The goal of this volume is to merge the out-of-school time and the peer relationship literatures to explore the question of how peers in organized activity contexts—like sports, the arts, and community-based organizations—influence academic functioning, social development, and problem behavior. This volume shows how organized activity contexts offer an ideal context to study peer processes, and to explore both how and why peers matter for organized activity participation. The first chapter reviews the theoretical and empirical research on peers and organized activities. These chapters address several questions including: (1) Does co-participating in an organized activity with your friend improve the quality of the relationship; (2) When do peer relations amplify the benefits of participating and when do they exacerbate negative outcomes; and (3) Does participation in organized activities help adolescents manage difficult transition periods? Finally, the volume concludes with a conceptual framework to guide future research on how organized activity characteristics influence peer processes and how these processes within organized activity contexts influence outcomes for adolescents.
Organized Out-of-School Activities: Settings for Peer Relationships

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Organized Out-of-School Activities and Peer Relationships: Theoretical Perspectives and Previous Research

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Abstract

The goal of this volume is to show how organized activities provide an ideal setting for developing a deeper understanding of peer relations, as well as offering a context for a more positive study of peers. The chapters in this volume focus on youth 10 to 18 years of age. In this introductory chapter we first describe the reasons why organized activities, like sports, arts, and school clubs, are ideal settings to examine peer processes. Next, we describe the theoretical and empirical research related to two questions: (1) how do peers influence organized activity participation and (2) how does organized activity participation influence peer relations. We organize this review around three themes outlined in the broader peer relations literature: (1) peer groups, (2) peer relationships, and (3) peer interactions. © 2013 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.
There is growing evidence that participation in school- and community-based organized activities, such as sports, school clubs, and youth development programs, is related to indicators of positive development, including greater academic achievement, educational attainment, occupational status, self-esteem, socio-emotional adjustment, resilience, and involvement in political and volunteer activities (Bohnert, Fredricks, & Randall, 2010; Mahoney, Vandell, Simpkins, & Zarrett, 2009). Other research suggests that participating in organized activities is a protective factor that reduces youths’ involvement in problem behaviors, such as delinquency and substance use (Mahoney & Cairns, 1997; Youniss, Yates, & Su, 1997), though sports participation has been shown to be related to higher drug and alcohol use (Eccles & Barber, 1999).

Although most research has focused on Caucasians and youth in the United States, the benefits of organized activity participation are evident for African Americans and Latino youth as well as youth in Canada and Australia (Fredricks & Simpkins, 2012). The majority of the research reviewed in this chapter focuses on youth in the United States.

The potential benefits of organized activities have sparked two pressing questions: (1) how do these activities influence adolescents’ development, and (2) how can we promote and sustain adolescents’ participation in organized activities? A common response to both of these questions is peers. Organized activities offer a wide range of social development opportunities and are structured in a way that helps adolescents meet their needs for social relatedness. There is evidence that participation in these settings facilitates adolescents’ maintenance and development of friendships (Schaefer, Simpkins, Vest, & Price, 2011). Involvement in organized activities can have broader implications for shaping peers’ perceptions of an adolescents’ popularity or likeability (Eder & Kinney, 1995).

Although only a few researchers have examined the links between organized activities and peer relationships, there are many parallels in the two distinct literatures. First, spending time in organized activities and hanging out with peers are two ways many Western adolescents pass their time outside of school. In recent national studies, over 70% of youth report participating in at least one organized activity context over the past year (Feldman & Matjasko, 2005). Second, high quality organized activities and supportive relationships with peers are settings that support adolescents’ positive development, such as higher academic achievement, social competence, and self-esteem (Mahoney et al., 2009; Vitaro, Boivin, & Bukowski, 2009; Wentzel, 2009). Conversely, youth who are disconnected from activities and from friendships are at greater risk for delinquency, depression, and substance use (Mahoney et al., 2009; Vitaro et al., 2009).

In Western contexts, peer relationships become increasingly salient during adolescence. Youth spend more time with their peers, place greater emphasis on the opinions and expectations of their peers, and are more...
strongly attuned to and motivated by belongingness and positive peer regard (Brechwald & Prinstein, 2011; Brown & Larson, 2009). Peers are also a primary source of emotional and social support and play a key role in self-evaluation and identity development. Although participation in organized activities offers a range of social opportunities that can support the development of peer relations, the research on peers in these settings is limited (Stattin & Kerr, 2009). Instead, most of our understanding of peer processes comes from research in classrooms or laboratory-based settings. Furthermore, the peer relations literature has historically focused on peer influence in terms of delinquent, deviant, and health-compromising behaviors (Brown, Bakken, Ameringer, & Mahon, 2008). The emphasis on the negative aspects of peer relations neglects the reality that much of peer influence is positive (Brown et al., 2008).

The goal of this volume is to show how organized activities provide an ideal setting for developing a deeper understanding of peer relations, as well as offering a context for a more positive study of peers. We hope this issue will encourage scholars in both the out-of-school time and peer relations fields to examine this question. Rodkin and Ryan (2011) echo this sentiment in a recent handbook chapter on peers, arguing that “peer relations researchers would be well served by leaving the classroom from time to time to venture into some of the settings where children and adolescents form relationships such as neighborhoods and after-school and community-based activities” (p. 373).

In this introductory chapter, we review the literature on organized activities and adolescents’ peer relations. First, we provide an overview of why school and community-based organized activities are ideal settings to study peers. Second, we review the literature on two overarching questions in the literature on peers and organized activities: (1) how do peer relations shape organized activity participation, and (2) how does organized activity participation shape adolescents’ peer relations. For the second question, we review the research on the positive and negative implications for adolescents’ peer relations separately. Finally, we provide a critical review of this literature and a summary of the remaining chapters in this volume.

Why Are Organized Activities an Ideal Setting to Study Peers?

There are several reasons why organized activities offer an ideal setting to study peers. Many youth-based community organizations explicitly include improving social skills, such as team work, leadership, and social competencies, as a central goal of their organization (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 1999). In a review of 48 effective youth programs, 81% of programs include enhancing social skills as an important program goal (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). Another important goal of
many community-based organizations is to give youth greater decision-making and leadership opportunities. These organizations have been characterized as “youth-driven” programs because they emphasize active involvement, youth empowerment, and leadership (Larson, Walker, & Pearce, 2005).

Organized activities, such as sports and school clubs, are structured in a way that affords greater opportunities for peer interactions and developing friendships than traditional classroom contexts. In fact, some elements, such as size, school transitions, and teacher-directed pedagogies, can actually impede the development of peer relations in classroom- and school-based settings. Organized activities tend to be smaller and less structured than classroom-based settings, which give youth more opportunities to interact socially. In both school and community-based organized activity settings, peers of different ages and races can mix together in settings of relative equality around a common activity. These structural factors can help to foster friendships across diverse groups (Moody, 2001). In contrast, age-grading and tracking constrains the development of diverse and cross-age friendships in school. Furthermore, in some types of organized activity contexts, children’s social relations are often directed toward solving a challenging problem. This is very different than most school contexts where youth have few opportunities to interact with their peers outside of lunch and recess. A large scale study of over 2,500 classrooms showed that over 90% of fifth graders’ time was spent listening to a teacher or working alone and only 7% of their time was spent in small group activities (Pianta, Belsky, Houts, & Morrison, 2007).

A few studies have compared peer processes in organized out-of-school activity settings and in schools. For example, Larson, Hansen, and Moneta (2006) compared the developmental experiences afforded to youth in extracurricular and community-based organizations and in schools. They found that youth reported higher rates of peer processes related to teamwork and social skills as well as more positive relationships in organized activity settings as compared to schools. Other research has explored youths’ perceptions of the opportunities for peer interaction in schools and in community-based organizations (Fredricks, Hackett, & Bregman, 2010; Loder & Hirsch, 2003). Youth who attended Boys and Girls Clubs reported that these settings provided them with a safe place where they could interact with their peers and express themselves. In contrast, they felt that opportunities for interaction in school contexts were more limited. They also reported being restricted from expressing themselves freely in school contexts.

In order to fully understand the connections between organized activities and adolescents’ peer relations, it is important to take a comprehensive look at adolescents’ peer relations. Although there is some variability in frameworks, many peer relation scholars have posited that youths’ peer relations encompass three related, but unique themes: peer groups,
peer relationships, and peer interactions (Brown & Larson, 2009; Hartup, 2009; Ladd, 2005; Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 2006). Youths’ standing within larger peer groups, such as schools or teams, includes such things as popularity (also known as social status) and peer crowd affiliation. Peer relationships focus on relationships shared by two individuals that can be friendly, romantic, or antagonistic in nature. Finally, peer interactions address the exchanges between peers, such as conversations, aggressive behavior, or how friends help each other. Scholars have strived to understand each of the three aspects of peers as well as the determinants and outcomes of each aspect. Our goal is not to provide an exhaustive review of the peer relations literature, but rather to describe a framework drawn from this literature in order to understand what is known and not known about organized activities and adolescents’ peer groups, friendships, and peer interactions.

How Do Peer Relations Shape Adolescents’ Participation in Organized Activities?

Scholars have begun to examine how peers shape whether adolescents join, attend, and quit an organized activity. According to self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2011), individuals have a basic need for relatedness or feeling that they are connected to others. Deci and Ryan (2011) noted that “the basic needs provide the energy and direction for people to engage in activities that satisfy those needs” (p. 19). In other words, adolescents are likely to go to places where they feel they are connected to others. The literature on peers and organized activities generally supports this premise. Of the three aspects of peer relations, much of this work has focused on peer relationships and not on peer interactions or peer groups. Among the various types of peer relationships, friendships have been examined most often.

Being with friends and making new friends are primary motives for joining and staying in organized activities, even among highly skilled youth (Denault & Poulin, 2009; Fredricks, Alfeld-Liro, et al., 2002; Fredricks, Hackett, et al., 2010; Hirsch, 2005; Loder & Hirsch, 2003; Patrick et al., 1999; Persson, Kerr, & Stattin, 2007; Simpkins, Vest, & Price, 2012). For example, Hirsch (2005) found that parents, peers, and activities were the most common reasons why youth initially joined Boys and Girls Clubs, and friendships were the biggest reason they continued to attend. In a recent study, Simpkins and colleagues found that having friends participate in the same activity increased the odds an adolescent would participate by 25% to 173% depending on the specific activity (Simpkins, Vest, Delgado, & Price, 2012). This relation emerged for all adolescents but was stronger for Whites compared to Hispanic and Black youth and for older adolescents compared to younger adolescents in the United
States. Studies in sport psychology also demonstrate the importance of peers for how involved youth are in athletic activities. These studies show that affiliation motives, or a sense of connection with a group and opportunities to develop and maintain friendships, are associated with higher sport commitment and enjoyment (Weiss & Petlichkoff, 1989; Weiss & Smith, 2002). In fact, there is evidence that some community-based programs use peers to both initially recruit other youth and to encourage them to keep coming to these programs (Lauver & Little, 2005; Loder & Hirsch, 2003).

Peers are also one of the reasons why adolescents also quit an activity. Because most activities are voluntary settings, negative peer interactions can prompt youth to quit. Latino middle school students said that some Latino youth leave activities because they are ridiculed by peers, such as hearing peers say “border hopping” jokes or other racist comments (Simpkins, Delgado, Price, Quach, & Starbuck, 2013, p. 714). In addition, for some youth, there are social costs to their involvement in organized activities. One reason highly involved youth in the sports and arts reported reducing their involvement is that participation took away from time to spend with their friends who did not participate in the activity (Fredricks et al., 2002; Patrick et al., 1999). Overall, this collection of studies suggests that spending time with existing friends and making new friends are two primary motives to join and attend activities, but negative peer interactions and the desire to spend time with friends outside of the activity can also be motives to quit an activity.

How Do Organized Activities Shape Peer Relations in Positive Ways?

Not only are peer relations determinants of adolescents’ participation in organized activities, but organized activities appear to also influence adolescents’ peer relations. In this case, adolescents’ peer relations are the outcome or the result of adolescents’ participation in organized activities. Scholars have looked at this question from two angles. First, many scholars have examined how participation in organized activities is related to adolescents’ subsequent peer relations. Second, scholars have also tested if changes in adolescents’ peer relations are the mechanism by which participation in organized activities is related to the beneficial adjustment of participants. Empirical findings suggest that participation in organized activities influence all three aspects of youths’ peer relations, including peer groups, friendships, and peer interactions.

**Peer Groups.** One area of research has focused on the effects of participation in different types of organized activities on popularity and peer acceptance. Popularity is an important marker of an individuals’ standing within the peer group and plays a multifaceted role in adolescence. In