



Youth

Increasing the engagement of young people in positive activities

Key messages

- Around three-quarters of all young people participate in some form of positive activities. There is little difference in terms of participation rates by gender but far fewer young people from lower-income families or from rural areas participate in activities.
- Barriers to participation include: poor access to information about what is available and how to access it; parental attitudes; the influence of friends and peers; internal factors (the perceptions young people hold about themselves, for example, confidence); and practical factors such as time, transport and cost.
- The weight of evidence indicated that young people's participation in positive activities helps in their development of personal, social and emotional skills, such as self-esteem, confidence, socialising and team-work. This includes improved relationships between young people and their peers and other adults (particularly teachers and parents).
- However, some studies did not find a link between participation and positive (or negative) outcomes for young people. Possible ways of avoiding such neutral outcomes include providing sustained initiatives at an earlier age and allowing a longer lead-in for young people to learn about and trust a new initiative. It must however be recognised that such approaches are likely to incur greater cost.
- A beneficial change in young people's relationships with other adults through their participation in positive activities can be transferred to academic learning and may lead to better outcomes.
- Participation in multiple positive activities brings additional benefits.
- Effective strategies for promoting opportunities for young people to participate in positive activities include:
 - appropriate levels of engagement (i.e. for initial take-up of opportunities and sustained engagement)
 - targeting all young people, not just specific groups such as young offenders or elite athletes (although again universal provision may incur increased costs)
 - using a variety of media/marketing as part of a comprehensive communications strategy
 - involving young people
 - communicating specific messages about the benefits rather than the generic benefit of participation being a 'good thing'.
- Young people should be involved in all aspects of the provision and promotion of positive activities and the influence of word-of-mouth through friends and social networks is a very powerful one.
- There is a lack of robust evidence around the cost-benefit analysis of young people's participation in positive activities and the social return on investment that participation may bring.

The research review tells us what works in increasing the engagement of young people in positive activities. It is based on a rapid review of the research literature involving systematic searching and analysis of key data. It summarises the best available evidence that will help service providers to improve services and, ultimately, outcomes for children, young people and their families.

The National Youth Agency carried out this review on behalf of the Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children and Young People's Services (C4EO). The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) conducted the data work.

There is a long history of interest in the activity of young people outside of school and home and the impact this has on their future life chances. The value of encouraging young people's participation in structured leisure-time activities (referred to here as 'positive activities') was a key strand of previous government policy and is implicit in the current Coalition Government's Big Society policy and their flagship project for young people, National Citizen Service.

Who are the key stakeholders?

The following key stakeholders have been identified for this review:

- young people
- parents and carers
- local authorities
- voluntary organisations.

Their contributions are valuable in the process of improvement

- **Young people** are the focus of this review and by participating in positive activities they can achieve better outcomes. Young people having awareness that they can exert influence over their lives through the decisions and actions they take is a crucial factor in the benefits that can be achieved. The involvement and influence of young people in promoting and delivering positive activities is important both to increase and maintain levels of participation and also to maximise the benefits. The role of **friends and peers** is also very influential.
- **Parents and carers** have a major influence on young people's participation in positive activities. Parent and carer perceptions of the value of positive activities and awareness of what is available locally and how to access it are important. Children and young people in lower-income families are less likely to participate in positive activities and face the practical challenges of meeting the costs of equipment, entrance fees and transport.
- **Local authorities** have responsibility for ensuring there is provision of positive activities for all young people in their area through both direct service delivery and effective commissioning arrangements. The **youth service** is an important provider of positive activities in most areas. **Schools** have an important role in promoting opportunities for positive activities and the benefits of participation. Schools are also a useful venue for providing activities through extended services. Local authorities are also required to work in partnership with other statutory services (including **health, police, fire and rescue**) that may deliver or fund positive activities. Local authorities and partner organisations are responsible for monitoring who participates and what the outcomes are, and for securing value for money.
- **Voluntary organisations** are very well placed to engage with young people and have a long history of providing a broad range of positive activities in local communities. Voluntary organisations may be commissioned by local authorities, and others, to provide services and are responsible for monitoring who takes part and what the outcomes are. Volunteering itself is an important positive activity for young people.

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What data is available to inform the way forward?

The Tellus survey (Chamberlain *et al*, 2010) reports levels of participation in positive activities at the level of single- and upper-tier local authority and national level. Part of the survey investigated participation in activities that are structured, good quality, outside school and adult-led. When considering the data from the Tellus survey, local authorities should also note that not all schools in a local authority will have participated in Tellus surveys, and this is worth considering when drawing conclusions and assessing performance. Nevertheless, data gathered by the Tellus survey represents a good estimate of the national and regional average participation for a given year and local authorities can then start their own analysis of local positive activity participation.

The new Coalition Government decided to stop the delivery of the Tellus survey as part of its commitment to reduce the burdens which data collection imposes on schools and local authorities¹. The last year for which data is available is 2009/10 (see Appendix 4 of the research review).

In February 2010 the Department for Children, Schools and Families (now the Department for Education) piloted a data collection exercise designed to provide a one-week snapshot of participation in positive activities across all local authority areas. Findings from this exercise may provide a useful benchmark when published.

The evidence base

A large body of evidence exists which relates in some way to the three main review questions in this study. Many studies, particularly from the USA, look at the impact of participation in sports-based activities and this dominates the literature. However, much less is available set within the social context of the UK and several studies comment on the lack of research around young people's participation in non-sports/physical 'positive activities'. This gap in the research base is itself, in part, a reflection of a lower provision of positive activities with an arts and/or cultural focus (compared to the provision of sports and physical activities).

The main gap in the evidence base for this review relates to 'what works' in terms of cost-effectiveness and what provides best value for money. It is also important to acknowledge the difficulty in obtaining 'hard evidence' of many of the principal perceived benefits of participation in positive activities. There is a lack of quantitative research in this area and much of the research which is available is qualitative and often based on self-reports. Further research is necessary into the longitudinal benefits of participation, for example, into outcomes relating to employment and later life.

¹ For further information, see www.tellussurvey.org.uk

Research review methods

Research literature was identified through systematic searches of relevant databases and websites, recommendations from our Thematic Advisory Group, and considering studies cited in identified literature ('reference harvesting'). The review team used a 'best evidence' approach to systematically select literature of the greatest relevance and quality to include in the review. This approach attempts to eliminate bias in the selection of literature, to ensure that the review's findings are as objective as possible.

Data contained within the data annexe was obtained by a combination of search methods but primarily by obtaining online access to known government publications and access to data published by the Office for National Statistics.

Next steps

An updated version of the review is due to be published in spring 2011. This will include validated local practice examples and views from children, young people, parents, carers and service providers. It will also reflect any changes to the policy context that have occurred in the meantime.

C4EO reviews on Targeted Youth Support and alcohol are also available on the C4EO website. Local decision-makers and commissioners working in children's services may also find it helpful to read the Youth Directors' summary, which presents the key messages from all three reviews.

C4EO is using the main messages from the three Youth theme reviews to underpin its knowledge sharing and capacity building work with children's services, and through them the full range of professions and agencies working to increase the participation of young people in positive activities.

Research summaries

This summary is a concise and accessible overview of the key messages from the research review on this topic.

Please go to www.c4eo.org.uk to download full and in-depth versions.

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