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Parental Participation in the Process of Youth Joining a Program: Perspectives from Adolescents and Parents

Objective: *This study examined the nature and extent of parental participation in the process of adolescents joining an organized program and identify factors underlying variations in overarching patterns of participation.*

Background: *Adolescents become increasingly interested in making their own choices and decisions. Thus, families must balance parental goals and adolescents' desire for autonomy in their social activities.*

Method: *Interviews were conducted with 62 adolescent program participants and 52 parents. Data analyses followed an inductive approach to identify emergent patterns in the data.*

Results: *We identified four roles parents played at the time their adolescent joined a program: emotional supporter, manager, informant, and instrumental supporter. Further, analyses revealed variations in roles and level of involvement related to adolescent age and ethnicity, as well as gaps between adolescent and parent perspectives. Overarching variations in parental*

engagement (the extent to which parents exerted influence during the joining process) were linked to parent, adolescent, and program factors.

Conclusion: *Findings indicate that a multitude of factors intersect and shape whether and how parents attempt to influence the joining process and manage adolescents' social activities.*

Implications: *Our findings can be used by program administrators and youth leaders to strengthen outreach and recruitment efforts with adolescents from ethnically and socioeconomically diverse family backgrounds.*

Organized youth programs provide important developmental contexts for adolescents in the United States. In 2014, nearly one in four US families (23%) had a child enrolled in an after-school program, and others participated in weekend or summer activities (Afterschool Alliance, 2014). Participation in such programs contributes to adolescents' socioemotional development and affords them opportunities to explore interests and develop skills in relatively safe environments (Vandell, Larson, Mahoney, & Watts, 2015). Parents often recognize the benefits of organized programs and draw on them for their children to achieve important goals (e.g., matriculation in college; acquisition of

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skills for adulthood; Dunn, Kinney, & Hofferth, 2003; Lareau, 2011). Given the importance of organized programs for adolescents and families, increasing access and enrollment is a priority for practitioners and policy makers (Afterschool Alliance, 2014), and considerable effort has been devoted to understanding who takes part in the programs.

Numerous studies have examined factors that predict whether adolescents take part in various types of organized activities. This body of literature demonstrates the importance of parents in determining whether and why children and adolescents (particularly preadolescents) participate in programs (for a review, see Vandell et al., 2015). Far less is known about how adolescents and their parents navigate the process of joining; for example, who makes the decision to join, what part (if any) parents play, and which considerations affect these decisions. Gaining a deeper understanding of parent–adolescent dynamics and actions surrounding the decision to join a program has the potential to inform scholarship and practice on program recruitment, planning, implementation, and evaluation. Accordingly, in this study, we draw on qualitative data from an ethnically and socioeconomically diverse sample of adolescents and parents to examine how parents participate in the process of their adolescent joining a program.

BACKGROUND

Parental Management of Youth's Program Activities

Parke et al. (2003) proposed four ways parents manage their children's social relationships and serve as gatekeepers of their children's activities. Specifically, parents (a) initiate and arrange children's informal and formal activities; (b) supervise their children's peer relationships and interactions; (c) act as advisers in their children's social interactions; and (d) monitor children's activities by supervising their choice of social settings, activities, and friends. All of these are evident in studies of parental management of children's program activities. For example, parents may arrange extracurricular activities (Gutiérrez, Izquierdo, & Kremer-Sadlik, 2010; Outley & Floyd, 2002), provide resources such as money and equipment (Outley & Floyd, 2002), screen programs before allowing children to participate in them (Howard & Madrigal,

1990), or give permission or endorsement for program participation (Borden, Perkins, Villarruel, & Stone, 2005). The extent to which parents are involved in their child's choice of an activity varies. Parents may pressure youth to join (or quit) an activity (most commonly sports; Dworkin & Larson, 2006) or restrict their participation because of family obligations or safety concerns (Outley & Floyd, 2002; Simpkins, Delgado, Price, Quach, & Starbuck, 2013). In other cases, parents influence children indirectly by acting as role models or transmitting values regarding what is important (Dunn et al., 2003; Parke et al., 2003; Persson, Kerr, & Stattin, 2007).

This body of literature suggests that parents influence children's program participation. However, because most studies have focused on program participation as the outcome, little is known about the process of joining itself. Moreover, much of this work has focused on preadolescents. From the decision-making literature, we expected the nature and extent of parental participation in the process of joining to change with age. For example, a study of how adolescents and parents made decisions indicated that adolescents had the greatest autonomy to make decisions about personal issues (e.g., how to spend free time), and their autonomy increased with age (Smetana, Campione-Barr, & Daddis, 2004). This is consistent with Larson, Pearce, Sullivan, and Jarrett's (2007) investigation of youth programs as an arena for autonomy development. Drawing on interviews with 113 ethnically diverse high school-aged program participants and 43 adult caregivers of program participants, the authors developed a grounded theory about the pathways of autonomy negotiation resulting from adolescents' program experience. The decision to join was one of several steps identified. Many participants said they joined the program because they wanted to do so; few indicated that family members had been involved in the decision-making process. Most parents reported supporting their child's decision, although some parents opposed or were ambivalent about their child's participation in the program because they were concerned about safety, did not trust their child, or were worried that the program might expose their child to values that conflicted with those of the family. In a few cases, parents "coerced" adolescents to join the program (Larson et al., 2007). Larson and colleagues' research

provided insight into the process of joining a youth program, but the study had several limitations (e.g., parents were added midway through the study and were not matched to participating adolescents, so adolescent–parent dyads were not examined). Building on this prior work, we explored parental participation in the process of adolescents joining a program. Our objective was to generate a deeper understanding of how parents and adolescents navigate the process of decision making that is likely to be driven by the adolescent yet of interest and concern to parents.

Potential Sources of Variations in Parental Participation in the Process of Joining

In addition to describing the nature and extent of parental participation in the process of joining, we were interested in identifying factors associated with variations in this process. One such factor was child age. During childhood, parents exert control over their children's environments and experiences, including by managing children's social lives and developmental contexts (Gutiérrez et al., 2010; Outley & Floyd, 2002; Parke et al., 2003). When children enter adolescence, they experience physical, cognitive, and emotional development that sparks exploration of their identity and self-concept. As a result, they become increasingly interested in—and capable of—making their own choices and decisions (Smetana et al., 2004). These developmental changes necessitate a shift in parenting, from direct supervision and control to more indirect forms of monitoring and influence (Steinberg & Silk, 2002). Research indicates that during adolescence, participation in out-of-school programs becomes more specialized and self-directed as youth pursue their own interests and goals (Savage & Gauvain, 1998; Vandell et al., 2015). Adolescents also have increased access to recreational and social activities outside the family (Steinberg & Silk, 2002).

A number of other demographic characteristics have been examined in the program literature, including gender and ethnicity (Vandell et al., 2015). To our knowledge, prior studies have not examined how these affect parental participation in the process of adolescents joining a program. Studies on planning and decision making shed light on this issue and reveal intersections between demographic characteristics. For example, mothers who were European American (vs. Latina), more

acculturated, or more educated reported younger ages for their child's participation in planning or deciding after-school activities (Savage & Gauvain, 1998). In general, girls have more decision-making autonomy than boys do in European American families (e.g., Wray-Lake, Crouter, & McHale, 2010), but no gender differences have been reported in African American families (e.g., Smetana et al., 2004). In Latino families, girls tend to be more restricted than boys, but variations based on domain of the decision and parent gender have been reported (Perez-Brena, Updegraff, & Umaña-Taylor, 2012).

Parental participation in the process of joining is also likely to reflect nondemographic characteristics, including parental attitudes toward and beliefs about youth programs. Many middle-class families view extracurricular activities as facilitating valued traits among children (e.g., independence, social skills, teamwork) while keeping them occupied (Dunn et al., 2003; Gutiérrez et al., 2010). In contrast, low-income families may use these activities to counter constraints imposed by poverty and to mitigate neighborhood risks (Lareau, 2011; Outley & Floyd, 2002). Immigration and ethnicity intersect with socioeconomic status to influence parental attitudes. For example, Mexican-origin parents perceived similar benefits to program participation as those reported by middle-class American-origin parents, but placed differential emphasis on benefits depending on their economic and cultural backgrounds (Lin, Simpkins, Gaskin, & Menjivar, 2017). Immigrant background may also affect parents' familiarity with, and preferences for, extracurricular activities; for example, Mexican-origin parents preferred church-based activities as a result of trust in religious institutions (Simpkins et al., 2013).

Taken as a whole, this literature provides a rationale for examining whether parental participation in the process of joining varies according to the child's age, gender, or ethnicity. It also underscores the value of identifying nondemographic factors (e.g., attitudes, beliefs) underlying variations in this process.

The Present Study

This study had two overarching goals. The first goal was to describe the nature and extent of parental participation in their adolescent's decision to join a program, and to explore

variations due to child age, gender, and ethnicity. The second goal was to uncover the factors underlying overarching patterns of parental participation in the joining process. The study extends prior research in several key ways. First, we built on the work of Larson et al. (2007) by administering a set of questions designed to investigate the dynamics surrounding the joining process and obtaining parallel data from adolescents and caregivers. Second, most studies reviewed earlier involved preadolescents; we focused on adolescents, who because of their age, are becoming more active in selecting their own activities. Third, with the exceptions noted earlier, studies have typically involved European American or middle-class samples, whereas our sample was socioeconomically and ethnically diverse. Finally, few studies have considered parents' perspectives and experiences; studying adolescent-parent dyads can provide a more comprehensive understanding of how families negotiate around adolescents' increasing capacity and desire for self-direction.

METHOD

Procedures

Data were from a mixed-method, longitudinal, multiple-informant study conducted in 13 youth programs. Consistent with the larger study's goals of obtaining a diverse representation of programs and participants, programs that served primarily low- and middle-income youth living in urban, suburban, and rural communities in two Midwestern states were recruited. Programs varied in focus (e.g., arts, leadership, science and technology) and context (e.g., school and community), but all were project based and led by experienced staff. Seven programs served primarily Latino/a adolescents; the others served primarily White and African American youth. The larger study followed adolescents, parents, and program leaders across a single program cycle and involved multiple forms of data collection. The present analysis focuses on qualitative data obtained from a subset of adolescents and parents during the first interview, when questions about the process of adolescents joining the program were administered.

Following institutional review board-approved procedures, a research team member presented information about the study to program participants and gave them a parent

information letter describing the study and providing opt out instructions. Youth assent was obtained at the first session of data collection. Adolescents in the interview sample completed an additional assent process; with their permission, one of their parents was also invited to complete an interview. All adolescents spoke English; parents could complete the study in either English or Spanish. Participants received modest monetary incentives. Adolescents and parents were interviewed individually by different interviewers at separate times. Interviewers were graduate students, staff, and faculty members from a range of disciplinary (mostly social science) and ethnic backgrounds. All attended group trainings on the protocols; those who interviewed Latino parents were bilingual.

Participants

The adolescents included in the present study ($N = 62$) were 13–18 years of age ($M = 15.69$, $SD = 1.24$) and had been in the youth program for about a year and a half ($M = 1.67$, $SD = 1.56$). The sample was balanced according to gender (51.6% girls), and ethnically diverse (43.5% Latino/a, 25.8% African American or Black, 25.8% European American, and 4.8% of other ethnicities). Most participants were born in the United States (79%), but half had one or two parents born outside of the United States (50%).

A subset of these adolescents' caregivers ($n = 52$) was also interviewed. Nonparticipation was primarily due to scheduling difficulties (as opposed to adolescent veto or parent refusal). Participating caregivers were predominantly females (82.5%) and biological or adoptive parents (94.3%). Twenty chose to be interviewed in Spanish. According to parent reports, 36.4% of families had annual household incomes of less than \$25,000 a year; 30.9% between \$25,000 and \$49,999; and 32.7% greater than \$50,000.

Interview Protocols

Interview protocols were tested and refined during a pilot study with adolescents and parents. Standardized open-ended questions with structured follow-ups were administered, and interviewers were trained to elicit detailed accounts. The set of questions analyzed for this article was designed to uncover perspectives and experiences relating to the process of adolescents joining the program. Parents were

asked 10 questions (five main questions and five follow-up questions) and adolescents were asked six questions (three main questions and three follow-up questions). Main questions for adolescents were as follows: (a) Did your parents have a role in your decision to join the program? (b) Did you and your parents talk about you joining the program? and (c) Was there any disagreement about whether you should join or not? Caregivers answered parallel versions of these questions, with additional questions about their prior knowledge of the program (“What did you know about the program?”) and general approach to family decision making (“Is this the kind of decision where [youth] is expected to get parental input?”). Interviews were audiotaped, transcribed verbatim, and checked by the original interviewer for accuracy and completeness.

Analyses

Coding and analyses occurred in multiple iterative stages, following an inductive approach to identify emergent patterns in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Two coding teams were formed; one coded adolescent transcripts and the other parent transcripts. Transcripts were coded in the original language (English or Spanish); therefore, the parent coding team was bilingual. The first author served as a member on both coding teams to ensure consistency in the interpretive process. Open coding was employed to “break” the data analytically (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The coding teams met regularly to compare codes and refine definitions of categories, utilizing a consensus approach to interpret the meaning of the data (Hill et al., 2005) and engaging in constant comparative analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

The first research goal was to describe the nature and extent of parental participation in their adolescent’s decision to join a program. Two relevant constructs were identified: parental role (parents’ specific functions in the joining process) and parental level of involvement (global assessment of extent of parental input at the time of joining). Examples of these constructs are provided in the Results section. Written descriptions and operational definitions of the constructs were created, and focused coding of the adolescent and parent data was conducted. Teams followed the analytic approach described earlier to assign codes for parental role and level of involvement to each

adolescent and parent. These codes were entered into an SPSS database that included self-reported demographic characteristics for each adolescent. Chi-square and analysis of variance tests (with appropriate follow-ups as needed) were conducted to examine the distribution of roles and level of involvement in the adolescent and parent samples and explore variations based on adolescent characteristics (i.e., child age, gender, and race/ethnicity). Some analyses focused on the subset of matched adolescent–parent dyads. For analyses of race/ethnicity, adolescents were classified into three groups: Latino/a, African American, and White/other (the latter group reflects the small number of “other” adolescents, which precluded separate analyses). Variations due to socioeconomic status (SES) or immigrant background were not examined because these variables overlapped and were strongly associated with race and ethnicity (e.g., all Latino parents were immigrants, and family income differed across racial groups).

The second research goal was to uncover factors underlying overarching patterns of parental participation in the process of joining. We identified ways that parents tried to influence their child’s decision to join through specific actions (e.g., attempts to persuade adolescent to join) and how they engaged with their child (e.g., directly or indirectly). Through these analyses we identified a higher-order construct: parental engagement approach, or hands-on versus hands-off parental engagement. Focused coding of the adolescent and parent data was conducted using this code. Because parents often employed multiple types of engagement, this set of analyses used parental actions (not individual parents) as the unit of analysis. In other words, parents could be coded for both hands-on and hands-off engagement, depending on their specific actions. We then identified links between engagement approach and specific parental actions and dynamics surrounding the process of joining (e.g., attitudes, perceptions, or beliefs mentioned by adolescents or parents). In the final step of the analysis, we selected quotes that best represented the emergent constructs. At this point, Spanish-language quotes were translated into English.

Three main strategies were employed to establish trustworthiness of the findings. First, to avoid interpretive biases, coders analyzed transcripts separately, then compared findings and discussed discrepancies (Hill et al., 2005;

Table 1. *Types of Parental Role in the Processing of Joining Youth Programs*

Theme	Example
Emotional supporter	<p>"[Mom] said that if you have this opportunity then you should be able to value it and be able to be part of it, and if it's gonna help you in your future and help you go to college then just do it. And, I did." (Isabella, 18, F, Latina)</p> <p>"Probably that we strongly encouraged [Erin joining a program]. ... We like to give them different opportunities and they can be involved and try different things." (Parent of Erin, 15, F, White)</p>
Manager	<p>"[My parents] kind of talked to me about ... 'cause I'm in a lot of sports and stuff ... and they were saying like will you have enough time? Will you be able to get your homework done and stuff? Kinda cautioning me." (Noah, 18, M, White)</p> <p>"I just needed to know what the program is about—their schedule, like I wanted to make sure that there are other adults that were gonna be there. ... [W]e looked over the information and then decided it would be beneficial for him." (Parent of Ryan, 16, M, Black)</p>
Informant	<p>"Yeah, my mom found [the program] and she said she checked it out and it was really cool and I looked at what she found out. It seemed cool to me too, so I went." (Payton, 14, M, ethnicity unknown)</p> <p>"I overheard one of the students talking about the program and it sounded interesting to me so I was hoping that I didn't have to convince Jaimin, but when I told him about it, he liked it right away." (Parent of Jaimin, 16, F, Black)</p>
Instrumental supporter	<p>"One day [the program leader] had called me, and then I told my mom that I have an interview all the way out north, and she was like, 'Okay, I'll take you.'" (Shanna, 17, F, Latina)</p> <p>"[The program] had something to do with a magazine and it involved taking pictures. Enrique is interested in taking pictures [and] I got him a camera." (Parent of Enrique, 14, M, Latino)</p>

Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Second, we examined every participant's transcript to ensure that no case disconfirmed our analysis; if needed, we made revisions to the definitions of the categories. Finally, we conducted peer debriefing with members of the larger study team who were familiar with the programs and participants.

RESULTS

Parental Participation in the Process of Youth Joining a Program (Research Goal 1)

We identified two constructs in the first set of analyses (roles and level of involvement). In presenting results, we describe general patterns in the data, examine differences in adolescent and parent perspectives, and explore variations by adolescent characteristics.

Parental Role. Adolescents and parents described four parental roles (see Table 1 for illustrative quotes). The role of emotional supporter included giving adolescents encouragement and advice in the process of joining, as well as providing affirmations and helping adolescents see the purpose, meaning, and benefit

of program participation. The manager role involved parents trying to help adolescents join a desirable program, make the right decision about joining a program, or choose the right program. This often involved parents screening the program or helping adolescents think things through before joining, such as considering the fit of the program with their goals (e.g., help with college preparation, develop specific skills) and logistical issues (e.g., schedules, other responsibilities). The role of informant involved providing information about the program; this included parents telling adolescents the program existed or passing along information about program activities. Finally, some parents acted as instrumental supporter by providing practical support, such as driving adolescents to initial meetings or interviews so the adolescents could explore or sign up for the program, or providing equipment needed for activities. These roles were not mutually exclusive; 34% of parents and 27% of adolescents reported that parents played two or more roles.

Most respondents (86.7% of adolescents, 92.5% of parents) described parents as having a role in the joining process. However, the distribution of parental roles was different in

the adolescent and parent samples. The most frequent parental role described by adolescents was emotional supporter (reported by 66.7% of adolescents), followed by manager (21.7%), informant (20%), and instrumental supporter (8.3%). In contrast, parents most often reported playing the role of manager (reported by 58.5% of parents), followed by emotional supporter (39.6%), instrumental supporter (30.2%), and informant (17%). To further explore how adolescents and parents perceived the parental role, we conducted analyses with the subset of adolescent–parent dyads ($n = 52$). The matched sample showed high consistency between parents and adolescents in reports of whether parents acted as informant or instrumental supporter (76.9% and 63.4% agreement within dyads, respectively). In contrast, parents and adolescents were less likely to agree that parents acted as manager or emotional supporter (40.6% and 38.5% agreement, respectively). For these two roles, discrepancies emerged for different reasons: More parents than adolescents described the parental role as that of manager, whereas more adolescents than parents described the parental role as that of emotional supporter.

No statistical differences in the distribution of parental roles by child gender or ethnicity emerged in either the adolescent or the parent sample, but there were several age differences. Adolescents who described parents acting as informants were substantially younger ($M = 15.0$ years, $SD = 1.28$) than those whose parents did not play this role ($M = 15.90$, $SD = 1.17$), $t(60) = 2.3$, $p = .023$, $d = 0.73$. In contrast, those who said their parents acted as instrumental supporters were considerably older ($M = 16.40$, $SD = 0.55$) than those whose parents did not play this role ($M = 15.65$, $SD = 1.26$), $t(60) = 2.50$, $p = .035$, $d = 0.76$. Among parents, those who said they acted as informants had younger children ($M = 15.11$, $SD = 0.78$) than those who did not mention this role ($M = 15.86$, $SD = 1.30$), $t(53) = 2.3$, $p = .033$, $d = 0.70$.

Level of Involvement. Parents varied in the extent of their involvement in the process of joining. In some cases, parents were minimally involved; adolescents took the initiative to join the program and informed parents after the fact, with no prior consultation. For example, when asked if her parents were involved in her decision

to join, Aubrey (15, female—abbreviated as F—Native American) said, “No, I just told them about the program,” adding that her parents did not have any questions. Similarly, the parent of Alexis (16, F, Latina) said: “When Alexis signed up was when I found out. I began to learn what the program was and what she did and everything. Before she joined I knew nothing.”

In other cases, parents had what could be characterized as a medium level of involvement. There was typically some discussion about the child’s decision to join, often occurring when adolescents requested parental approval or permission to participate in the program. For example, Aurelia (14, F, Latina) said: “I just talked to them about [the program]. I wanted to come here and then they were okay with it. They were like ‘Okay, go and check it out, see what you think.’” One parent described a similar interaction with her son (16, male—abbreviated as M—Black): “[Michael] had already told me what [the program] was ... he brought me home an application for me to sign for him. I signed it for him.”

Some parents were highly involved in the process of joining. These parents often initiated the joining, engaged in active communication with the adolescent about the program, or strongly encouraged them to join the program. For example, Carly (15, F, White) said, “[My caregiver] knew about the program and she asked me if I wanted to do it because [the program leader] had been talking to her about it and said I’d like it.” Similarly, the parent of Payton (14, M, race/ethnicity unknown) said, “I called [the organization] and asked if they had anything that was film based and they suggested this program, and we were very excited because it’s just around the corner from us.”

Adolescents’ descriptions of parental involvement in the process of joining were coded as low (18.3%), medium (43.3%), or high (38.3%); parents tended to report more moderate levels of involvement: low (11.3%), medium (69.8%), or high (18.9%). To further explicate these findings, we conducted analyses in the matched adolescent–parent subsample ($n = 52$). In half of the dyads, adolescents and parents were coded with the same level of involvement; the other half had discrepant reports. In two-thirds of the 26 discrepant dyads ($n = 17$; 65.4%), adolescents reported a higher level of parental involvement than parents reported; in the other third ($n = 9$; 34.6%), parents reported a higher

level of involvement. A test for the difference between proportions was statistically significant, z score = 2.22, $p = .026$.

Next, we examined associations between level of parental involvement in the process of joining and child characteristics of age, gender, and ethnicity. Analysis of variance tests were used to examine age effects, and chi-square tests to examine gender and ethnicity effects. No statistical effects were observed using adolescent reports of parental involvement. Analyses conducted using parent reports showed a moderate statistical association between ethnicity and parental involvement, $\chi^2(4, N = 53) = 11.23$, $p = .024$, Cramér's $V = 0.33$. Most parents of Latino/a adolescents reported low (25.0%) or medium involvement (62.5%) as opposed to high involvement (12.5%). In contrast, no parents of African American or White/other adolescents reported low involvement. Most African American parents reported medium involvement (90.9%), with 9.1% reporting high involvement. Among White/other parents, most reported medium (66.7%) or high (33.3%) involvement.

Taken together, the first set of analyses revealed that adolescents and parents described a variety of parental roles and extent of involvement in the process of joining. Variations in parental roles were primarily due to age; ethnicity effects emerged only for level of involvement. Next, we turn to results of analyses aimed at uncovering factors underlying patterns of parental participation in the joining process.

Factors Linked to Parental Engagement Approach (Research Goal 2)

The construct of parental engagement approach reflects overarching variations in parental participation in the process of joining. Hands-on engagement involved attempts to influence the adolescent's decision to join in direct and active ways, whereas hands-off engagement involved indirect means of influence, or (as one parent described) "taking a backseat" in the process of joining. This analysis uncovered nine factors associated with parental engagement approach, which we classified for descriptive purposes as parent-, adolescent-, and program-related factors (see Figure 1 for a conceptual depiction and Table 2 for the distribution of codes). As a reminder, these analyses focused on parental

actions (not individual respondents) as the unit of analysis; therefore, respondents could be coded for more than one factor listed in Table 2.

Parent-related Factors. Four parent-related attitudes and perceptions were linked to their engagement approach. Three of the factors resulted in parents being either more hands-on or hands-off. Parental perceptions of the program as beneficial or supporting parental goals for their child's future led some parents to be more hands-on because of their desire to help adolescents benefit from the program. This dynamic was illustrated by Madeline (14, F, Black): "Mom [signed me up] and then she just told me that I was going to be in it . . . [S]he said, 'It's a group. It's very good for you. And when you're in high school it helps you more.'" The same perception led other parents to be hands-off, giving adolescents more freedom concerning program participation. For example, one parent said she would not require her son William (16, M, White) to obtain her permission to join a program if it was "school oriented and it's gonna help him get into college and gives him something fun to do, helps him learn to work with people better. Those are all good things."

Similarly, variations in parents' trust in their child were linked to engagement approach. Parents with high levels of trust tended to be hands-off; for example, when asked whether she required her son Brice (15, M, Black) to get permission to join a program, a parent responded:

When he tells me about the things, I don't doubt it . . . And he's the type of person that will never take advantage of anything. Just because I didn't know [details about the program], he's not going to take advantage of me not knowing.

In contrast, parents with lower levels of trust in their child were more hands-on during the process of joining. After describing close monitoring that included picking up and dropping off her daughter, Aurelia's (14, F, Latina) mother said: "Teens tell us lies or say they are going to be somewhere and they aren't."

Parental availability, in terms of flexibility in work schedule or time commitments, was also associated with being either hands-on or hands-off. Parents with flexible schedules could engage in the process of joining by, for

FIGURE 1. FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT APPROACH WHEN ADOLESCENTS JOIN A YOUTH PROGRAM.

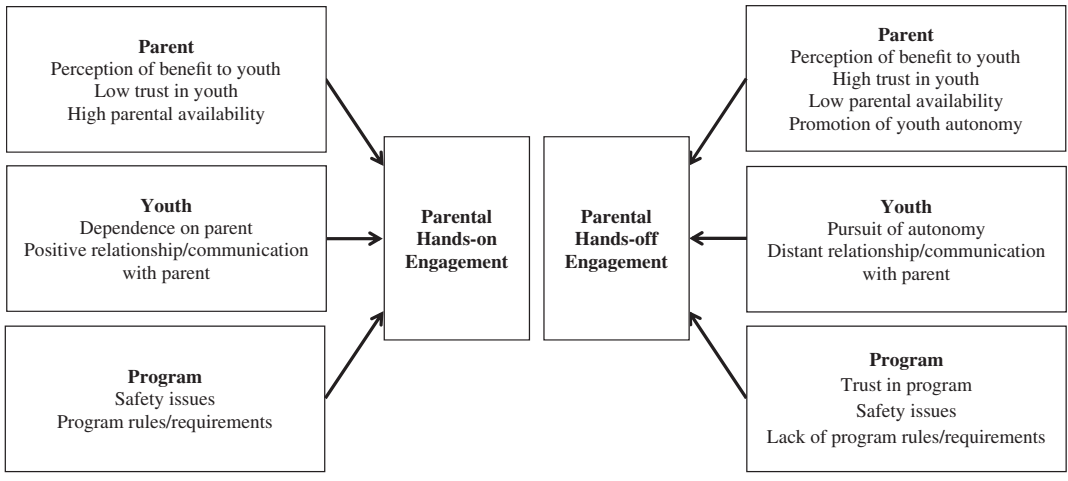


Table 2. Parent and Adolescent Mentions of Factors Relating to Parental Engagement in When Adolescents Join a Youth Program

	Parents (n = 52)		Adolescents (n = 62)	
	n		n	
Parent related				
Program seen as beneficial for youth	28	53.9	22	35.5
Desire to promote child’s autonomy	11	21.2	10	16.1
Availability	7	13.5	2	3.2
Trust in youth	4	7.7	3	4.8
Adolescent related				
Pursuit of autonomy vs. dependence	0	0.0	8	12.9
Quality of parent–child relationship	1	1.9	1	1.6
Program related				
Trust in program	15	28.9	6	9.7
Perceived safety of participation	8	15.4	3	4.8
Program rules or requirements	3	5.8	1	1.6

Note. Figures reflect number of respondents coded for each of the nine categories (i.e., number and percentage of parents or adolescents who mentioned each factor at least once). Because respondents could be represented in more than one category, percentages do not sum to 100. Factors are listed from most to less frequently identified within each category.

example, attending orientation meetings, taking adolescents to initial meetings, or talking to the program leaders. In contrast, parents with more limiting schedules tended to be hands-off. For example, Joseph (16, M, Latino) attributed his mother’s hands-off approach to her busy work schedule: “[I made the decision to join] because my mom is not usually around, because she has to work real late. Usually she leaves the decisions up to me.”

The fourth factor, desire to promote their child’s autonomy, led parents to be hands-off at the time their child was joining a program. Frankie (16, M, Black) said:

[My parents] let us try different things, like in elementary school I would try whatever sport I wanted to do. ... They encourage [us] to do our own things and so we do that. [The program] was just something I wanted to do on my own and they supported me with it.

Amanda's (16, F, White) parent echoed this account:

Especially [where] extracurricular activities are concerned, I have a tendency to let my kids do what they want to do. If they feel that it is something they want to get involved with I am all for it. ... So I try to take a backseat to some of their extracurricular activities.

Adolescent-related Factors. Two adolescent-related factors were associated with parental engagement approach. One was the extent to which adolescents pursued autonomy versus dependence on parents. Most parents and adolescents described the decision to join as primarily the adolescent's while acknowledging that adolescents still needed parental permission. Some adolescents, however, desired a high level of autonomy and acted independently, limiting parents' potential engagement in the joining process. As Sidney (16, M, Black) said: "No one actually made the decision on whether I wanted to be in the program or not, besides me. I knew it was gonna be a great program for me to improve as a leader." A few adolescents relied more on their parents, perhaps asking them to find the program or provide practical support. For example, Payton (14, M, ethnicity unknown) said: "I asked my mom to help me find a film program. And she did."

A second (rarely mentioned) factor was the general quality of the parent-child relationship. Most adolescents and parents described the process of joining as harmonious, but when asked whether someone in her family had a role in her decision to join the program, Aurora (15, F, Black) responded: "No, not at all. I would say maybe because [of] the things that were going on at home. ... I get along with my mom, but not that well. ... So I'd say that'd be another reason." In contrast, Jennifer's (16, F, Latina) parent explained her hands-on engagement by saying: "Jennifer is very open with me. She likes to talk and let me know what's going on. I don't have to ask her, she just tells me, 'this is what we did. This is what we're planning to do.'"

Program-related Factors. Three factors associated with parental engagement approach were related to the program itself. First, parents' trust in the program led them to be more hands-off during the process of joining. Different factors contributed to parental trust: reputation of

the program or its sponsoring institution, prior familiarity with the program (especially due to previous positive experiences by family members or acquaintances), and trust in the staff (often based on personal contact). The parent of Enrique (14, M, Latino) said:

Basically, I trust [this agency]. I know they have a lot of real good programs here. And my nephew, my brother came here. ... I had a lot of friends who did. I know of [it], I trust the programs. I trust the staff here. So I feel comfortable with him being here.

For some parents, trust resulted from learning about the program from a trusted source of information (e.g., teacher, program leader, social worker), as illustrated by Sebastian's (17, M, Latino) parent, who said, "If it was a program recommended by the social worker we knew that it was something very positive." Moreover, several parents mentioned the context of the program, especially school-based programs, as a reason for their trust.

Second, the perceived safety of participating in the program was linked to parents being either hands-on or hands-off. Parents tended to be more hands-on if they had safety-related concerns, such as worrying about potential danger getting to and from the program, other adolescents enrolled in the program (e.g., prosocial vs. deviant), and adult staff. For example, Payton's (14, M, ethnicity unknown) parent stated, "I want to know where he is and what he's doing," explaining: "It's not a real safe neighborhood, you know there are shootings right around my corner frequently and I want to make sure that he's safe. Safety is really huge to me." Parents who did not share these concerns tended to be more hands-off; for example, Graham's (14, M, White) parent explained why she was hands-off when her son joined the program:

I just felt like it was a safe place for him to be. ... I knew it was a safe and good environment and I knew that his friends were involved in it. 'Cause his friends are good kids, so I knew that it would be somewhere safe and good and it would help [him] out.

Finally, program rules or requirements affected parental engagement approach. Most respondents reported that programs initially required parental permission for adolescents to join. Few respondents, however, mentioned

opportunities for parents to be engaged in other ways (e.g., parental participation in information or orientation sessions).

DISCUSSION

We explored adolescents' and parents' perceptions of how parents participate in the process of adolescents joining organized programs. Our discussion is organized around the two research goals, and highlights contributions and directions for future research.

Nature and Extent of Parental Participation in the Process of Joining

Consistent with Parke et al.'s (2003) conceptualization of parents as regulators of their children's social activities, the majority of parents in our study participated in the process of their adolescent joining a program. We identified four roles parents played at the time their adolescent joined a program: emotional supporter, manager, informant, and instrumental supporter. These roles are largely in accord with those described in prior theory and research focused on preadolescents (reviewed earlier), although methodological differences make direct comparisons difficult. In our study, many adolescents and parents highlighted parents' role in providing encouragement and transmitting values related to program participation (emotional supporter), which may affect adolescents' motivation or interests in the program (Eccles, 1993; Simpkins, Fredricks, & Eccles, 2012). One finding that merits follow-up is that some respondents reported that parents played multiple roles during the process of joining. It would be informative to explore the extent to which parents play each specific role (e.g., by developing a set of structured items based on the various roles we identified). Moreover, most adolescents and parents described at least medium levels of parental involvement, which is consistent with theoretical propositions regarding how parents support healthy autonomy during adolescence (Smetana et al., 2004).

As has been reported in prior studies of parent-child dyads (e.g., Smetana & Asquith, 1994; Smetana et al., 2004), we found that adolescents and parents have different perspectives on both the type of role parents play and their level of involvement. As noted by Smetana et al. (2004), discrepancies should be viewed not as

resulting from informant bias but as reflecting differences in family members' perspectives. Findings relating to parental roles indicated that adolescents and parents have different perceptions (or awareness) of how parents contribute to the process of adolescents joining. For example, parents may play multiple roles that are differentially emphasized by parents and adolescents. Of note, in two-thirds of dyads with discrepant reports of parental level of involvement, our adolescent participants reported a higher level of parental involvement than their parents. This contrasts with prior studies indicating that adolescents may overestimate their own input into family decision making (e.g., Smetana & Asquith, 1994; Smetana et al., 2004). Adolescents and parents disagree on what issues they consider as within the parental or adolescent purview (Smetana et al., 2004). If adolescents view joining a program as their decision, they may be sensitive to parental attempts to take part in the process and thus perceive parents as more involved than parents consider themselves.

Scholars have proposed that parental management of children's organized activities changes as children enter adolescence (Parke et al., 2003; Savage & Gauvain, 1998) and become increasingly able to determine how they use their free time (Smetana et al., 2004). Our analysis revealed age-related differences in parental roles. Findings are generally consistent with prior work showing that parents of preadolescents typically exert control over children's extracurricular activities (Dunn et al., 2003; Gutiérrez et al., 2010; Outley & Floyd, 2002), but shift into a supportive role as adolescents become more active in selecting activities (Steinberg & Silk, 2002; Vandell et al., 2015). Taken as a whole, the findings support the notion that parents adjust their management in ways that are developmentally appropriate and acceptable to their adolescent children.

Ethnicity and gender have been previously examined as predictors of youth program participation but not (to our knowledge) with respect to the process of joining. No ethnic differences in parental roles emerged, which indicates similarities in the nature of parental participation at the time of joining. However, parents of Latino adolescents described lower levels of involvement in the joining process than did White parents. Most of the Latino parents in our study were immigrants, so this finding may reflect immigrant parents' perceptions of appropriate roles in

their children's social institutions (Smith, Stern, & Shatrova, 2008; Zarate, 2007), lack of familiarity with organized programs (Simpkins et al., 2013), or other immigration- or SES-related factors that have been linked to youth's program participation (e.g., Fredricks & Simpkins, 2012; Outley & Floyd, 2002). Moreover, some immigrant parents may have been undocumented and thus reluctant to intervene in adolescents' activities outside the home. Prior research focused on predictors of program participation has found gender differences (Vandell et al., 2015), yet no gender differences emerged in either adolescent or parent reports of parental participation in the process of joining in the present study.

A Preliminary Model of Parental Engagement Approach

Dynamics between adolescents and their parents regarding program participation are shaped by a variety of attitudinal and situational factors, such as parents' beliefs and values, developmental factors, and the family's ecological context (Eccles, 1993; Larson et al., 2007; Savage & Gauvain, 1998). In the context of adolescents' joining a program, these factors intersect and shape how parents manage their children or attempt to influence the joining process. We identified three sets of factors linked to variations in parental engagement approach (hands-on vs. hands-off). Some of these factors have been identified in prior research on youth program participation; our study elucidates how they operate at the time of joining and illustrates how they may promote hands-on or hands-off engagement (or in some cases, both).

The most frequently mentioned parent-related factor was seeing the program as beneficial, which supports research showing that parental values and beliefs about specific activities shape their behavior surrounding adolescents' pursuits (Eccles, 1993; Larson et al., 2007). The finding that parents' general attitude toward autonomy promotion informs their engagement is also consistent with prior work (e.g., Larson et al., 2007). Parental trust in adolescents may reflect past experiences or perceptions of their child's capacities; for example, Parke et al. (2003) suggested that parents were more likely to get involved in their children's organized activities when youth displayed poor social skills. Parental availability also shapes their engagement, in line with

previous research indicating that parents of low socioeconomic statuses may have limited time and energy to support their children's activities because of job demands (Simpkins et al., 2013). There are likely other parent-related factors that influence parents' engagement approach; for example, most of the caregivers in our study were women, and research on decision making has shown differences between mothers and fathers (e.g., Perez-Brena et al., 2012).

The most salient adolescent-related factor was adolescents' general tendency to seek autonomy. Consistent with prior research (e.g., Larson et al., 2007), most adolescents initiated the process of joining a program. Adolescents may perceive decisions related to program participation as falling within the personal domain (Smetana et al., 2004) and thus discourage parental engagement (Larson et al., 2007). During adolescence, with an increase in youth's agency, parents' influence may be shaped by the extent to which adolescents allow it. Prior research has also linked adolescents' family experiences or relationships with parents to their program participation (Persson et al., 2007). Although only a small number of our participants described how parent-adolescent relationships or communication influenced parental engagement approach, this factor merits further attention.

Trust in the program and perceived safety of participation emerged as salient program-related factors. Parents generally prefer that children be involved in programs offered by trusted institutions (Simpkins et al., 2013) and perceive organized programs as providing safe spaces and positive activities (Dunn et al., 2003; Gutiérrez et al., 2010). In our study, some parents from low-income urban areas were concerned about the program's location. Parents raising children in unsafe neighborhoods may restrict their children's social activities (Outley & Floyd, 2002; Parke et al., 2003); our findings show that parental concern results in more hands-on engagement at the time adolescents join a program. Moreover, safety concerns included other potential risks to children, such as program participants and adult staff. Finally, although most programs required parental permission for adolescents to join, we observed few instances linking program rules or requirements to variations in parental engagement approach. It is possible that some programs allow adolescents to join programs with minimal parental engagement.

These findings informed a preliminary model of factors linked to parental engagement approach. The model is largely descriptive, yet it highlights the complex and dynamic nature of parents and adolescents co-navigating the process of adolescents joining a program and can be used as the basis for future research. For example, there were differences in how often specific factors were mentioned; further research is needed to determine the relative salience of each factor and examine how they may be related to each other. Moreover, in some cases, parents employed both hands-on and hands-off engagement (e.g., a parent found a program for her child but remained uninvolved in the decision making process); it would be informative to explore the confluence of factors feeding into these situations. Another fruitful direction would be to explore the intersections among parent-, adolescent-, and program-related factors. The descriptive model can also be used to generate testable hypotheses, for example, regarding how differences in parental engagement during the joining process may be linked to program persistence or dropout. Taken together, findings illustrate that parent-adolescent dynamics surrounding the process of joining are shaped by multiple layers of parent-, adolescent-, and program-related factors.

Limitations

Study limitations must be kept in mind when interpreting findings. First, although the sample size was large enough to accomplish our research goals, we had limited power to examine variations due to adolescent characteristics. Moreover, we were unable to examine the role of SES or immigrant background because these variables were strongly associated with race and ethnicity in our sample (reflecting larger demographic patterns in the United States). Similarly, the large number of programs relative to the sample size meant that we could not examine potential differences because of program-level characteristics. Second, the study was conducted in two Midwestern states, and thus the sample is not representative of the larger U.S. population. Third, by design, we studied only adolescents who were participating in programs and thus could not examine dynamics in families where the negotiation process failed and the adolescents did not join a program. Finally, the length of time adolescents had been in the

program varied considerably, so accounts of the process of joining were subject to retrospective recall bias. These limitations notwithstanding, the present study contributes to the literature on adolescent-parent dynamics and has applied and theoretical implications.

Implications

Programs may be particularly important developmental contexts for young people from lower income and immigrant families (Simpkins et al., 2013; Vandell et al., 2015), who experience high rates of unmet demand for after-school programming (Afterschool Alliance, 2014). Gaining a clearer understanding of the roles parents play in the joining process is critical for programs to best serve adolescents from socioeconomically and ethnically diverse families. We found that many parents played a role in finding a program for their adolescents; thus, reaching out directly to parents may be an effective approach for promoting adolescents' program participation. For example, programs may contact organizations that parents use and trust, such as churches, ethnic organizations, or community organizations; also, calling on community leaders to contact parents could be helpful. Older adolescents, however, seek out activities that interest them; therefore, we recommend that programs find ways to reach both parents and adolescents. Our findings indicate that parents can affect adolescents' program enrollment in different ways. For example, parent's beliefs about the benefit of the program were linked to parental engagement in adolescents' joining process. Programs must effectively communicate the benefits of participation, particularly if parents are unfamiliar with youth programs. This might involve providing information in multiple languages and describing how programs can support parents' long-term goals for their children. Recent research has proposed different ways to build bridges between programs and families (Finn-Stevenson, 2014; Simpkins, Riggs, Ngo, Vest, & Okamoto, 2017). Among these suggestions is to involve trusted local community organizations to provide opportunities for all parents to be involved in ways that accommodate parents' schedules and ways of gathering and to reach out to families, especially for those that are "hard to reach" (Simpkins et al., 2017). Applying these lessons to the time of joining, programs could open channels of

communication, provide resources to increase parent participation, and solicit and incorporate input from parents (Afterschool Alliance, 2013). Programs also need to find ways to build trust. We found that trust was often based on prior knowledge about the program and personal connections with staff and previous participants; thus, it may be advantageous to utilize community networks and adolescent participants in recruitment efforts. Recruitment efforts should also address parental concerns about safety issues, including program location, adult staff, and other adolescent participants.

The study also contributes to research and theory on adolescent development and parent–child interactions during this developmental period. An important arena for parent–adolescent negotiations concerns how adolescents use their free time. By focusing on a specific event (joining a program), we were able to examine processes and dynamics related to parents' shifting management of adolescents' social activities. Findings offer insight into how these issues play out when adolescents are joining a program. This study suggests that parents adapt the nature and extent of their engagement based on a complicated set of considerations. Findings highlight the joint process involved in decision making surrounding adolescents' use of free time and can be used to guide future research into the dynamics of parent–adolescent decision making.

CONCLUSION

This qualitative study explicated parent–adolescent dynamics and actions surrounding the decision to join an organized program. Findings indicate that a multitude of factors intersect and shape whether and how parents attempt to influence the joining process and manage adolescents' social activities. The study contributes to a growing literature on youth participation in organized programs, which represent important developmental contexts for adolescents in the United States. Program administrators and youth leaders can use the findings to strengthen outreach and recruitment efforts with adolescents from ethnically and socioeconomically diverse family backgrounds.

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