

## Structured Leisure Activities in Middle Childhood: Links to Well-Being

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### **Abstract:**

Associations between children's (N = 147) participation in structured leisure activities and their adjustment were examined. Caregivers provided lists of extracurricular activities (clubs, sports, and church activities) in which children participated. Children and caregivers participated in interviews and completed questionnaires designed to measure children's adjustment in four domains (academic competence, psychosocial development, externalizing behavior, and internalizing behavior). Classroom teachers completed additional measures of children's academic and social competence. Greater participation in club activities was linked with higher academic grades and more positive teacher ratings of academic competence. Greater participation in sports was associated with higher levels of psychosocial maturity and more positive teacher ratings of social competence. There were no associations between involvement in church activities and any indicators of adjustment. Activity involvement was unassociated with externalizing or internalizing behavior. Findings are discussed in terms of both selection into different types of extracurricular activities and the skills emphasized in the pursuit of such activities.

### **Article:**

The writings of Bronfenbrenner (1977, 1986), have emphasized the importance of conducting research that acknowledges children's positions nested within the multiple contexts (*microsystems*) of children's lives. In response to Bronfenbrenner's work, developmental researchers in recent years have increasingly recognized the importance of identifying the multiple social ecologies in which children and adolescents spend time, and of documenting ways in which experiences within such contexts have implications for adjustment. A substantial literature documents that children are influenced by the characteristics of their home environments including the physical resources available within homes (Armor, 1972; Bryant, Burchinal, Lau, Sparling, 1994), the parenting children receive (Pettit, Bates, & Dodge, 1997), and the types of relationships children have with their siblings (Dunn & Munn, 1986). In addition, children are impacted by experiences within their school environments. For example, children typically benefit from attending schools that encourage meaningful learning activities (Finn, 1989) and development of higher order thinking skills (Eccles & Midgley, 1989) and from having teachers who are structured, organized, and engaged in children's learning experiences (Fraser & Fisher, 1982). In contrast, we know relatively little about how children might be influenced by their experiences within a third context: that of their leisure activities. It is children's experiences within the leisure context, and the implications of these experiences for their well-being, that are the focus of this article.

Within the leisure context, a distinction can be made between involvement in structured versus unstructured leisure activities (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Larson, 2000; Mahoney & Stattin, 2000; Meeks & Mauldin, 1990). Structured activities are those that are organized by adults around specific social or behavioral goals. Examples include children's involvement in sports leagues, music lessons, or scouting activities. Unstructured activities arise more spontaneously in children's lives, and may include time spent engaged in social interactions with friends or siblings, reading or listening to music alone, or engaging in spontaneous play activities. Interestingly,

these two types of leisure have been differentially emphasized within different research traditions and within research conducted with children versus adolescents.

Much of what is currently known concerning the nature of children's involvement in both structured and unstructured leisure has emerged out of a literature focused on how children divide their time among various activities. Time-use researchers have typically collected data by having children complete time use diaries or using the Experience Sampling Methodology (ESM). ESM requires that children carry pagers and record their activities when pagers signal them at random intervals (see Larson, 1989). Typically, time-use researchers have attempted to describe in a detailed manner the time children spend engaged in a variety of activities or identify demographic differences in time spent engaged in such activities.

Results from time-use studies typically indicate that children spend a substantial number of hours each day engaged in leisure activities (e.g., socializing, watching TV, listening to music, engaging in art and hobbies, sports involvement, church related activities, and the catchall category of "other leisure") (Meeks & Mauldin 1990). Time spent engaged in various types of leisure activities varies somewhat based upon demographic characteristics such as gender, social class, and maternal employment status. For example, children spend more time reading and studying, and less time watching TV, when parents are more highly educated and mothers are employed part-time (Bianchi & Robinson, 1997). Boys are more likely than girls to participate in sports and games and to spend time watching television, while girls are more likely than boys to spend time socializing (Meeks & Mauldin, 1990).

Research that focuses primarily on documentation of how children spend their time has typically failed to differentiate between structured versus unstructured leisure activities, or to identify the specific types of structured leisure activities engaged in by children. For example, the category of "sports involvement" (Larson, 1989) might involve either participation in an organized soccer league, or playing a spontaneous game of street hockey with friends. "Church related activities" (Larson, 1989) might encompass either attendance of religious services or participation in a religiously sponsored youth group. In addition, this literature tends to either focus solely on time use among elementary-aged children, or to combine time-use data from respondents who range in age from middle childhood through adolescence, ignoring potential developmental differences in time use patterns. In an exception to these two tendencies, Meeks and Mauldin (1990) used the Time-Use Longitudinal Panel Study data to examine children's versus adolescents' participation in structured versus unstructured leisure activities. Findings indicated that structured leisure activities among girls are most prevalent during middle childhood. Among boys, weekend time involved in structured leisure activities peaks during middle childhood, while weekday participation in structured leisure peaks during early adolescence.

Few studies of children's time use have considered possible links between activity involvement and psychological and behavioral well-being. A notable exception to this tendency is the work of McHale and Crouter (2000). These investigators departed from more traditional methodologies for collecting information concerning how children spent their leisure hours (time-use diaries and ESM), and instead, conducted a series of telephone interviews with children to determine how children spent their free time. Time spent involved in different types of leisure activities was then considered as a correlate and predictor of children's academic grades, behavior, and depressive symptomatology. Findings differed with respect to both the type of leisure activity and the type of adjustment considered. Higher academic grades were observed among children who spent more time engaged in hobbies and reading and less time engaged in outdoor play. More conduct problems were observed among children who engaged in greater amounts of outdoor play. Higher levels of depressive symptomatology were observed for children who were less involved in hobbies and sports and who spent more time reading. The only structured leisure activity considered in this study was sports involvement, which was linked with lower levels of depressive symptomatology.

The lack of attention to potential links between children's involvement in structured leisure activities and their adjustment stands in contrast to a substantial literature documenting associations between adolescents' involvement in structured leisure (extracurricular) activities and their well-being. This literature has typically

relied on adolescent self-reports (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Fletcher, Elder, & Mekos, 2000; for an exception, see Mahoney & Cairns, 1997) to determine levels and types of activity participation. Findings in this area of inquiry have indicated academic and psychological benefits to adolescents who participate in volunteer service or church-sponsored activities, organized sports, and special interest groups (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Lamborn, Brown, Mounts, & Steinberg, 1992; Mahoney & Cairns, 1997; Yates & Youniss, 1996). However, adolescent males who participate in organized sports have an increased likelihood of using alcohol (Eccles & Barber, 1999).

There is little reason to suspect that the benefits of structured activity involvement are age-dependent. The 1992 Carnegie Corporation report, *A Matter of Time*, called national attention to the substantial amount of time children and adolescents alike spend engaged in unstructured leisure activities (usually watching television, listening to music, or socializing with friends) rather than engaged in structured leisure activities. Involvement with structured activities was proposed to benefit both children and adolescents in three ways: by preventing potential involvement in risky or antisocial activities, by teaching children and adolescents positive skills and competencies, and by placing young people in contact with networks of supportive adults and peers met through participation in organized activities.

In addition, childhood activity involvement sets the stage for involvement in organized leisure activities in adolescence, at which time they have been clearly linked with developmental benefits. Although not demonstrated empirically (factors predicting adolescent activity involvement remain understudied, as has been noted by Meeks and Maudlin (1990; for an exception, see Fletcher et al., 2000), there is every reason to suppose that the child who plays Little League baseball will be more likely to become the adolescent who engages in high school baseball, or that the child who takes clarinet lessons will be more likely to become the adolescent who plays in the marching band.

This developmental continuity in activity involvement notwithstanding, it should be noted that access to structured leisure activities is more likely to be limited to a certain segment of the population in childhood, compared to adolescence. Parents with adequate financial resources, as well as a commitment to transporting children to lessons, meetings, and games, are more likely to have children who participate in structured leisure activities. In adolescence, school-sponsored extracurricular activities are available to a wider segment of the student body (although this proposition has been challenged, see Quiroz, Gonzalez, & Frank, 1996) and transportation to and from activities is typically provided by schools. Accordingly, it is especially important to take into account confounds between social class and activity participation when studying links between activity participation and adjustment in childhood.

A potential advantage to studying extracurricular involvement in childhood lies in the community-based nature of such involvement. When links between extracurricular involvement and academic competence have been observed within adolescent samples, researchers have been challenged in their attempts to determine whether such benefits are due to the skills and competencies inculcated in children through their extracurricular participation (which then spill over into their academic experiences), or whether children who participate in school-based extracurricular activities benefit academically due to their increased investment in and attachment to the schools that sponsor such activities. Because structured leisure activities in childhood are virtually all community-based, any observed associations between activity involvement and academic competence could not be due to children's feelings of investment in sponsoring schools.

The purpose of the current study is to extend knowledge concerning the role of structured leisure in the lives of elementary-aged children by documenting associations between child participation in structured leisure activities (sports teams, church activities, and other clubs and organizations) and four domains of adjustment (academic competence, psychosocial development, externalizing behavior, and internalizing behavior). It is hypothesized that children who are more heavily involved in a variety of types of extracurricular activities will exhibit more positive adjustment than will their less involved peers.

## METHOD

### *Participants*

One hundred forty-seven fourth-grade students, and their primary caregivers (85% mothers, 10% fathers, and 4% stepparents and other relatives, referred to hereafter as parents) participated in this study. Students were enrolled in two consecutive cohorts attending a suburban elementary school in the southeastern portion of the United States. Sixty-five percent of children were European-American, and 35% African-American. Fifty-three percent of participating children were male, 47% female. Socio-economic status (SES) was assessed using the Hollingshead Four Factor Index of Social Status (Hollingshead, 1975). Scores ranged from 14 (unskilled laborers and menial service workers) to 64.5 (major business and professional workers), with an average of 37.94 (skilled craftsmen, clerical, and sales workers). Seven of 94 European American children and 27 of 50 African-American children were bussed to the participating school from an urban neighborhood in a nearby city. Hispanic ( $n = 14$ , 8 English as a Second Language students) and multiethnic ( $n = 10$ ) children were omitted from the sample because of small sample sizes within these subgroups.

### *Procedure*

Participating families were initially contacted regarding children's school-based participation in a study designed to identify children's social networks and associations between network characteristics and child well-being. Data collected during this initial contact with children were not analyzed as a part of this project. However, at this time teachers were asked to complete several measures assessing perceptions of children's social and academic competence. These teacher reports were utilized in the analyses reported here. Families were then contacted by telephone and invited to participate in the home interview portion of the assessment. Research assistants administered individual interviews and questionnaires regarding child socialization practices and child adjustment to parents and children in their homes. Interviews were audiotaped and later coded by research assistants.

### *Measures*

**Demographic Information.** Child sex was recorded from class lists provided by the participating school. Parents reported their own and their children's ethnicities, their own highest grades completed in school, and their present occupations. The Hollingshead Four Factor Index of Social Status (Hollingshead, 1975) was used to calculate SES. The Hollingshead accounts for characteristics of both parents (when both parents are involved in raising the child) in assessing socioeconomic status, making it preferable to other measures of SES that rely upon information about only one parent.

**Extracurricular Involvement.** During home interviews, parents completed the Child Behavioral Checklist (CBCL; Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1981). One of the questions asked parents to "Please list any organizations, clubs, teams, or groups your child belongs to." The CBCL provides space for parents to list up to three activities. Because parents were not permitted to list more than three activities, this measure cannot be considered indicative of the extent to which children were involved in extracurricular activities. Instead, it is reflective of those activities children participated in that were most salient in the minds of their parents. Salience is likely influenced by children's interest in and time spent participating in specific activities. Only 7% of parent's listed three activities, 18% listed two activities, 41% listed one activity, and 31% listed no activities. Research assistants coded each activity as falling into one of three categories: sports teams, church activities, and involvement in other types of clubs. Responses were coded as sports if they involved physical activity (e.g., swim team, dance team). Responses were coded as church activities if they were sponsored by a church or religious organization (e.g., church choir, church youth groups). Responses were coded as other clubs if they represented a type of organized activity that did not fit into the previous two categories (e.g., Girl or Boy Scouts, 4-H clubs). The final measures of activity involvement was the number of sports teams, the number of church activities, and the number of clubs participated in by each child. Accordingly, this measure takes into account both whether children participated in a given type of activity (e.g., detecting differences between students who were versus were not involved in any sports activities), and the extent to which they might be heavily involved in any one type of activity (e.g., detecting differences between students who played on a soccer team versus those who were involved in soccer, basketball, and football).

**Academic Competence.** Academic achievement was indexed using three measures. The participating school provided students' scores on state-wide standardized end-of-year math and reading achievement tests. Given the high correlation between reading and math achievement ( $r = .82$ ), achievement test scores were averaged across math and reading to provide a summary measure of academic achievement. The participating school also provided academic grades for each student during the school year in which data collection occurred. Final academic grades were reported on a traditional four-point scale (A = 4.0, B = 3.0, C = 2.0, D = 1.0, F = 0.0). Grades were averaged across reading and math, which were highly correlated ( $r = .72$ ) scores. The decision to exclude science and social studies grades from this summary was made based on the low variability in science and social studies grades and the desire to be consistent with achievement test data (available only for math and reading). Children's classroom teachers completed the academic competence subscale of the Harter Perceived Competence Scale (Harter, 1982). This scale was designed to assess perceptions of children's academic abilities (five items;  $\alpha = 0.93$ ). Teachers indicated on a four-point scale children's similarity to two hypothetical children. A sample item is "Some kids do very well at their classwork" versus "other kids don't do very well at their classwork." Scores were standardized within classrooms to control for potential biases in teachers' perceptions of children.

**Psychosocial Development.** Children's classroom teachers completed the social competence subscale of the Harter Perceived Competence Scale (Harter, 1982). This scale was designed to measure perceptions of children's abilities to competently affiliate with others (five items;  $\alpha = 0.93$ ). Teachers indicated on a four-point scale a target child's similarity to two hypothetical types of children. A sample item is "some kids find it hard to make friends" versus "for other kids it's pretty easy." Again, scores were standardized within classrooms to control for potential biases in teachers' perceptions of children. Children completed the work orientation and self reliance subscales of the Psychosocial Maturity Inventory (Greenberger, Josselson, Knerr, & Knerr, 1974). The work orientation subscale measured children's pride in the successful completion of tasks. A sample item, reverse coded, is "I often leave my homework unfinished if there are a lot of good TV shows on that evening." The self-reliance subscale assessed children's feelings of internal control and abilities to make decisions independently. A sample item, reverse coded, is "Luck decides most of the things that happen to me." Responses on both subscales were on a four-point scale ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (4). Items on the two scales were combined to yield one scale measuring generalized psychosocial maturity (20 items;  $\alpha = 0.72$ ). Children also completed a measure of self-esteem (10 items,  $\alpha = 0.76$ ; adapted from Rosenberg, 1965). A sample item is "On the whole, I am satisfied with myself." Children's responses were based on a four-point scale ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (4).

**Externalizing Behavior.** Teachers completed the externalizing behavior subscale of the Teachers' Report Form (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1981). A sample item on the TRF asks the teacher to indicate the extent to which a child is "disobedient at school." Parents were asked to complete the externalizing behavior subscale of the Child Behavior Checklist (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1981). A sample item on the CBCL asks parents to indicate the extent to which their child "argues a lot."

**Internalizing Behavior.** Teachers completed the internalizing behavior subscale of the Teachers' Report Form (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1981). A sample item on the TRF asks the teacher to indicate how often a child "feels worthless or inferior." Parents were asked to complete the internalizing behavior subscale of the Child Behavior Checklist (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1981). A sample item on the CBCL asks parents to indicate how often their child is "nervous, high-strung, or tense."

Means, standard deviations, and ranges of all variables are presented in Table 1.

### **Plan of Analysis**

We were interested in determining whether involvement in three types of extracurricular activities (organized sports, church activities, and clubs) was associated with children's psychosocial development in four domains: academic competence, psycho-social development, externalizing behavior, and internalizing behavior. Because out-come variables within our four domains of interest were strongly intercorrelated, we decided to perform a

series MANOVAs, which would control for correlations among outcome variables when considering whether they were associated with child involvement in sports, church, and club activities. In the first MANOVA performed for each domain, we entered demographic control variables (child sex, ethnicity, and ses) as predictors. In the second MANOVA performed for each domain, we added as predictors child participation in sports, church, and club activities. The second MANOVA was conducted to determine whether activity participation was associated with child well-being, above and beyond the effects of demographic controls.

**Table 1. Variable Means, Standard Deviations, and Ranges**

<i>Variable</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Range</i>
Organized sports	.51	.67	0–2
Church activities	.19	.43	0–2
Club involvement	.30	.49	0–2
Psychosocial maturity	2.78	.30	2.10–3.60
Social competence	.10	.98	–2.86–1.08
Self-esteem	3.07	.41	1.90–4.00
Achievement test scores	151.53	8.97	125.50–171.50
Grade point average	3.03	.80	1.00–4.00
Academic competence	.15	.94	–2.03–1.36
TFR externalizing behavior	3.71	.98	–.62–5.97
CBCL externalizing behavior	8.56	6.86	0–34.00
TFR internalizing behavior	6.51	1.07	–.62–5.02
CBCL internalizing behavior	5.82	5.39	0–25.00

## RESULTS

### *Bivariate Associations Among Variables*

Patterns of intercorrelations among variables are presented in Table 2. Different types of activity involvement were not significantly associated with one another, suggesting that these variables were indicative of three distinct ways in which children spent their time. Overall patterns of association among variables within each adjustment domain suggested that variables were assessing related constructs. Exceptions to this general tendency were as follows. First, children’s levels of social competence and self-esteem were not significantly associated, although each was linked with psychosocial maturity. Second, parents’ versus teachers’ perceptions of children’s internalizing problems were unassociated. This may be due in part to the fact that internalizing symptomatology is a subjective experience for children, and difficult to observe from an outside vantage point. Associations between activity involvement variables and indicators of competence indicated that these correlations varied greatly depending on both the type of activity and the adjustment domain. For example, church involvement was uncorrelated with any indicator of adjustment. In contrast, sports activities were associated with psycho-social development and social and academic competence variables, as well as with parents’ reports of internalizing behavior. Club involvement was associated with academic outcomes and self-esteem.

### *Prediction of Academic Competence*

Results of MANOVAs testing for associations of demographic and activity involvement variables with child academic competence are reported in Table 3. Both ethnicity,  $F(3,122) = 9.46, p < .01$ , and SES,  $F(3,122) = 10.33, p < .01$ , were associated with academic competence. Univariate tests indicated that European-American children received higher achievement test scores,  $t(125) = 5.14, p < .01$ , and higher academic grades,  $t(125) = 2.02, p < .01$ , and were reported by teachers to be more academically competent,  $t(125) = 2.58, p < .01$ , than African-American children. Univariate tests also indicated that children from higher SES families received higher achievement test scores,  $t(125) = 5.02, p < .01$ , and higher academic grades,  $t(125) = 4.42, p < .01$ , and were reported by teachers to be more academically competent,  $t(125) = 4.89, p < .01$ . The model including sex, ethnicity, and SES as predictors of academic competence yielded an  $R^2$  of 0.40 for achievement test scores, 0.22 for academic grades and 0.27 for teacher ratings of academic competence.

The addition of sports activities, church activities, and club activities as predictors of academic competence indicated a significant effect of club involvement,  $F(3,114) = 4.43, p < .01$ . Univariate tests indicated that

children involved in clubs received higher academic grades,  $t(125) = 3.37, p < .01$ , and higher teacher ratings of academic competence,  $t(125) = 2.84, p < .01$ . The model including demographic and activity involvement variables yielded an  $R^2$  of 0.41 for achievement test scores, 0.30 for academic grades, and 0.32 for academic competence. Change in  $R^2$  was significant for the prediction of both academic grades and teacher ratings of academic competence.

**Table 2. Intercorrelations Among Variables**

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
1. Social class	—															
2. Sex	-.08	—														
3. Race	.35**	.14	—													
4. Organized sports	.34**	.01	.26**	—												
5. Church activities	.18*	.03	.04	.10	—											
6. Club involvement	.24**	-.09	.07	-.15	.01	—										
7. Psychosocial maturity	.22**	-.07	.20*	.27**	-.05	.03	—									
8. Social competence	.38**	-.05	-.03	.21*	.11	.22	.19*	—								
9. Self-esteem	.22**	-.09*	.14	.23**	-.04	.03*	.52**	.13	—							
10. Achievement scores	.50**	-.03	.48**	.25**	.13	.27**	.35**	.15	.34**	—						
11. Grade point average	.43**	-.00	.32**	.19*	.16	.35**	.31**	.24**	.28**	.70**	—					
12. Academic competence	.46**	-.00	.37**	.21*	.13	.30**	.36**	.36**	.33**	.72**	.67**	—				
13. TFR externalizing behavior	-.22**	-.08	-.19*	-.01	.10	.04	-.03	-.18*	.08	-.05	-.17	-.08	—			
14. CBCL externalizing behavior	-.20*	-.03	.17*	-.08	.09	.05	-.09	-.31**	-.09	-.00	.01	-.16	.23**	—		
15. TFR internalizing behavior	-.17*	-.05	.11	.07	-.01	-.11	-.01	-.36**	-.11	-.13	-.07	-.19*	.09	.19*	—	
16. CBCL internalizing behavior	-.09	-.06	.13	-.17*	.02	.18	-.08	-.18*	-.06	.03	.02	-.20	-.05	.60**	.14	—

Note. Associations between dichotomously coded variables (sex and race) and continuously coded variables are represented by Spearman rank coefficients. Associations between continuously coded variables are represented by Pearson product moment coefficients.

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

**Table 3. Prediction of Academic Competence Variables from Demographic Controls and Child Activity Involvement**

	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	$\Delta R^2$
<i>Achievement Scores</i>				
Block 1				
Sex	-.95	1.27	-.75	
Ethnicity	7.37	1.43	5.14**	
Ses	.28	.06	5.02**	.40**
Block 2				
Sex	-.67	1.30	-.51	
Ethnicity	6.70	1.48	4.5**	
Ses	.24	.06	3.76**	
Sports	1.02	1.07	.96	
Church	.724	1.46	.50	
Clubs	2.52	1.38	1.83	.01
<i>Grade point average</i>				
Block 1				
Sex	.07	.13	.56	
Ethnicity	.30	.15	2.02*	
Ses	2.49	.01	4.42**	.22**
Block 2				
Sex	.098	.13	.77	
Ethnicity	.25	.15	1.71	
Ses	.018	.01	2.1**	
Sports	.091	.10	.88	
Church	.17	.14	1.21	
Clubs	.45	.13	3.37**	.08**
<i>Teacher Perceptions of Academic Competence</i>				
Block 1				
Sex	-.02	.14	-.12	
Ethnicity	.42	.16	2.58*	
Ses	.03	.01	4.89**	.27
Block 2				
Sex	-.005	.14	-.04	
Ethnicity	.38	.16	2.3*	
Ses	.022	.01	3.33**	
Sports	.12	.12	1.04	
Church	.11	.16	.70	
Clubs	.43	.15	2.84**	.05*

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

### *Prediction of Psychosocial Development*

Results of MANOVAs testing for associations between demographic and activity involvement variables and psychosocial development variables are reported in Table 4. Ethnicity,  $F(3,114) = 7.23$ ,  $p < .01$ , and SES,  $F(3,114) = 5.35$ ,  $p < .01$ , were associated with psychosocial development. Univariate tests indicated that European-American children were reported by teachers to be more socially competent than African-American children,  $t(125) = -2.74$ ,  $p < .01$ . Children from higher SES families received higher scores on teacher ratings of social competence,  $t(125) = 5.63$ ,  $p < .01$ . The model including sex, ethnicity, and SES as predictors of psychosocial maturity yielded an  $R^2$  of 0.19 for social competence, 0.07 for psychosocial maturity, and 0.09 for self-esteem.

The addition of sports activities, church activities, and club activities as predictors of psychosocial maturity resulted in a significant effect of sports activities,  $F(3,125) = 3.04$ ,  $p < .05$ . Univariate tests indicated that children involved in organized sports had greater scores on teacher ratings of social competence,  $t(125) = 2.14$ ,  $p < .05$ , and higher psychosocial maturity,  $t(125) = 2.25$ ,  $p < .05$ . The model including demographic and activity involvement variables yielded an  $R^2$  of 0.26 for social competence, 0.13 for psychosocial maturity, and 0.11 for self-esteem. Change in  $R^2$  was significant for the prediction of social competence only.

**Table 4. Prediction of Psychosocial Development Variables from Demographic Controls and Activity Involvement**

	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	$\Delta R^2$
<i>Teacher Perceptions of Social Competence</i>				
Block 1				
Sex	.69	.15	.46	
Ethnicity	-.47	.17	-2.7**	
Ses	.37	.01	5.6**	.19**
Block 2				
Sex	.15	.15	.97	
Ethnicity	-.56	.17	-3.26**	
Ses	.03	.01	4.37**	
Sports	.26	.12	2.14*	
Church	.01	.17	.58	
Clubs	.33	.16	2.09**a	.07*
<i>Psychosocial Maturity</i>				
Block 1				
Ses	-.03	.05	-.64	
Ethnicity	.09	.06	1.64	
Ses	.04	.01	1.85	.07**
Block 2				
Sex	-.038	.05	-.74	
Ethnicity	.083	.06	1.43	
Ses	.003	.00	1.31	
Sports	.094	.04	2.25*	
Church	-.059	.06	-1.01	
Clubs	.022	.05	.40	.06
<i>Self-esteem</i>				
Block 1				
Sex	-.14	.07	-2.16	
Ethnicity	.01	.08	1.33	
Ses	.01	.00	1.94	.09**
Block 2				
Sex	-.14	.07	-2.00*	
Ethnicity	.074	.08	.96	
Ses	.005	.00	1.42	
Sports	.095	.06	1.72	
Church	-.07	.08	-.90	
Clubs	.015	.07	.21	.02

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

<sup>a</sup>No multivariate effect observed.

### **Prediction of Externalizing Behavior**

Results of MANOVAs testing for associations between demographic and activity involvement variables and externalizing behavior variables are reported in Table 5. Ethnicity,  $F(2,134) = 6.35$ ,  $p < .01$ , and SES,  $F(2,134) = 7.12$ ,  $p < .01$ , were significantly associated with externalizing behavior. Univariate tests indicated that European-American children exhibited more externalizing behavior as reported by parents,  $t(125) = 3.32$ ,  $p < .01$ . Children from lower SES families scored higher on externalizing behavior as reported by parents,  $t(125) = -3.46$ ,  $p < .01$ , and teachers,  $t(125) = -2.25$ ,  $p < .05$ . The model including sex, ethnicity, and SES as predictors of externalizing behavior yielded an  $R^2$  of 0.11 for parental reports of externalizing behavior and 0.07 for teacher reports of externalizing behavior.

The addition of sports activities, church activities, and club involvement as predictors of externalizing behavior resulted in no significant multivariate effects and no significant change in  $R^2$  for prediction of externalizing behavior.

### **Prediction of Internalizing Behavior**

Results of MANOVAs testing for associations between demographic and activity involvement variables, and internalizing behavior are reported in Table 6. Ethnicity,  $F(2,134) = 4.73$ ,  $p < .05$ , and SES,  $F(2,134) = 5.26$ ,  $p < .01$ , were significantly associated with internalizing behavior. Univariate tests indicated that European-American children scored higher on teacher reported internalizing behavior,  $t(125) = 2.59$ ,  $p < .05$ , and children

from lower SES families scored higher on teacher reported internalizing behavior,  $t(125) = -2.96, p < .01$ . The model including sex, ethnicity, and SES as predictors of psychosocial maturity yielded an  $R^2$  of 0.03 for parental reports of internalizing behavior and 0.08 for teacher reported internalizing behavior.

**Table 5. Prediction of Externalizing Behavior Variables from Demographic Controls and Activity Involvement**

	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	$\Delta R^2$
<i>CBCL Externalizing Behavior</i>				
Block 1				
Sex	-1.7	1.13	-1.49	
Ethnicity	4.25	1.28	3.32**	
Ses	-.17	.05	-3.46**	.11**
Block 2				
Sex	-1.55	1.6	-1.34	
Ethnicity	4.23	1.33	3.17**	
Ses	-.20	.56	3.65**	
Sports	.49	.95	.52	
Church	2.22	1.34	1.66	
Clubs	1.5	1.24	1.22	.02
<i>TRF Externalizing Behavior</i>				
Block 1				
Sex	-.25	.17	-1.51	
Ethnicity	-.11	.19	-.58	
Ses	-.02	.01	-2.25*	.07**
Block 2				
Sex	-.29	.17	-1.7	
Ethnicity	-.071	.20	-.36	
Ses	-.021	.01	-2.57*	
Sports	.12	.14	.90	
Church	.30	.20	1.56	
Clubs	.071	.18	.39	.02

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

The addition of sports activities, church activities, and club activities as predictors of internalizing behavior resulted in no significant multivariate effects and no significant change in  $R^2$  for prediction of internalizing behavior.

## DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to identify associations between participation in structured leisure activities and well-being during middle childhood. Findings indicated that children who were more involved in club activities received higher academic grades and were rated by their teachers as higher in academic competence than were their peers who were less involved in such activities. Children who were more involved in sports activities were rated by their teachers as more socially competent than peers who were less involved in such activities. Children who were more involved in sports activities also reported higher levels of psychosocial maturity. Participation in church activities was unassociated with child well-being. Activity involvement was unassociated with levels of externalizing or internalizing behavior.

These findings suggest that elementary-aged children who participate in structured leisure activities experience greater psychosocial development and academic competence than do their less involved peers. Such associations between activity involvement and indicators of child well-being are similar, but not identical, to those typically observed within adolescent samples. To understand differences and similarities, as well as potential continuities, between activity involvement in childhood versus adolescence, it is necessary to examine more closely patterns of association between involvement in different types of activities and adjustment within different domains of competence.

Within this sample, academic competence was linked with participation in one particular type of structured leisure activity: organized clubs. Children who reported greater involvement in club activities received higher

academic grades and were rated by teachers as more academically competent, compared with their peers who were less involved in such activities. Such associations cannot be accounted for by increased levels of attachment to school resulting from participation in school-based extracurricular activities, as club activities were not affiliated with the participating school.

**Table 6. Prediction of Internalizing Behavior Variables from Demographic Controls and Activity Involvement**

	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	$\Delta R^2$
<i>CBCL Internalizing Behavior</i>				
Block 1				
Sex	-.03	.98	-.04	
Ethnicity	2.02	1.05	1.93	
Ses	-6.58	.04	-1.64	
Block 2				
Sex	.13	.94	.14	
Ethnicity	2.35	1.07	2.18*	
Ses	-.062	.04	1.41	
Sports	-1.28	.77	1.67	
Church	.64	1.08	.59	
Clubs	1.85	.10	1.85	.09**
<i>TRF Internalizing Behavior</i>				
Block 1				
Sex	-.07	.18	-.41	
Ethnicity	.53	.21	2.59*	
Ses	-.02	.01	-2.96**	
Block 2				
Sex	-.13	.19	-.70	
Ethnicity	.50	.21	2.35*	
Ses	-.028	.01	3.21*	
Sports	.18	.15	1.20	
Church	.07	.21	.33	
Clubs	-.08	.20	-.41	.01

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ .

Interestingly, associations between club involvement and academic competence were not observed for our third indicator of academic well-being: standardized achievement test scores. Instead, club activities were linked with the two indicators of academic competence that were indicative not only of objectively assessed academic achievement, but also of teachers' perceptions regarding such performance. This suggests that club involvement is not necessarily linked with improved academic performance, but rather with an increased likelihood that children will be perceived by teachers to be meeting classroom goals and expectations. Such goals and expectations are not solely academic in nature, but may also reflect the extent to which students can get along with others and exhibit cooperative behavior in the classroom. Additional evidence supporting this conclusion is reflected in the strong bivariate association between participation in club activities and children's levels of teacher-reported social competence. Although no multivariate effect linked club involvement with psychosocial development, there was a univariate association between club involvement and social competence observed within MANOVA findings. It is likely that children who participate in club activities are more socially and behaviorally competent than their peers who do not have such experiences. Increased levels of nonacademic competence are then positively evaluated by teachers within the classroom setting.

This pattern of associations may be understood in terms of both processes that select children into club involvement and the likelihood that participation in club activities will encourage the development of social and behavioral competence. With regard to selection, it is likely that certain types of children are more likely to both participate in club activities, and to exhibit social and behavioral competence at school. Such children would include those whose parents value and model affiliative behaviors in the home and the community, as well as children predisposed to feel more comfortable and confident in social situations. Children who are high in such personality traits as conscientiousness may also be more likely to both participate in club activities that

emphasize the development of positive personal attributes (see the description of scouting below) and to perform well in school.

It is also likely that children who spend a portion of their leisure time engaged in club activities have increased opportunities to learn relational skills and competencies as they interact with one another in a context that has as an explicit goal the development of such competencies in young people. The overwhelming majority of students who participated in club activities within this sample were members of scouting organizations (Girl Scouts of America and Boy Scouts of America). The purpose of the Boy Scouts of America is “[t]o provide an educational program for boys and young adults to build character, to train in the responsibilities of participating citizenship, and to develop personal fitness” (National Council of the Boy Scouts of America, 2001). Scout law requires that boy scouts be trustworthy, helpful, friendly, and courteous, to name a few personal characteristics (National Council of the Boy Scouts of America, 2001). Similarly, Girl Scout Law requires that members “. . . be honest and fair, friendly and helpful, considerate and caring, courageous and strong, and responsible . . .” (Girl Scouts of the USA, 2000, p. 13). Children who exemplify these personal characteristics within the school environment are likely to be evaluated positively by their teachers. In addition, activities such as scouting typically require cooperation and teamwork, also of value in an academic setting.

Interestingly, participation in organized sports activities was unassociated with academic competence within this sample. This stands in contrast to findings reported in research with adolescent samples, in which adolescents who participate in sports activities typically perform better in school than their classmates who do not participate in such activities (e.g., Eccles & Barber, 1999). However, within adolescent samples, participation in organized sports often reflects membership on school-sponsored sports teams. Associations between membership on school sports teams and indicators of academic competence may reflect school requirements that students who wish to participate in extracurricular activities maintain a specified grade point average. In such cases, associations between participation and academic grades in high school may be explained by selection or motivational processes resulting from such policies. Such factors cannot be at work in elementary school, at which age sports participation is primarily community-based. Under such circumstances, it appears that children who participate in community sports leagues are more socially competent and higher in psychosocial development (work orientation and self-reliance) than are their peers who are less involved in sports.

Once again, explanations for such associations involve both selection and skill acquisition. It may be that more socially competent children are predisposed to participate in sports leagues, due to their comfort in group situations and confidence in their abilities to get along with teammates. In addition, children who are predisposed to work hard at developing athletic skills (indicative of work orientation) and who are confident in their own athletic abilities (indicative of self-reliance) may be predisposed to participate in sports. In turn, participation in sports may further develop within children levels of social competence and psychosocial maturity.

Somewhat surprising were findings indicating that involvement in church activities in childhood was unassociated with well-being. Within adolescent samples, participation in religious activities has been linked with lower levels of internalized distress (Wright, Frost, & Wisecarver, 1993) and a decreased likelihood of sexual activity (Crockett, Bingham, Chopak, & Vicary, 1996). The lack of associations reported here may be accounted for by a number of factors. First, childhood involvement in religious activities (Bible study, youth group, bell choir) may be determined at the discretion of parents rather than children themselves. It may be that participation in such activities is only beneficial to participants when their involvement is voluntary. Alternatively, participation in religiously sponsored activities may benefit children in domains not measured within the current study. The work of Yates and Youniss (1996) has indicated that adolescents participating in service projects (serving meals in a homeless shelter) reap benefits with respect to political-moral identity. The benefits to younger children of participation in religious activities may also be in the areas of civic connection and moral responsibility, indicators of well-being that were not assessed in the current project.

It is also of interest to note that children who participated in structured leisure activities within this project did not benefit in terms of lower levels of either externalizing or internalizing behavior. Research on extracurricular involvement as a correlate or predictor of well-being in adolescence has also typically not observed effects for internalized distress outcomes. It may be that activity participation does not serve as a protective factor within this domain of adjustment. In addition, adolescent extra-curricular involvement has been linked predominantly with higher levels of academic investment and competence, rather than levels of involvement in problem behavior (with the exception of higher levels of alcohol use among adolescent boys who are involved in organized sports; Eccles & Barber, 1999). It may be that activity involvement is only associated with types of problem behavior that emerge in early adolescence— such as substance use.

### *Limitations*

Given the relatively small sample size in the current study and the cross-sectional nature of data, the findings presented here should be considered preliminary. Longitudinal data is needed to clarify the nature of linkages between involvement in structured leisure activities and developmental competence in childhood. In addition, participation in this project was restricted to a very narrowly defined group of individuals: African-American and European-American fourth-grade children attending a suburban school in the Southeast. Although this sample was socioeconomically diverse, we cannot be sure that associations between activity involvement and child competence would be observed for younger children, or for children from different ethnic groups.

In addition, the project yielding the data analyzed herein was not initially developed with the study of activity involvement in mind. Accordingly, the available measure of activity participation was not ideal. It is possible, although not likely, that children participated in additional types of activities that were not spontaneously listed on report forms by parents. Had parents been provided lists of activities available in their community and asked to identify those in which their children participated (a methodology typically used with adolescents), different results might have been obtained. Of greater concern is having restricted parents to listing only three activities participated in by their children. Still, only a very small percentage of parents indicated that their children participated in three activities; it is unlikely that many of these would have listed four or more activities had such an alternative been available. The structure of children's lives may be such that they are logistically unable to participate in as many activities as adolescents.

### *Implications for Research and Community Action*

Findings reported here suggest that the study of structured leisure activities in childhood and their potential links with well-being have not received sufficient attention within the developmental or community psychology literatures. The majority of fourth-grade children reported participating in at least one structured leisure activity. Of greater importance, participation in certain types of structured leisure activities, club activities and sports activities, was linked with higher teacher evaluations of academic and social competence and children's own reports of psychosocial maturity. Although not addressed within this study, it is also likely that children who demonstrate commitment to structured leisure activities in elementary school are likely to become adolescents who are involved in such activities.

Associations between participation in select activities in childhood and academic and psychosocial well-being suggest that parents and community leaders should consider ways to make organized leisure activities available to as broad a group of elementary aged children as possible, as such participation may both inculcate in children positive developmental attributes, and set them on a pathway for extracurricular participation later in life. To increase levels of childhood activity involvement within communities, leaders must overcome barriers to participation based on both accessibility and cost of activities. We suggest that schools, churches, and after-school care programs represent logical settings through which to funnel information concerning activity alternatives to families, and as potential sponsors of activities. For example, scouting troops often meet at churches in the evenings, but might also meet during the after school hours at schools or after school program sites. Sports teams might be sponsored by churches, or information about sports leagues available through community agencies (such as the YMCA) might be distributed to children through schools, churches, and after-school programs. Financial barriers to participation may be more difficult to overcome. Registration fees

required for participation in activities such as scouting and sports leagues are prohibitive for many families. If activity participation in childhood is to be considered a priority, community leaders must be creative in looking for new and innovative ways to supplement participation costs. Possibilities include cultivating relationships with local businesses that may be willing to sponsor activities, obtaining grant support for activities, and using community volunteers to staff activities.

Further research focusing on the role of structured activity involvement in children's lives should focus on a key set of issues unaddressed in the current study. Such efforts should determine whether activity involvement is longitudinally predictive of child well-being, as well as identify characteristics of children and families that both predispose them to become involved in structured leisure activities, and mediate associations between activity involvement and adjustment. It is also of interest to determine the extent to which child activity involvement may set in place a trajectory that results in extracurricular involvement during adolescence and civic responsibility in the adult years.

Two somewhat disconnected literatures exist with regard to child and adolescent involvement in leisure activities. One literature has focused primarily on the experiences of elementary aged children, and has sought to describe the manner in which leisure time is represented within the broader description of time use. The second literature has focused on associations between involvement in structured leisure activities and a variety of indicators of well-being, but has been restricted to adolescent samples. Research focusing on the role of participation in structured leisure activities in the lives of elementary aged children represents a potential link between these two somewhat disparate literatures. It is only by understanding connections between how children spend their time and their well-being in childhood and beyond that we will develop a fuller picture of development as it unfolds within the microsystem of the leisure context.

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