Personally meaningful and positive leisure pursuits are powerful mechanisms for adolescent development. Elements and characteristics of leisure experiences contribute directly to the development of identity, autonomy, competence, initiative, civic duty, and social connections.

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Leisure, recreation, and play from a developmental context

Linda L. Caldwell, Peter A. Witt

The terms play, recreation, and leisure can evoke thoughts of frivolity, fun, sociability, competition, slothfulness, or idleness. However, there is substantial evidence that what people do in their discretionary or free time has important developmental and health implications. Therefore, to introduce this special issue, this article examines how play, recreation, and leisure contribute to adolescent development and the conditions that facilitate that development.

A large proportion of a nonworking adolescent’s day is considered “free time.” By some estimates, this time fills about 40 percent of an adolescent’s day. The way in which an adolescent fills this time has important developmental and health implications. Of interest for this volume are the developmental benefits of filling this time with positive experiences of play, recreation, and leisure. Defining these terms depends on who is asked; complicating the situation is that the terms are often used interchangeably. Leisure scholars tend to consider leisure as the overall container for positive experiences and may include activity-based pursuits, as
well as the state of being reflective and experiencing freedom. For many adolescents, some portion of their leisure activities takes place during out-of-school-time programs, such as scouting, 4-H, youth sports, and community park and recreation programs; others play out in self-managed, family, or other nonstructured contexts.

Adolescents can also fill their free time in unhealthy or unproductive ways, such as being involved in vandalism or using alcohol or other drugs. Many adults consider these to be negative behaviors, even though some adolescents may consider these activities to be simply fun and recreational. Some researchers have suggested that these activities can also contribute to development and that they are part of growing up if they are experimental rather than addictive. Often these types of activities are motivated when adolescents perceive they are bored in their free time and have nothing else to do.

In this article, we discuss positive developmental benefits associated with filling free time in positive ways. Although there are differences in the use of the terms play, recreation, and leisure, we will avoid the semantic quagmire and use the term leisure to convey the positive ways that adolescents can fill their free time. As we discuss these developmental outcomes, we describe in more detail the characteristics of leisure pursuits and experiences that contribute to these outcomes.

The examination of leisure pursuits from an activity, context, and experiential perspective in many ways differentiates the way leisure scientists study adolescent leisure from the way developmental psychologists study it (although there are exceptions). That is, leisure scientists tend to focus on the whole leisure experience, including activity and time use, context, and experience, such as the leisure activity, context, and experience model, rather than taking a “time” or “activity” perspective that developmental psychologists typically, but not always, adopt. What has been missing in the field of leisure sciences is a more sophisticated examination of development using modern longitudinal analytical techniques such as latent transition analysis. We hope this article and this
entire special issue contribute to further dialogue on the importance of leisure to adolescent development.

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**Plugged In: A case study**

We begin our discussion with a recent story from the *Christian Science Monitor* about two parents who started a nonprofit organization, Plugged In (PI). The mission of PI is to enable youth to have a positive effect on their world through music. The story of PI serves as a platform to begin a discussion of how leisure contributes to youth development.

PI began when Sandra Rizkallah and Tom Pugh heard their teenagers and their teenagers’ friends talking about wanting to be in a rock and roll band. But nothing happened. Realizing that there were no places in the Boston area for these teens to get support for their dreams, they decided to help. Pugh had studied bass at the Berklee College of Music and played in bands as a professional musician. With his talents and his wife’s vision, they started PI with five teens who participated in a course to learn to play in a rock band. Eight years later, more than four hundred teens have participated in the program. During three sixteen-week sessions every year, ninety-five teens play in twenty-eight bands and learn from area professionals in classes that have about four to six students per class.

The story of PI demonstrates that what youth do in their leisure time can make powerful contributions to human development and health. PI was developed to provide an avenue for adolescents to learn music and how to play in a rock band, but the fundamental vision was that music could be a vehicle for social change through helping others. Thus, at the beginning of each session, all participants attend a town hall meeting where they select a charity or cause to receive monies raised from their concerts and the sale of their CDs. They also sponsor a Jam-a-Thon fundraiser for the selected charity or cause. At the meeting, students pitch their ideas about which charity or cause to support. This process is entirely run by the teens.
The anecdotal story of PI’s effectiveness is supportive of the substantial empirical evidence of the powerful developmental outcomes that are associated with positive leisure-time activities. Comments from the founders of the PI program and its students, counselors, and parents provide some insights into the impact of the program:

Many teens come to us struggling with low self-esteem. Through connecting with other young musicians in Plugged In, they learn they can help others through their love of music. They gain confidence, compassion, a social conscience—and hope. We provide a safe place for these kids. They have so many pressures. . . . Here, kids can take risks, and they can be kind to each other. And that brings strength.

—One of the program founders

I learned to work in a group, and to share my opinions and ideas. And most of all, to never be afraid to try new things—even if you make a complete goof of yourself—and to be outspoken about what I believe in.

—College student who spent six years in the program

Plugged In is more than a music program. It’s a place for youths to connect with one another in a noncompetitive way. That’s why I love this program. If a young person isn’t an athlete or part of a school-based group, there are virtually no places that offer an opportunity to grow and connect with their peers.

—Jon Mattleman, director of Needham Youth Services

It’s been wonderful for him, especially in boosting his self-confidence. Plugged In has helped him improve as a musician, but it’s also empowered him to see how he can use his music to make a difference in the world.

—Parent of son who has been playing bass guitar in the program for six years

Leisure and adolescent development

Developmental benefits occur in leisure for a variety of reasons. The PI story provides a number of lessons about how leisure
pursuits can contribute to adolescent development. One of these lessons is the importance of having appropriate environmental supports and opportunities. For example, caring adults who respect adolescents’ capabilities and provide a supportive push to learn skills and competencies are critical to the developmental process. Providing supports to help youth develop their own voices and make decisions can be powerful vehicles for development.

Larson and his colleagues have described youth experiences in both adult-led and youth-led endeavors and the complexities surrounding youth leadership and youth voice. The most successful adult-youth partnerships occur when adults adopt a scaffolding model, providing the appropriate amount of support and the resources that adolescents need at each stage of their development to be successful.

A rich empirical literature documents the importance of how appropriate structure, organization, and leadership contribute to adolescent development. For example, research shows that adolescents who participate in structured extracurricular activities are less likely to engage in antisocial behavior, more likely to have a higher level of academic achievement, and more likely to have positive psychosocial functioning.

Unstructured activities are often defined as being unsupervised or having no focus on skill building. When defined as such, unsupervised activity participation typically is linked to negative outcomes. For example, hanging out has been positively related to alcohol initiation, and sedentary activities such as watching TV and playing video games are related to outcomes such as overweight and diminished physical activity among adolescents.

Some researchers and theorists, however, have argued that unstructured time is important for healthy development and self-expression. Elkins posits that many contemporary children and adolescents are overscheduled, making them more likely to be stressed and less likely to engage in important activities such as playing in a natural, creative way. Furthermore, when unstructured activities are defined more broadly, research findings are more positive. For example, participation in activities like
backpacking and chess has value for expressing and affirming identity among college students, and virtual online peer-to-peer interactions contribute to informal learning.¹²

What is often missing from the literature, however, is a deeper understanding of why leisure is an important context for adolescent development. These benefits can occur because leisure offers a number of conditions or characteristics associated with addressing developmental tasks of adolescents. These are described next.

**Autonomy development and self-determination**

One of the defining elements of leisure is that it is characterized by free choice and self-determination. That is, in leisure, adolescents make choices to engage in activities they enjoy and give them meaning. The feeling of freedom and choice in leisure facilitates being open to and gaining developmental benefits. As young people mature, developing behavioral and emotional autonomy is an important task. Leisure pursuits are ideal contexts for autonomy development given that they are characterized by self-determination. Adults who facilitate growth experiences through providing appropriate structure (or lack of structure) in leisure play a critical role in adolescent development through leisure. Conversely, leisure pursuits that are not self-determined tend to be experienced negatively and can quickly lead to cessation of participation.

**Intrinsic and identified motivation, initiative, and goal setting**

Autonomy development and self-determination are intricately linked with developing initiative and goal setting skills. Often leisure is considered an end, not a means to an end. That is, it is pursued for its own sake and thus is internally rewarding. For example, someone may love to run because it feels good. Although running may be a form of exercise and contribute to health, the primary motivation is running for its own sake. A great deal of research suggests that intrinsically motivated activities are related to health and well-being.¹³ Leisure is an important context for intrinsic forms of motivation.
Leisure can also be a means to an end. Purposeful leisure (that is, doing a leisure activity to achieve a goal) is also beneficial if the goal is meaningful to and endorsed by the adolescent. In the PI case, playing in a rock band to raise money for a cause that is personally endorsed and part of one’s value system is, in most cases, intrinsic in nature, even though it is goal oriented.

Leisure pursuits thus offer myriad opportunities for adolescents to experience doing an activity for internal rewards, as opposed to doing an activity out of external compulsion. Of course, there are many free-time activities that adolescents engage in due to some form of external compulsion. Peer pressure, parental demands, and external rewards such as trophies are all motivating. However, participation driven solely by external factors is unlikely to help adolescents reap important developmental and health benefits as much as internally motivated action.

Internally motivated pursuits are more likely to be sustained over time. Adolescents who are internally motivated are more likely to remain focused and stick to a personally desired activity even when they face challenges, such as transportation difficulties or lack of initial skill. Undertaking internally motivated leisure pursuits leads to the development of initiative, which is important to fostering the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Furthermore, intrinsically motivated pursuits are more likely to be personally expressive and to reflect one’s true self-identity.

*Achievement and competence*

Perceived competence and a sense of achievement contribute to intrinsic motivation. Leisure pursuits are excellent mechanisms for developing skills and a sense of mastery. As illustrated in the PI example, leisure pursuits offer many avenues for developing skills and competencies. Youth engaged in learning how to play in a rock and roll band not only gained music skills, but also learned to work with others, take personal risks, and contribute to society through their passions.

Leisure can also be a significant context for achievement and developing perceived competence for those who may in other ways
feel less competent in school-based activities. All students can find a leisure activity in which they can excel, even if they are not as successful with academic material.

In addition, leisure pursuits can contribute to educational attainment by influencing academic achievement at school and through informal learning that occurs outside the traditional classroom. For example, there is fairly consistent evidence that extracurricular activities are associated with educational success, even when controlling for academic ability, family background, and other extracurricular activities. Youth whose leisure activities are characterized by participation in more organized or structured activities and fewer passive and unstructured activities have better academic performance compared to those with the opposite profile.

A second, but often overlooked, avenue to increase educational attainment is through informal learning that takes place outside the classroom. This type of learning is effective because most students are more engaged in leisure contexts than with typical academic classroom instruction. Having choices and being exposed to different opportunities is not only developmentally appropriate; it also stimulates passions and allows students to become intensely involved in a project.

Identity
Leisure pursuits are an important avenue for adolescent identity formation. Pursuits that are internally motivated, self-determined, personally meaningful and expressive, and offer a chance to build competencies can become a way for adolescents to understand who they are in relation to others and the world around them. In the PI example, there is little doubt that the students who participated in the classes identified themselves as singers, songwriters, rock musicians, or some combination of these roles. Equally important, these youth no doubt saw themselves as part of a larger local and global community and recognized that they had an imperative to contribute to that society and found a means to do so.
Civic engagement, community connections, and developing a moral compass

As youth come to identify with a larger social context, they begin to develop a sense of community and undertake actions that can contribute to that community. As they mature, they also develop an understanding of social and cultural traditions and norms and a sense of right and wrong. For example, many adolescents form groups over the Internet around a common cause or use public spaces for marches or rallies to express their views. These leisure pursuits provide a means for them to explore their values and worldviews, gain civic skills, and connect to the larger community. Involvement in these experiences is important to adolescents’ transition to adulthood and contributes to their emerging identity as citizens.

Social skills and social connections

Social activities are among the most commonly pursued forms of leisure among adolescents. They are also the most commonly desired form of leisure because adolescents crave the feeling that they belong. The social context of leisure is important to adolescent development in that it provides opportunities to learn empathy, loyalty, and intimacy in group activities, as well as to negotiate with peers, resolve conflict, and work together for communal goals. Developmentally, social leisure activities allow both differentiation and integration and facilitate youth’s abilities to exert personal control over their environments.

Leisure is an important context in which adolescents can experience safe places to try out different roles and interact informally with members of the opposite sex, as well as develop and learn about dealing with romantic relationships. Leisure is a particularly important context during puberty.

Leisure pursuits can also provide opportunities for youth to develop social capital: the social, cultural, and material resources young people acquire to help them in the various contexts of their lives and in the transition to adulthood.
develop when youth work together for a common goal, whether it is a protest against some injustice, lobbying for a skate park or youth center, or other type of collective activity.

Where and when social interactions take place is also important. Many structured and unstructured leisure activities are sought out and provide opportunities for face-to-face social interaction. But youth also spend a great deal of time with social media and on the Internet. A 2009 study revealed that about 93 percent of U.S. teens used the Internet, spending about six and a half hours a day involved with some type of media. Some research has suggested that use of media and technology is to blame for decreases in interpersonal skills, academic achievement, violence, and identity confusion and increased cyberbullying. However, other studies report that adolescents gain social skills, feelings of belonging, academic skills, leadership skills, and creativity through screen time and the use of media and technology.

Emotional response to leisure

A final but essential consideration is that adolescents often report positive emotional experiences in leisure, which can serve as a relief from the stress they feel in other areas of their lives and contribute to positive psychological adjustment and well-being. Joy, fun, excitement, interest, and happiness are hallmarks of leisure. In addition, leisure is a rich context to experience flow, a state of consciousness in which there is a “merging of action and awareness” and time passes without thought. The happiest adolescents tend to be more often engaged in flow-producing situations.

Of course, adolescents may also experience negative emotional experiences in their leisure. Stress and embarrassment, boredom, and loneliness can be associated with leisure pursuits. Adolescents can also feel pressure from their peers to engage in activities that they would not normally pursue.
The developing brain, social and emotional regulation, and risk and experimentation

Recent advances in understanding the developing brain are relevant to adolescent leisure. Between ages twelve and seventeen, the adolescent brain is easily shaped and thus receptive to the influence of social learning through interaction with adults and peers. During this time, the developing brain is primed for developing enduring interests. The amygdala, the brain’s center for emotion and emotion-based memory, becomes particularly active during early adolescence. This early activation of emotions and passions intensifies goal-directed behavior and is often manifested by developing passions in music, art, recreational hobbies, and sports. The activation of interests comes about because when certain connections among neurons are used, they are strengthened; those that are not used are pruned. Consequently adolescent brains are primed to become hardwired for developing leisure activity preferences, setting the stage for continued participation throughout adulthood.

Because of this brain activity, adolescence is also a time of increased sensation seeking and risk taking. Thus, adolescents have a natural tendency to seek out and participate in intense and exciting situations. Adolescents like novelty and have the capacity to deal with or gravitate to multiple forms of simultaneous stimuli.

Executive functioning skills, such as good decision making, critical reflection, and problem solving, evolve a bit after the amygdala is activated. In part, this may account for why youth often make poor judgments in emotionally charged situations. For example, an intense emotional response to a situation may prevent an adolescent from correctly interpreting another’s emotional state, and the brain is often unable to govern this emotional situation with a more neutral or clear-headed response.

Leisure pursuits provide excellent avenues for practicing social and emotional regulation due to the often intense emotional experiences that accompany such pursuits. Leisure pursuits are also excellent vehicles for youth to initiate and practice executive
functioning skills. These processes are particularly true if there are adults who can help youth develop skills through debriefing activities and structuring situations. Moreover, providing safe risks through leisure activities is one way to help mitigate possible unfavorable outcomes (for example, personal injury or injury to others and vandalism) due to the need for behavioral risk and excitement.

Conclusion
Leisure and recreation contexts have the potential to be important contexts for adolescent development. Research that focuses on all aspects of leisure-time activities—activity and time use, context, and experience—across time promises to be a fertile ground for continued research in the importance of leisure to adolescent development.

Notes
LEISURE, RECREATION, AND PLAY


27. Dworkin et al. (2003).


LINDA L. CALDWELL is professor of recreation, park and tourism management and human development and family studies at the Pennsylvania State University.

PETER A. WITT holds the Bradberry Recreation and Youth Development Chair at Texas A&M University.