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The Effects of Extracurricular Activity on Children and Adolescents: Hosting a Tennis Camp For Children In the Foster Care System

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THE EFFECTS OF EXTRA CURRICULAR ACTIVITY ON CHILDREN AND
ADOLESCENTS: HOSTING A TENNIS CAMP FOR CHILDREN IN THE
FOSTER CARE SYSTEM

By

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Table of Contents

Summary 2

Introduction 3

Behavioral Effects 4

Health Effects 6

Academic Effects 8

Role of Socioeconomic Status 11

Arranging and Hosting the Tennis Camp 15

Works Cited 22

Summary

In recent years, many studies have been conducted regarding the positive effects of extracurricular activities on the behaviors, actions, and overall well-being of children and adolescents. Whether it is through sports, hobbies, or activities within the community, it is important for all children to be able to have access to and be involved in some kind of extracurricular activities. Participation in activities such as these instills in children the qualities essential for life long success including good work ethic, time management skills, the ability to work in groups, commitment, and focus all while guiding them along the right path as they grow and mature as young adults.

The purpose of this thesis was to focus on the positive benefits of participation in extracurricular activities, and most importantly to arrange and host a tennis camp for the children at Carolina Children's Home. The camp lasted for 4 hours and consisted of teaching the children how to properly hit the ball, drills where I fed the ball to the children on the other side of net, a lunch in between, and finally fun tennis games.

To complement the tennis camp, I also did a review of the relevant literature examining the effects of extracurricular activities on the behavior, health, and academic success of children and adolescents, specifically focusing on children in low income families. Through this research, I found that there is a strong positive correlation between extracurricular sports activities and increased behavior, increased health, and increased academic achievement in children and adolescents. I also found that socioeconomic status plays a significant role, whereby higher SES results in higher levels of extracurricular activity participation, also noting that these positive effects are greater in those children from families of lower SES backgrounds.

Introduction

Participation in extracurricular activities is a commonplace undertaking in today's society. All children, including elementary, middle, and high school students, have very little free time in their busy, event filled schedules. Sports participation, in particular, for many students is no longer a few practices before a game but an intense, competitive, year-round occurrence where players and parents are no longer satisfied with the team coach as the sole source of training. Thus, trainers and coaches, paid or unpaid, are sought out to help further develop and improve the skill level of the child. Trainers are no longer obtained merely to improve a player's skill set but to improve the agility, flexibility, and overall conditioning necessary to compete at a high level. If a child wants to make a team, daily practices with the team are no longer adequate to compete with players who train year-round with additional coaches after practice and on weekends. As a result, there is very little free time outside of sports. The carefree lifestyle of children has taken a drastic turn over the last couple of decades, and time to relax is almost unheard of for many students. Parents allow practice/training to become the central part of the child's life, and chores are pushed aside to permit additional time to improve upon their extracurricular activity of choice. Even homework takes a backseat to practice and training in some cases. But, is this lack of leisure time good for our children, and if so, what are the positive benefits of extracurricular activities on children and to what extent do these activities provide positive outcomes? Furthermore, what are the effects of these activities on disadvantaged children? Fortunately, these questions and many related questions have been examined by researchers over the years, and many positive effects have been identified.

Behavioral Effects

Extracurricular activities have been shown to have many positive effects on child development, one of these being improved behavior. Recent research has linked participation in extracurricular activities with reduced delinquency and other behavioral problems. In a longitudinal study conducted by Mahoney (2000), the relationship between child and adolescent participation in extracurricular activities and antisocial behaviors was examined. This study followed 695 boys and girls who were interviewed annually between childhood and high school, then again at ages 20 and 24. Results showed that individuals who participated in at least one extracurricular activity as a child or adolescent had lower rates of school dropout and criminal arrests when compared to individuals who did not participate in extracurricular activities. These results also showed that social networks played a major role in behavior, as those students who interacted with other students participating in extracurricular activities showed reduced antisocial and delinquent behaviors as compared to students whose peer networks did not participate in these activities. These results were especially true for “at-risk” youth, or those children who show problem behaviors and have an economic disadvantage (Mahoney 503). Harrison and Narayan (2003) also found similar results in their studies examining the effects of sport participation on psychosocial functioning and healthy behavior. This study included 50,168 ninth grade public school students who anonymously responded to a nationwide survey. Results showed that the students involved in sports (either alone or in conjunction with other extracurricular activities) had healthier self-images, lower emotional distress, lower drug and alcohol use, lower odds for vandalism and physical/sexual abuse, and were less likely to skip school.

These studies show the positive benefits of extracurricular activities on behaviors of children and adolescents, but why is it that these results are seen? Some people suggest that it is a lack of opportunity, as participation in activities keeps children off of the streets and more closely monitored, reducing the chances for them to perform delinquent acts or act unfavorably. Others, however, believe that participation in extracurricular activities allows for personal growth and creates healthy relationships with adults who in turn become positive role models for children. Harrison and Narayan (2003) suggest that extracurricular participation has beneficial influence on participants by “providing a context for personal growth, exposure to health-related messages, and interactions with supportive adults and peers” (118). Shumow (2003) explains in her research that youth who have positive relationships with adults and mentors outside of the family are less likely to participate in high risk behaviors such as drug and alcohol abuse as compared with those who do not have this type of relationship. Whether it is lack of opportunity or positive adult relationships, it is clear that participation in extracurricular activities is highly influential in the actions and behaviors of children and adolescents.

Health Effects

Another benefit of extracurricular activities includes healthier lifestyles, as positive health outcomes have been attributed to extracurricular sports activity. The most obvious health benefit is actual physical fitness whereby there is increased muscle tone and endurance. Pate (1995) and over 20 other researchers brought together by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM) summarized their own epidemiologic studies accumulated on physical activity and its impact on health (403). Their research pointed to an abundance of health benefits in terms of reducing the probability of health issues. According to Pate et al, "Exercise training improves Coronary Heart Disease risk factors and other health-related factors, including blood lipid profile, resting blood pressure in borderline hypertensives, body composition, glucose tolerance and insulin sensitivity, bone density, immune function, and psychological function" (403). Blood pressure, blood glucose and insulin levels, as well as cholesterol levels are all positively affected. It is clear that adolescents who do not participate in sports or any type of physical activity are much more likely to be overweight or obese.

Similar positive benefits were also identified by Pate, Trost, Levin, and Dowda (2000). They found that adolescents participating in physical activity ate more fruits and vegetables the day prior to survey data collection. They were also less likely to report smoking cigarettes, using illegal drugs including cocaine, or considering suicide than those that did not participate in physical activity. According to Ferber, Gaines, and Goodman (2005), increased time in extracurricular activities has positive influences on adolescents including "preventing teen

pregnancy, drug abuse, unemployment and youth violence to promoting academic, civic and vocational success” (Ferber et al 2).

Harrison and Narayan also found similar results, relating participation in sports with healthy eating habits as well as healthy emotional and behavioral habits.

“While participation in any activity generally appears to be better than nonparticipation, participation in sports (alone or in conjunction with other activities) has a unique association with adequate exercise, milk consumption, healthy self-image, and with a lower likelihood of emotional distress, suicidal behavior, familial substance abuse, and physical and sexual abuse histories. Conversely, participation in extracurricular activities other than sports appears to have a unique association with doing homework and avoiding alcohol use, marijuana use, and vandalism” (Harrison & Narayan 117-118).

Academic Effects

In addition to behavioral and health benefits and perhaps most importantly, extracurricular activities, sports in particular, have repeatedly been shown to enhance the academic achievement level of students as well. In a thorough review of the literature published from 1961 to 2007, Hartman confirmed that the majority of the research, in fact, was indicative of a strong statistically significant correlation between interscholastic sports participation and educational performance (Hartman 23). Not only were academic factors such as grades, SAT scores, and graduation rates higher, but mental health, self-esteem, and higher post-school wages and income were also higher (Hartman 8). Hartman also examined the causal factors involved in this positive relationship and found that many differences were identified depending on the social variables utilized (Hartman 4). Miller et al. (2005) postulated that research taking into account social variables such as socioeconomic status, type of sports participation, level of sports participation, and academic curriculum required a more in depth analysis to determine the causal factors that might be responsible for such differences and not just assume in every situation there will be increased educational attainment (Hartman 25).

In a 2009 review of the literature, most of which was based on large databases from longitudinal studies, Baker and Ralston identified three main themes. The first finding was related to the numerous positive benefits of extracurricular sports participation. They point out that “High school athletic participation is associated with an array of positive outcomes, including high school GPA, college attendance, college completion, adult income and earnings, job quality, and beneficial health behaviors” (Baker and Ralston 5). Baker and Ralston also noted that the positive outcomes were dependent on “individual circumstances, level and type of

sport, and school context” (Baker and Ralston 5). Individual circumstances were described as race/ethnicity, gender of the athlete, family circumstances, and socioeconomic status (SES), the level and type of sport dealt with (i.e. varsity versus junior varsity levels as well as aggressive versus non-aggressive sports), and school context including the size of the school, public versus private schools, and the culture within the school community. The final research finding suggested that negative effects also exist related to participation in school extracurricular sports activities, explaining that “male high school athletes in particular report higher levels of alcohol consumption, drunk driving, sexist and homophobic social attitudes, gender-related violent activity, and same-sex violence and fighting” (Baker and Ralston 5).

Guest and Schneider (2008) found that not only do extracurricular activities affect achievement levels, but they also impact a student’s identity and standing in peer hierarchies which translated into higher levels of academic achievement in all socioeconomic communities. Longitudinal data, which included survey and interview information from over 1000 middle and high school students (grades 6, 8, 10, 12) over a five-year period (1992 to 1997) via the University of Chicago, were utilized (Csikszentmihalyi & Schneider). Results showed that students living in low socioeconomic status communities who participated in sports related extracurricular activities were more likely to benefit academically than those living in higher socioeconomic communities (school and community). Thus, participation in extracurricular sports activities was predictive of academic achievement. It should also be noted that participation in non-sports related extracurricular activities such as Drama and Debate team resulted in higher achievement levels in all levels of socioeconomic status communities.

Gender differences have also been identified with regards to academic success and participation in athletic extracurricular activities. In Hartman’s literature review, he found that

the majority of the studies that looked at male versus female tended to point to a more positive relationship between academic achievement and sports participation in school with female athletes (Hartman 19). He pointed out that this is consistent with research showing that females in general have the tendency to perform better academically (Hartman 20). Utilizing the 1988 National Educational Longitudinal Survey or NELS:88, Troutman and Dufur in 2007 found that not only do females perform better in high school, but they are also more likely to graduate from college. There was a huge 73% difference whereby females who played a high school sport were overwhelmingly more likely to attend college and graduate than nonparticipating females (Troutman and Dufur 458). The sample included 24,599 eighth graders in 1988 and followed up with these same subjects in 1990, 1992, 1994, and again in 2000 with very little attrition over the 12 years (Baker & Ralston 6).

Role of Socioeconomic Status

With all of the positive benefits related to extracurricular sports activity, what type of student is most likely to actually participate in these activities, and what role do social variables play? Torre et al (2006) examined socioeconomic status (SES) and parental level of physical activity to determine if these factors play a role in determining whether or not a child participates and, if so, the level of participation in extracurricular sports. From 2002 to 2003, they distributed a survey to 2,411 students (1121 males/46.5% & 1290 females/53.5%) between the ages of 11 and 17 years in five regions of Italy. Physical activity of the adolescent was determined through questions asking about participation in general, type of particular activity, and level of participation in terms of hours per week. The researchers also obtained information on a yes/no scale about cigarette smoking, coffee, and alcohol consumption. Data looking at the level of parental physical activity, occupation, and education level were also obtained. Results indicated that more than 86% of the students participated in some form of physical sports activity at least two hours per week and another 14.6% participated 3 or more hours per week. Gymnastics, volleyball, basketball, football, handball, long jump, high jump, and running were the extracurricular activities participated in by the students. Of this sample, almost 38% smoked, almost 44% consumed coffee, and just as many (43.4%) consumed some type of alcohol (beer, wine, “alcoholic lemon drinks and vodka”) (Torre et al 1). Torre et al. found a positive relationship to exist between SES and level of adolescent participation in extracurricular activities. Thus, as parental SES increased, so did participation levels. They pointed out the apparent relationship between parental SES and level of education. Children from parents who were more educated and held higher paying positions, one indicator of SES,

were more likely to participate in extracurricular sports activities (Torre et al 1). On the other hand, the children of mothers and fathers who held unskilled positions, including housewives and those who were unemployed, were statistically significantly less likely to participate in extracurricular physical activities than children with parents from Professional/Managerial/Office-worker positions. Additionally, parents who were less physically active tended to have children who were also less active (Torre et al 1). In conclusion, adolescents who are more likely to participate and do at higher levels of extracurricular physical activity included those of higher SES backgrounds where their parents worked skilled jobs and were more active physically.

Similar conclusions have been found in Canada, as Mo, Turner, and Krewski (2005) found that physical activity was higher among adolescents who came from families with a higher SES. They examined data from the 2003 Canadian Community Health Survey, which utilized 18,441 adolescents, an almost equal number of males and females, between the ages of 12 and 20 years. They also found that males and younger adolescents tended to be the most physically active, and this also correlated with SES. Overall, the level of physical activity increased with higher SES.

Noting that studies have shown that lower SES status equates with an increased likelihood of becoming obese or overweight, Tandon et al (2012) examined home physical activity environments of 715 children aged 6 to 11 years, to determine if they differed significantly by SES. The sample consisted of almost an equal number of male and female children, and they had a mean age of 9.3 years. As for the parents, they were almost 90% female with a mean age of 39.6 years, 89% Caucasian, and 80% were married. They measured physical activity levels as well as screen time. SES was measured using parental income and level of

educational achievement. Physical activity was measured using readings from an Actigraph accelerometer worn for 7 days by the child. This instrument uses measurements such as acceleration, steps taken, physical activity intensity, and energy expenditure. Parents completed questionnaires to provide further information related to their child's physical activity and household screen time which included television time, whether the television was in the bedroom, DVD use, internet use, cell phone use, and video games. Results indicated that the home environment of children in lower SES households revealed significantly more electronics in their bedrooms as well as more screen time in general. Televisions were found in 52% of their bedrooms compared to 14% in higher SES environments. Likewise, DVD players were found in 39% of low SES bedrooms versus 14%, and video games were noted in 21% as opposed to 9%. Furthermore, significantly fewer pieces of play equipment were also found in lower SES homes than in higher SES home environments. This included bicycles in 85% (vs. 98%) of their homes and jump ropes in 69% (vs. 83%). Television viewing with parents and siblings was also significantly higher in low SES homes at 3.1 days per week versus higher SES homes who viewed television together 2.5 days per week (Tandon et al. 1). Overall, parents of children in lower SES home environments spent significantly more time watching television with their children than they did participating in physical activity and provided more opportunity for their children to be sedentary as a result of the electronic devices and less opportunity to partake in physical activities secondary to lack of play equipment.

In conclusion, there is a strong link between extracurricular sports activities and increased behavior, increased health, and increased academic achievement level of children and adolescents. Many variables have been researched throughout the years, and psychosocial function, body image, health, grades, SAT scores, graduation rates, mental health, self-esteem,

post school wages, income, college attendance, and college completion have all been found to positively correlate with participation in extracurricular sports activities. Social or causal factors that can affect this relationship include type of sports participation, level of participation, race, ethnicity, gender, school size, and whether a school is public or private. Socioeconomic status also plays a significant role, whereby higher SES results in higher levels of extracurricular activity participation. The SES of students is also related to physical activity in general. Unfortunately, research has shown that adolescents who come from low-income families tend to have parents who are also more sedentary. Thus, their role models are exhibiting behavior that could be interpreted as a deterrent to participation in extracurricular activities and therefore an increased likelihood for lower levels of academic achievement.

Arranging and Hosting the Tennis Camp

This project focused on the positive benefits of participation in extracurricular activities. To complement the literature review, a tennis camp was organized and hosted for the children at Carolina Children's Home, a foster home in the Columbia area. As previously discussed, participation in extracurricular activities, specifically participation in sports, yields countless benefits for children in terms of academics, development, and overall wellbeing, especially those children in families of low socioeconomic status. The idea of the tennis camp was to introduce the children to the sport of tennis in the hopes of sparking an interest in a fun, low risk activity that they could turn to in their free time instead of more destructive options that children in similar situations tend to fall back on.

To begin the process, I contacted University of South Carolina's Sports Club Director to discuss my tennis camp idea. I wanted to make sure that it would be acceptable to host a tennis camp on university courts without violating any university policies. The Director informed me that it is required for each person who steps foot on university tennis courts to sign a waiver that frees the university of any responsibilities for injuries that may happen, so I would be allowed to host the camp as long as each child participating in the event had a signed waiver before entering the courts.

After ensuring that courts would be available for the camp, I began contacting children's homes. The first place I contacted was Epworth Children's Home, as I had volunteered there during high school and thought it would be great to work with them again. I was directed to the Volunteer Coordinator, and after explaining my ideas for the project, she said she would speak to her supervisor to confirm the details but that everything seemed like it would work out. A

few days later, however, I received a call from a different woman from Epworth who explained to me that because my tennis camp was associated with a school project, they would not be able to accommodate my requests. This was due to security reasons, as the children's names and faces cannot be shown or used anywhere for risk of being exposed to the wrong people (for example parents who are not supposed to know where their children are located).

I then began searching online for other children's homes in Columbia, as Epworth was the only one I had ever heard of. I quickly found a website for Carolina Children's Home, which is actually located seconds away from the house I had lived in last year. I called the number on the site right away and was directed to the Volunteer Coordinator named Malik. I told him my situation and asked if a tennis camp would be feasible, explaining the issues that prevented me from working with the children at Epworth so he would be well aware in advance if there would be any issues. He said that he would need to discuss it with a few other people involved in the organization, but also said to call back in a few days with potential dates so that if the camp were to work out, we could go ahead and make arrangements.

After picking out some potential dates for the camp, I called Malik to see if he had any news on whether or not I could hold the camp. He told me that all of the details sounded good but that I needed to contact a man named Gary Boyd, who organized and attended all activities with the children, to get the final "okay." I called Mr. Boyd immediately, and after going over the details with him, he told me that a tennis camp sounded like a great idea and the kids would love it. As for taking pictures to document the camp, I assured him that my thesis director, second reader, and I would be the only people seeing the pictures in my paper and powerpoint presentation, so he said that would be perfectly fine as long as they did not go anywhere else. Finally, we discussed the details of the camp and decided on the final date: March 22 from 11-2.

The home has busses available for transportation, so all I had to do was figure out a way to provide the equipment and tennis balls for the camp then meet them at the courts. We planned on getting in contact closer to the date of the camp to finalize the rest of the details, such as how many people would be attending.

Now that the date was set, the details of the tennis camp were arranged and outlined. I organized an event filled day for the children involving drills and games with a lunch in between. To assist me during the camp, I asked a few members of the Club Tennis team at USC to act as tennis instructors for the day to feed balls and just help out wherever was needed throughout the day. As for the actual camp, the beginning would consist of forehand and backhand practice where the assistants would hit balls to the children for them to return as well as instruct them and help them with their strokes. After this, the instructors were to work on net play with the children, focusing on volleys and overheads and teaching them the proper way to hit both of these strokes. Finally, the children would work on serves, and once this was complete, everyone would have lunch. Once lunch finished, the children would play an assortment of games for the remainder of the camp and just have fun hitting around.

After determining how the events of the camp would play out, I needed to find sponsors to provide food for the lunch portion of the camp. I wanted to have something healthy for the kids to eat, so I decided that sandwiches would be a good choice. The first place I called was Publix to see if they would possibly donate a platter of subs or two for the kids. After discussing my plans with the deli manager, she said that they would be happy to accommodate my requests. I did not set up anything yet, however, because I wanted to make the order in person (so it would seem more formal and I could thank them face to face) and I also needed to know how many children would be attending the camp to know how many subs to order.

In addition to food for lunch, I wanted to provide prizes and gifts for the children to give out during the camp. I decided to go to Todd and Moore to see if they had anything they would be willing to donate. After talking to the manager, he went into the back of the store and brought out some Gamecock folders and pencils. I was very thankful for these, as I knew the kids would really like anything with USC on it. In addition to these items, I really wanted to give the children some t-shirts, as I'm sure their clothing options are somewhat limited being in a foster home. I knew that I probably would not be able to get any shirts made, so I decided to call one of the representatives for the United States Tennis Association who I became close with this year through Club Tennis to see if there was anything she could do. As soon as I told her what I was doing, she was very willing to help in any way she could. She told me that there were plenty of extra t-shirts at her office and that she would box them up as soon as possible to send them to me. With these t-shirts and other items, I also decided to purchase some candy, as everyone likes candy and I figured it would be good to give out as prizes for the games we played during the camp.

About two weeks before the date of the camp on March 5, I called Mr. Boyd to get the rest of the details and make sure everything was still in order. However, when I called, he said that they had completely forgotten about the camp because the home was closing down on the 14th and would not be able to attend the camp on the 22nd. We tried to quickly come up with a new plan of action, but because Spring Break was to begin the next week, this made things difficult. The only option was to host the camp that Saturday March 8th. With this new date, I had a lot of planning to do, as it was only three days away.

I first called the Sports Club Director to make sure I could still use the courts, but because the new day was during Spring Break, there would be nobody to manage the courts

while I was there and were therefore unavailable. I began calling multiple tennis facilities around the area, but all of them were either already booked on Saturday or had court fees associated with them. My last hope was to use the indoor tennis facility at USC which is normally only available to students who play on the tennis team. I have a friend on the men's team and called him asking if there was any way I could use the courts for my camp. Luckily both men's and women's teams did not have a match on those courts that day, so they said it would be acceptable for us to use the courts.

My next issue was having enough assistants to help me run the camp. Many people were leaving for Spring Break that Friday, and only one of the people I had originally asked was still able to attend. I contacted as many tennis players as I knew in the area, but nobody was going to be in town to help. Fortunately, one of my friends who barely plays tennis said he would be in town and would come assist during the camp. Three instructors were not what I had in mind for the camp, but I had to manage with that because I really had no other choice.

The final thing I had to do was get the food for lunch. I called Publix to see if they would be able to take my order so close to the date of the camp, but because of scheduling and forms that needed to be processed for donations, they said they would not be able to take my order unless I paid for all of the sandwiches myself. Not really wanting to do that, I decided that maybe Dominos would be willing to give some free pizzas, so I drove to Dominos and spoke with the manager who thankfully was very willing to give me as many pizzas as I wanted. We decided on five pizzas that would be delivered to the courts at 12:30 on Saturday.

On Friday morning, I called Mr. Boyd to tell him the new plan, and he said he would be there with 12 kids ready to play on Saturday. Later that day, I put together all of the goodie bags

with the folders, pencils, t-shirts, and some candy and got everything else ready so the camp would run smoothly the next day.

My two assistants and I arrived to the courts around 10 to set up for the camp. We set up a table with a Gamecock tablecloth and set out all of the goodie bags and bottled waters. By 11, the children and staff members arrived at the courts, but when I went outside to greet them, only four kids came out of the van – three girls and one boy. I asked where the others were, and he said that these were the only four who could make it, as many of the other children were being placed in different homes and with foster parents, and some were just in trouble and had their leaving privileges revoked.

Despite there only being four attendees, the camp went very well. Mr. Boyd even jumped in for many of the drills and games because the kids were having so much fun. None of them had ever played tennis before and were very eager to learn how to hit the ball “just like us.” We did drills to teach them how to hit the proper strokes until the pizza arrived, and during lunch we all got to know each other a little better. The kids were very nice and seemed very optimistic about their living situations. They also said they really enjoyed playing tennis and would love to play more if they had the opportunity to do so. I tried to be very optimistic the whole time and stayed positive about everything we talked about, as many times it is easy for these children to feel down on themselves or negatively about the situations they are in, and I reassured them that they can do anything they want as long as they tried and worked hard in everything they did. Once the camp was over, I gave each child a goodie bag and briefly talked to them about ways they can get involved in tennis in their community if they wished to do so as well as some more positive parting words on working hard in school and in everything they do. With that, everyone left and the camp was finished.

Although planning was very hectic, overall I really enjoyed everything about this project. Tennis and teaching are two of my biggest passions, so I would love the opportunity to continue hosting tennis camps or clinics to disadvantaged children in the future. All it takes is one person to affect the lives of others, so all I can hope is that I can be that one person who can maybe change a child's life through tennis.

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