parents or teachers are likely to be in need of extra adult attention, while the typical after-school program participant may just want something to do or need supervision. However, given that there was variation within mentoring programs (where the youth served were fairly similar) and within youth programs, program practices are likely to matter. Our 15 years' of research has convinced us of this fact.

In the sections that follow, we identify and describe characteristics of staff interaction and program features that our research suggests promote connection between the youth and the adults, as well as among the youth.

FACTORS THAT FOSTER CONNECTEDNESS

Much of P/PV research on after-school programs has striven to understand which program factors and practices are related to three types of connectedness: adult/youth

connectedness, a sense of belonging and peer connectedness. We have found that several different types of factors influence connectedness: individual staff interactions, group dynamics and program level factors.

Staff Interactions That Enhance Connectedness With Youth

One of the most important, yet simple, practices that promote the development of positive adult-youth relationships is providing the adults and youth with time to informally socialize (McClanahan, 1998; Herrera et al., 2000; Herrera, et al., 2002). Thus, for example, tutors and work-based mentors who took the time to ask the youth about their day were more likely to form a good relationship with the youth than those that spent their entire time teaching or going over homework. Mentoring pairs that played games, had lunch and just “hung out” were more likely to report being close than pairs that spent more time on schoolwork. Similarly, group mentoring or youth program settings that encouraged the adults to interact individually and more socially with the youth resulted in a greater percentage of the youth feeling connected to the adults.

These positive relationships formed more quickly and easily if the adults and youth shared common interests. Grossman and Rhodes (2002) found, for example, that having shared interests was one of the few factors that predicted whether an adult and youth could form a solid mentoring relationship. One advantage that youth program have in this regard is that most participants have chosen to be there based on their interest. Thus, the activity instructor and the participants have an immediate bond. This shared interest is best demonstrated when instructors engage enthusiastically with the youth in the activity—be it art, dance or music. However, in other situations, the instructor can

demonstrate his or her passion or love for the activity by demonstrating expertise and a strong desire to teach the participants. While the shared interest is often the activity's subject, it can also be an understanding and interest in teen culture. This is one of the reasons why staff who are closer in age to the participants often have good relationships with them.

Another key factor that promoted adult-youth relationships, especially with older youth, was that the adults treated the participants with respect. Listening to the youth's ideas was an important element of respect. This simple act was often profoundly appreciated by youth. For many of the participants, the after-school setting was one of the few places where they felt their ideas were elicited and seriously considered. Students often perceived teachers as ignoring or pre-judging them, and other adults as treating them as children. Staff who listened respectfully to their ideas and if necessary helped the youth refine their suggestions into something that truly was useful were highly valued by the youth. Thus, staff who:

- Have interests in common with the participants,
- Interact informally with the youth, and
- Treat the youth respectfully

are much more likely to create positive relationships with youth than staff who are aloof and spend all their time on task. However, even these staff can connect with youth if they are respectful of the participants and show their caring through teaching the youth skills they wish to acquire.

Group Or Activity-Level Practices That Affect Connectedness

Because relationships are made on an individual level, individual interaction is critical, as shown in the previous section. However, we have also found that how an activity is run affects the likelihood that youth feel connected.

Walker and Arbreton (2004), Herrera and Arbreton (2003) Arbreton and McClanahan (2002) and Campbell et al. (in progress) all find that the way the instructor runs and structures the activity also affects how engaged and interested the youth feel. In particular, the following five practices increase the likelihood that a youth is engaged and feels positively:

- Activities are shaped with the youth's interests in mind;
- Youth are given opportunities for decision-making and their input is elicited;
- A cooperative peer environment is created, including group activities and youth-to-youth help;
- Good "classroom" management techniques are used; and
- All youth are actively engaged in the activity.

Keeping or heightening youth interest in an activity is important in maintaining youth's engagement. When the staff actively shape activities with the youth's interest in mind, the adults communicate that they care that the participants are enjoying themselves, making it more likely that participants' engagement in the activity will be deepened. Especially at the younger end of the spectrum, youth report that the staff care about them if they feel their suggestions were seriously considered by the staff, even if not implemented.

Although this tailoring can occur without asking the youth for input (more likely in activities with younger participants), it is more common for staff to do it by giving

youth opportunities for decision-making and actively eliciting their input. For example, youth can choose from a menu of options within an activity structure and can select order of daily tasks or be given freedom to creatively carry out a task. Older youth can select and design the main projects of an activity entirely. In all cases, effective instructors guide youth input to make it successful since youth often do not fully understand what is entailed in going from an idea to reality. A delicate balance must be struck by instructors when they allow the youth to fully design an activity. Instructors need to let the youth have control but help them understand the challenges and the steps involved in carrying out a project (DuBois and Barton, 2003). In a study P/PV is doing in the Philadelphia Beacon initiative (Campbell, Raley and Grossman, in progress), we are finding that when youth had input, they had a greater interest in activities [$p=.01$] and were more engaged [$p=.02$].

This same study (Campbell, et al., in progress) found that when instructors created a cooperative peer environment, interest levels were higher [$p=.02$] and they made greater efforts to attend [$p<.0001$]. Walker and Arbreton (2004) also found that youth reported higher levels of adult and peer support in activities that encouraged peer cooperation. Instructors facilitate a cooperative peer environment through using a variety of techniques, such as conducting team- or pair-based tasks and activities either with or without “friendly competition,” and linking old and new participants in “peer mentorship.” To make peer cooperation work, however, staff need to establish ground rules about respect and intervene when needed.

Although youth rail under overly restrictive structure and management techniques, youth appreciated activities that were well-managed. Campbell et al. (in

progress) found that youth had greater levels of interest, engagement and enjoyment in an activity if they perceived it as well managed, in particular that the staff was in control and the rules were clear and followed. Staff whose management techniques were most appreciated were consistent and fair (corrected youth but did not hold grudges). With higher risk or older youth, the best staff tended to ignore smaller infractions but did not lose control of the situation.

In summary, how an activity is run affected the degree of connectedness the participants feel toward the activity, the instructor and their peers. Trying to incorporate the desires of youth into the activity and letting youth work cooperatively conveyed to them a sense of caring by the provider and thus, encouraged a greater sense of connection with the adults. A cooperative peer environment also enhanced youth engagement in the activity and their sense of peer support. Lastly, staff who were clearly in control of the situation but who allowed for some informal peer and staff interactions promoted higher levels of engagement of the youth in the activity.

Programmatic Factors That Promote Relationships

Thus far we have considered what individual staff can do to promote connectedness both in term of their own interactions with youth and how they can best structure their activity. Now we turn to factors that executive directors can do to promote connectedness. In particular, we consider three factors at three levels: staff, activity, and center/program.

Staff Related Policies and Practice

The most obvious step programs can take to promote connectedness is to hire staff that have similar interests as the youth and are comfortable informally interacting with them. Many programs have experienced hiring a charismatic young person and subsequently attracting many new participants. Youth tend to feel most comfortable with staff who are close in age and background to themselves because they believe these staff can relate to them more than other types of staff. However, while this is true in many instances, P/PV's research has not found that gender, race or ethnicity matching of staff or mentors with the participants is absolutely necessary. In our mentoring research, we and others have found that same-race and cross-race pairings are equally effective (Rhodes, Reddy, Grossman and Lee, 2002). Similarly, in other youth programs there are many effective staff who do not look demographically similar to the participants. The key is that the participants perceive the staff member as caring and have something to connect with them around.

Training on interpersonal skills and group management, at least in some cases, is another thing executive directors can provide that can improve youth connectedness. Some adults instinctively know to interact with youth in such a way as to make the youth feel respected and supported in their endeavors. However, many adults (especially younger ones) need training and guidance. While high school and college students who work with younger teens may be able to quickly connect to them, they often need reminding as time goes on to remain the "adults" in the relationship—putting or vindictive behavior may be acceptable among college peers but it does not belong in a staff-youth relationship (Morrow and Styles, 1995).

Most of the evidence on training comes from our mentoring studies. For example, in a study of approximately 1000 matches in 100 mentoring programs Herrera, Sipe and McClanahan (2000) found that programs that offer the adults at least six hours of training before they started were significantly more likely to form “very close” relationships with their mentees. Similarly, at least two hours of post-match training or at least monthly contact with a “supervisor” to talk about the matches progress increased the likelihood of “very close” relationships. DuBois’ et al. meta-analysis (2002) of nearly 60 evaluated programs found that those providing ongoing training for mentors had significantly larger effects. Those with ongoing training had an average effect size of .22 while those that did not had average effect sizes of .11. In Dubois’ study, while programs with pre-match training and supervision had larger effect sizes the difference was not statistically significant.

Smith and Smoll’s (1997) randomized assignment study finds that coaches that received training on how to emphasize positive feedback, encouragement and sound technical instruction had much stronger relationships with the youth than coaches focused on winning and who used punitive responses, and that the proportion of adults who use a “positive approach to coaching” was greatly increased through training. Youth who played with trained coaches had better psychosocial outcomes and were less likely to drop out. Walker and Arbretton’s (2004) study of the Beacon initiative in San Francisco finds some evidence that training in interpersonal relationship skills and youth development lead to more positive adult (and peer) relationships. Similarly their study suggests that programs whose staff includes more adults with previous experience in youth programs had greater levels of connectedness.

Another decision in the hands of an executive director is whether to hire full-time or part-time staff. Our research is beginning to indicate that having full-time staff (as opposed to part-timers) may increase the likelihood that youth feel connected. Walker and Arbretton (2004) noted that the more full-time employees a program had, the more the adults fostered positive adult interaction and cooperative peer environments. They speculate that the adults have more opportunities to interact informally with the youth and may develop greater skill and comfort interacting with young people.

Activity Level Practices

The types of activities programs choose to offer (art, recreational, educational, career, etc.) do not seem to greatly affect how close youth are to the staff, with the slight caveat that youth in educational activities tend to report less adult support (Walker and Arbretton, 2004). However, the type of activity does seem to influence how the youth describe the adult's role (Herrera, Vang and Gale, 2002). Youth from academically focused activities tend to talk about the adults as "friends" who helped them understand things but with whom they did not feel particularly intimate. These adults are not viewed as confidants. Youth who participate in non-academic activities that are activity-focused (as opposed to relationship-focused) are more likely to talk about the adults as "friends on their level." This orientation did not preclude a close relationship; youth from these groups were just as likely to report feeling close to the adult as youth from other groups. In contrast, youth in nonacademic groups that explicitly focus more on the adult-youth and peer interactions described the adults as people they could trust and depend on, people who could help them through personal problems.

“They’re not just teachers. They tell us what is wrong or right and tell us what to do...They’re like friends, best friends.” [Youth]

Thus, the balance a program strikes within and across activities between skill transmission (be it educational, cultural or recreational) and relationship formation does affect how youth connect to the adults.

In addition, how the activity is set up—the size of the group and the staff-youth ratio—matters. First, Walker and Arbreton (2004) find that activities with larger groups of youth (even holding constant the staff-youth ratio) somewhat reduces the observed extent to which the adults actively interacted warmly with the youth. [The standardized beta, $\beta = -.03$, $p < .01$]. However, it did not affect the youth’s perceptions that the staff cared about them (paid attention to them, told them when they had done things well or poorly, could be asked for help). Second, as Table 2 showed earlier, they also find that the higher the staff-youth ratio, the more the youth felt the adults cared and supported for them. ($\beta = .16$, $p < .05$). The staff-youth ratio was also positively correlated with the observed degree of emotional warmth between the youth and staff. ($\beta = .17$, but not significant) However, Walker and Arbreton found that the higher the staff-youth ratio, the less likely peers will have opportunities to interact and cooperate [$\beta = -.26$, $p < .01$].

More research on the relationship between connectedness and activity frequency and duration still needs to be done. However the evidence to date suggests that frequency (within reasonable bounds) is less important than duration. Studying group mentoring programs, Herrera et al. (2002) found that there was no difference in the closeness the youth and adults felt if they met once a week or every other week. Grossman and Johnson’s (1999) study of one-on-one mentoring programs, on the other hand, found that

meeting weekly engenders closer relationships than meeting only monthly. Herrera et al. (2002), however, found a statistically significant relationship between participation duration in the group and talking about more personal issues with the adults ($p < .05$). Similarly they found that none of the youth they talked to who had joined groups within the last six months had reached the stage of feeling “very close” to the adults. Rhodes et al. (in press), studying one-on-one matches, found no correlation between relationship quality and the frequency of meeting, but a correlation of approximately .20 ($p < .01$) with the duration of match. Thus, programs can increase the likelihood of connection if at least some activities go for extended periods of time, or youth can continue to be with the same adults, if perhaps doing another activity.

Center Level Policies

Many of P/PV’s studies (such as, Herrera and Arbreton, 2003; Walker et al., 2000; Walker and Arbreton, 2004; Walker et al., 2002; and Campbell et al., in progress) have found three center level factors help to promote connectedness:

- n Having an organizational culture of making time to socialize with youth,
- n Having unstructured time for informal interactions—free periods or adequate time between activities, and
- n Providing space for informal interactions—snack rooms or lounges, drop-in room, office made available for private conversations, office space.

These three factors work together to support informal interactions between adults and youth that is so critical in fostering positive relationships. While many youth organizations will say they “put youth first,” we have found most want their staff to be “on task,” be it typing, making phone calls, having requisite meetings. The organizations

that youth connect to most are those where office staff, custodians and bus drivers, check-in receptionists stop working and chat with youth. We have found that often the adults the participants felt closest to were these support staff who interact with the youth informally. Structurally, the frequency of these informal interactions can be increased if programs provide participants with time and a place explicitly made for “hanging out,” be it an unstructured snack time or game-playing time. For example, Boys and Girls Clubs have a game room where participants can hang out with peers and staff. However, space is often a scarce resource for youth programs, thus some creative programs allow youth to commandeer empty offices or use other common space, such as halls, as “hang-out” places.

WHY SHOULD YOUTH PROGRAMS CARE ABOUT CONNECTEDNESS?

The literature on attachment, social control and social development all highlight the importance of connectedness to adults in the positive development of adolescents. But why should a drug-prevention or education program or other programs that serve youth pay attention to it? Of course, most youth program staff deeply care about their youth and their developmental progress. but research is starting to show that youth who feel more supported and connected to program staff get more from the program than those who do not. In particular, programs that pay attention to enhancing adult-youth relationships within a program improve the attendance rates among its participants and increase the potency of the program.

Walker and Arbreton (2004) found that the most significant predictor of youth participation in the San Francisco Beacon program was the number of adults at the

program the youth felt supported them [$\beta=.23$, $p<.001$]. Interestingly, they did not find that the quality of the interaction between youth and staff as observed by an outside observer *in* activities was related to the *activity* attendance rates; instead the number of supportive adults in the program as a whole was related to youth showing up the program, but not necessarily a particular activity.

Arbreton and McClanahan (2002) examined an initiative run by the Boys' and Girls' Clubs to draw in and retain youth who were on the fringes of gangs, as well as gang members themselves. They found that the relationship youth had with staff was positively related to participation for youth who were on the fringes of gangs ($r=.16$, $p=.05$) but not related for actual gang members. The actual gang members were older than the "gang wannabes" (on average 15 years old versus 13 years old, and over half were 16 to 18 years old). Taken together with the San Francisco Beacon finding, it appears, thus, that adult-youth connectedness is important in retaining youth longer enough for programs to have an effect, at least for younger youth.

Studies also indicate that better adult-youth relationships lead to better outcomes. Rhodes et al. (2005) and Grossman and Johnson (1997) found that youth who had closer relationships with their mentors experienced better improvements in academic and social-emotional outcomes. Grossman and Johnson found that youth who felt closest to their mentors experienced greater increases in their perceived scholastic competence, skipped school least, got higher grades, were least likely to start using drugs or alcohol and among high school students, and were more likely to enroll in college than youth in less close relationships. Rhodes et al. (2005) found that youth with the better relationships

had higher levels of perceived scholastic competence, a greater sense of school's value and better self-esteem, but not higher grades or better behavioral conduct.

In recent work, my colleagues and I have tried to understand the mechanisms through which better connectedness may work. We posited that that youth are drawn to after-school programs by activities they judge as fun and interesting. Once there, the relationships they form with program staff and their peers keep them coming (along with their innate interest in the activities). We also hypothesized that the adults play an additional role of enhancing the youth's experience while they are in the program. In particular, by structuring activities that are challenging to the youth, encouraging and guiding them through the tasks, staff stretches the participants' abilities—heightening or expanding a youth's interest in the activity and helping them master new skills. This theory of learning was laid out by Vygotsky (1978) and called “the zone of proximal development.” Rhodes (2002) suggests this is also one of the mechanisms through which mentoring helps children. If this theory holds, it suggests that creating bonds between the participants and the staff and among the participants allow the youth to get more out of their participation.

To test these hypotheses, we collected information on approximately 400 youth (primarily ages 10 to 17) and 50 staff participating in approximately 50 activities run by the Beacon programs in Philadelphia during the school year 2004-2005 (Campbell et al., in progress). We collected data on the degree to which:

- Youth felt supported by staff (i.e. “staff pay attention to me,” “understand me,” “care about me,” “say nice things to me when I do something good or try hard,” and “make me feel like part of the group”),
- Staff promoted peer cooperation (according to the youth), and
- How much youth liked the other participants.

(We collected many other variables, but we highlight here the results pertaining to connectedness to adults and peers.)

Using hierarchical linear modeling, we related these factors (as well as staff variables) to the degree to which youth felt positive when they were in the activity, were interested in the activity, how much they enjoyed it, how engaged they were in the activity (i.e., the degree to which they had to concentrate and were challenged), how much the youth tried to attend the activity and how much the youth felt they learned.

Figure 1 shows our findings.

We found that youth who felt more emotionally supported by staff (positive adult support):

- Felt more positive in their activities [$\beta=.28$, $p<.0001$]
- Were more interested in the activity [$\beta=.25$, $p<.0001$]
- Enjoyed it more [$\beta=.14$, $p=.09$]
- Were more engaged and challenged [$\beta=.27$, $p<.01$] and
- Felt they had learned more [$\beta=.45$, $p<.0001$].

Examining connectedness to peers, we found that youth in activities where staff created a cooperative peer environment (youth work together, help each other, and staff actively tries to include everyone) were:

- More interested in the activity ($\beta=.16$, $p=.02$), and
- Tried to come all the time ($\beta=.34$, $p<.001$).

As Walker and Arbreton (2004) found, the supportiveness of the staff did not affect the activity-level attendance directly. Rather what affected youth's desire to attend was the staff's ability to create an environment where participants could work and socialize with

their peers. Interestingly, the degree of peer affiliation (e.g. students here “are interested in getting to know each other,” “like being with each other,” “get along”) does not affect participation ($p=.25$) nor any other outcome we considered (affect, interest, enjoyment, engagement, or learning). The pattern of findings for peer affiliation and a cooperative peer environment would be consistent with students being interested in interacting with only a small subset of the typical group.

The findings from Campbell et al. (in progress) suggest that, as hypothesized, youth are attracted to participate in programs because they are interested in the activity and they want to socialize or interact with at least some of their fellow participants. Youth’s desire to keep coming was linked with the positive support they experience from adult staff and their ability to interact with peers. However, adult support also had a strong effect on what the youth get out of the activity. Perhaps the most important ways they do so is by heightening the degree to which participants feel challenged and engaged in the tasks and subsequently how much they learn. When we tested whether the adults’ support was fully mediated by the youth’s sense of engagement, we found that it was not. Even controlling for the heightened sense of engagement due to strong adult support, adult support further enhances how much a youth feels that he or she is learning from an activity. Thus, when adults emotionally support and encourage the youth, they create a synergy where the program is more effective. Figure 1 summarizes those findings.

Because of the role of adults and peers differs so much across childhood, we explored how our results differed by the age of the youth. We created three subgroups of youth—elementary school students ($n=169$), middle school students ($n=120$) and high school or older students ($n=43$). We found no difference by age in the effect of adult

support on challenge/engagement or learning (or how positively the participant felt in the activity). Adult support significantly improves engagement and learning for all aged youth. However, for middle school students adult support also heightened enjoyment and interest in the activity.

With respect to peer cooperation, we found that creating a cooperative peer environment is positively associated with participants of all ages wanting to come to the activity. In addition, for elementary and high school students, peer cooperation is positively correlated with the youth's interest in the activity. However for middle school students, the participants' interest in and enjoyment of the activities is unaffected by higher levels of peer interaction. We also found that middle school participants report being less engaged and challenged by the material in activities with more cooperative peer interaction.

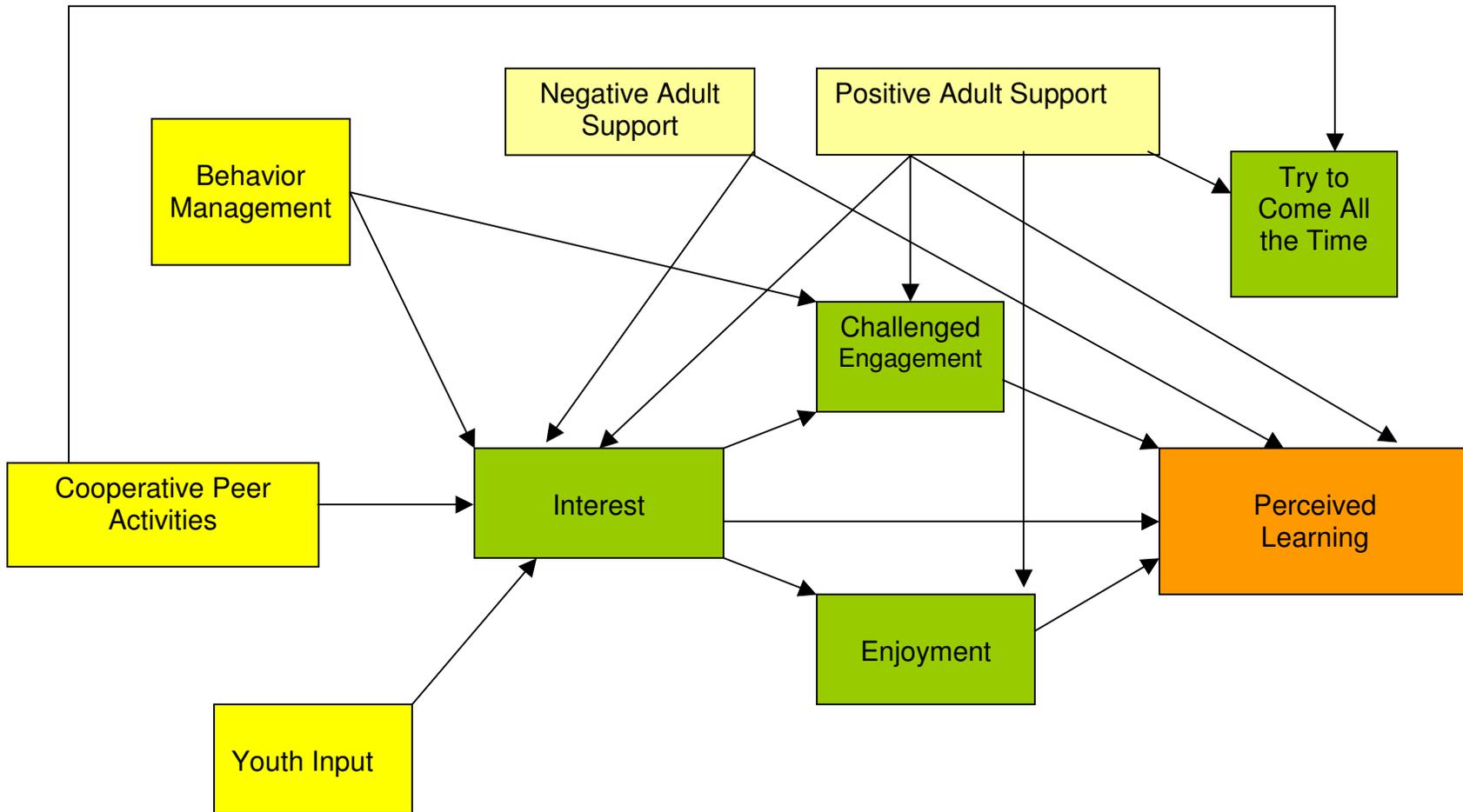
The findings for middle school youth on the effects of adult support are not surprising, given this is the age at which youth strive for more independence from their parents and they are beginning to explore the wider world. Non-parental adults are particularly valuable as advisors and guides, as well as individuals who can teach them about other environments than the ones they live in. The finding that more peer interaction is negatively associated with challenge/engagement and not related to enjoyment or interest was surprising, given that peers become more important to youth in middle school. However, middle school students did want to come to the activity more often if there is more peer interaction. Perhaps, socializing is so important to middle school students that it detracts from their ability to concentrate and engage in the activity's content.

SUMMARY

In this paper, we identified three levels of practices that can enhance the level of connectedness participants experience: individual staff-youth interaction practices; practices around activity structuring; and program level policies. At their core, most of the practices involve enabling staff to interact in a caring and/or respectful manner with youth.

Studies reviewed in this paper also found that the positive connections youth make with adults in programmatic settings—after-school programs, sports, mentoring and tutoring programs—help programs hold onto their young participants and enable the youth to get more out of the activity than they would have without the positive adult support. Thus, apart from just wanting to create a general environment that promotes positive development, youth programs should want to adopt policies and practices that enhance adult-youth connectedness so as to have bigger effects on their participants.

Figure 1



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TABLE 1
SUMMARY OF STUDIES EXAMINED

Programs or types of organizations studied

- Community-based mentoring programs
- School-based mentoring programs
- Tutoring programs
- Group mentoring programs
- Work-based mentoring/apprenticeship programs
- San Francisco Beacons
- Philadelphia Beacons
- A variety of school-based after-school programs
- Community-based after-school programs (Ys, Boys and Girls Clubs, Girls Incorporated)
- Youth Places (a program for older high risk youth in Pittsburgh)
- Boys and Girls Club Targeted Outreach Project (for gang-related youth)

Summary of Mentoring Samples

- 125 programs
- >150 staff interviews
- >200 mentors interviews
- >200 youth in-depth interviews
- 600 in-depth interviews with youth and mentoring representing 230 matches
- 30 focus groups with volunteers, youth, staff and parents
- >1000 youth surveys
- 1500 volunteer surveys
- Organizational survey of >750 mentoring programs

Sample of youth programs

- Site visits to:
 - 36 untargeted youth programs (Ys, clubs, after-school programs, etc.)
 - 22 programs targeted specifically at older, high-risk youth
- 2022 youth surveys
- 179 staff surveys
- 192 activity observations
- 16 in-depth staff interviews
- 18 in-depth youth interviews
- 250 youth participating in focus groups

TABLE 2

CLOSENESS TO ADULTS BY PROGRAM TYPE

