

EXTRACURRICULAR PROGRAMMES AS A RESOURCE FOR PROMOTING POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

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Most youth intervention programmes have focused on the prevention of risk behaviours, using an approach based on a deficit model of adolescent health and development. Recently, this model has been called into question in the context of new approaches that emphasize competence and positive youth development. Indeed, there is converging evidence suggesting that extracurricular activities can be instrumental in promoting adolescent development. This paper reviews the contemporary literature on extracurricular activities as a resource for the promotion of youth development. We focus on topics such as the particular characteristics of effective extracurricular programmes and the positive consequences of participation in them. We also describe two examples of Spanish extracurricular youth development programmes. To conclude we look at some unanswered questions and consider future lines of research.

Key words: Adolescence, Positive youth development, Afterschool programmes, Extracurricular programmes

La mayoría de las intervenciones dirigidas a la población adolescente han partido de un modelo de déficit y se han centrado en la prevención de conductas de riesgo. En la actualidad este modelo está siendo sustituido por otro de competencia que pretende promover el desarrollo de chicos y chicas en esta etapa evolutiva. Por otro lado, existe cada vez mayor conciencia de que las actividades extraescolares son un importante recurso a través del cual estimular el desarrollo adolescente. El objetivo de este trabajo es revisar lo que hasta el momento sabemos de los programas extraescolares de desarrollo positivo, analizando entre otros aspectos, las características de los programas exitosos o las consecuencias que tiene la participación en ellos. Asimismo, se exponen ejemplos de dos programas extraescolares llevados a cabo en España con el objetivo de estimular el bienestar adolescente. Para concluir se presentan algunas preguntas que todavía carecen de respuesta y futuras líneas de trabajo.

Palabras clave: Adolescencia, Desarrollo positivo, Programas extraescolares

THE COMPETENCE MODEL AS A FRAMEWORK FOR POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMES

For several decades now, researchers and professionals have been showing their interest in adolescent development by investing considerable effort in designing programmes for the prevention of particular risk behaviours. Such programmes have been based on a *deficit model*, and have had as their goals the prevention of drug use, risk sexual practices, academic problems and school violence. However, for some years now a change of perspective has become apparent, with more and more programmes being designed from a *competence model* that seeks to promote positive development (Damon, 1998). This change is based on a threefold consensus.

First, that adolescence is a resource to be developed, not a problem to be solved (Roth, Brooks-Gunn, Murray & Foster 1998); second, that healthy development requires something more than merely the avoidance of risk behaviours (Lerner et al., 2006); and third, that the promotion of social, emotional, behavioural and cognitive development is key for the prevention of the types of problem mentioned above (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak & Hawkins, 2004). In the framework of the competence model, positive development programmes set out to help young people build up a series of resources and skills that they will need to navigate their way successfully through adolescence and achieve a well-adjusted adulthood.

Such programmes are currently on the increase. Testimony to this is the growing interest of policy-makers in developing structured activities, both curricular and extracurricular, that provide enriching experiences and

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promote adolescent development. Although the majority of programmes in existence at present are within the context and timetable of school itself, the focus of this article is extracurricular activities. In it, we offer a review of current knowledge about these programmes and of the role they play as a source of the promotion of positive development during adolescence.

The accumulated evidence on the favourable consequences of participation in structured extracurricular activities for youth development has stimulated interest in the incorporation of programmes in which boys and girls can involve themselves after school, especially those living in the most disadvantaged environments (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). These initiatives are more common in northern European countries and the United States; in Spain, the majority of programmes are markedly educational in a more formal sense, and aimed at younger children. Nevertheless, it is fair to say that there is a growing presence of these types of activity for adolescents in the Spanish context, and that their presence is set to increase in the coming years.

WHAT IS AN EXTRACURRICULAR POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME?

In general, it can be defined as a programme of activities that takes place outside of school hours, with the object of providing enriching experiences that permit adolescents to widen their perspectives, improve their socialization and increase their skills, without saturating them or overloading them, but allowing them to enjoy a reasonable amount of free time and leisure. In the view of Roth and Brooks-Gunn (2003), a programme of positive youth development should help its participants to develop competencies that permit them to grow and develop their skills, and become healthy and responsible adults concerned with the welfare of others.

Defining a positive development programme is not an easy task. What does seem clear is that it should fulfil at least three requirements: to pursue specific objectives, to be implemented within a framework of planned activities, and to take place in an atmosphere of healthy relationships (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003).

As regards the first of these aspects, Catalano (Catalano et al., 2004) suggests that a good positive youth development programme should pursue one or more of the following basic **objectives**. First of all, to stimulate the acquisition of social, emotional, cognitive, behavioural and moral competencies. Social, such as the correct codification and

interpretation of social cues or the generation of effective solutions to interpersonal problems. Emotional, such as recognizing and dealing with one's own and others' emotions. Cognitive, such as understanding the perspectives of others and being able to resolve problems in a way that is logical and optimizes resources. Behavioural, such as having access to the set of skills necessary for behaving successfully and prosocially. And moral, such as being able to respond in an ethical way or taking into account principles of social justice. The second objective proposed by Catalano involves promoting and supporting adolescent's self-determination – that is, their ability to think independently and make coherent decisions based on those thoughts –, boosting their sense of self-efficacy and facilitating the construction of a clear and positive identity, which includes realistic and optimistic future expectations. A final objective is to promote links between the boy or girl and significant others, contributing to the generation of strong relationships with peers and adults.

In addition to these objectives, positive development programmes are characterized by their implementation based around **planned activities** (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). Such activities, regardless of their content, which may be related to art, music, sport or volunteering, should provide an opportunity to stimulate adolescents' interests, to facilitate the acquisition and practice of new skills, and to establish a social network that can turn into a valuable resource. Eventually, they should contribute to the construction of one's own identity through the establishment of values and the stimulation of abilities. Likewise, they should allow young people's exposure to new realities, beyond the everyday activities themselves, thus broadening their social participation and their involvement in new challenges.

As far as the **atmosphere** is concerned, positive development programmes should combine three aspects (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). First, they should permit the establishment of support networks and positive relationships with peers and adults. Second, they should promote the empowerment of adolescents, which can be achieved by encouraging boys and girls to get involved in useful activities for which they are responsible, to which they must commit themselves, and that contribute to generating strong feelings of group membership. And third, a good atmosphere involves showing belief in adolescents' capacities through the transmission of high expectations about their behaviour and the setting of clear rules and responsibilities.

THE ROLE OF ADULTS WORKING ON THESE PROGRAMMES

The majority of extracurricular programmes benefit from the presence of adults who can support adolescent development processes. Such people need to be keenly aware of the difficult balance to be struck between their supervisory role and the promotion of the adolescent's initiative and sense of *agency*. That is, at the same time as encouraging the young people's independence, they must provide a guide and structure that helps them to carry out the activities (Larson, Hansen & Walker, 2005)

More specifically, however, what general principles should guide the work of adults involved in youth development programmes? Larson et al. (2004) have offered some suggestions that can be summarized in six points. First, they suggest the need to follow what the young people are doing, supporting their objectives and decisions about the activities of the programme, which reinforces their role as active agents of their development, permitting them at the same time to reflect upon and learn from their errors. Second, they highlight the importance of developing a culture in which boys and girls want to participate; a culture that stresses adolescents' action and their leadership, that encourages them to work and stimulates their sense of responsibility. The third point concerns the work of supervision, to contribute to the development of the activities and intervene where the need arises. Getting the balance right in this respect is no easy task, since adults are often torn between leaving the young people to make their own mistakes, or intervening to avoid such errors and make the activity a success (Zeldin & Camino, 1999). The fourth suggestion is to scaffold and provide support, since adult intervention sometimes has to focus on structuring or reconfiguring tasks to make them more accessible to adolescents, in accordance with their abilities (Zeldin & Camino, 1999). The fifth principle that should guide the work of adults consists in encouraging young people to take on new challenges, so that they adopt new roles and ideas and go beyond what they already know, assuming new responsibilities. Finally, the sixth suggestion concerns knowing how to adapt to different situations, finding the appropriate balance between taking an asymmetric position in some situations and a symmetric one in others. Adults must work in what Vygotsky referred to as the *Zone of Proximal Development*, scaffolding and supporting the development process, and helping to create the conditions in which the challenges are in accord with the adolescents' skills and abilities at any given time.

CONSEQUENCES OF EXTRACURRICULAR PROGRAMMES FOR POSITIVE DEVELOPMENT

The available data indicate that participation in positive development programmes during adolescence is related to greater social commitment in early adulthood, as well as better achievements at educational and occupational levels (Gardner, Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2008). Many studies also report protective action of such activities against involvement in delinquency and problem behaviour (Landers & Landers, 1978; Mahoney, 2000; Marsh & Kleitman, 2002; Persson, Kerr & Stattin, 2007), especially in at-risk adolescents (Mahoney, 2000; Mahoney & Cairns, 1997), as well as against drug use (Barber, Eccles & Stone, 2001; Cooley, Henriksen, Van Nelson & Thompson, 1995; Elder, Leaver-Dunn, Wang, Nagy & Green, 2000).

Furthermore, there is evidence of better general emotional adjustment (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), with higher levels of self-esteem, feelings of control over one's own life, and greater aspirations of achievement (Broh, 2002; Eccles & Barber, 1999; Marsh, 1992). Participation in such activities also stimulates the building of values, talents and interests, as well as offering opportunities for adolescents' personal development, since they provide a forum for the expression and reinforcement of their identity (Eccles, Barber, Stone & Hunt, 2003).

Research has also reported a series of advantages at the level of interpersonal relations, such as better capacity for initiative and decision-making, better handling of conflict, superior communication skills and, in general, more social skills (Eccles et al. 2003; Elder & Conger, 2000). In relation to this last point, and halfway between the social and cognitive contexts, some studies have revealed changes in the use of language, with an increase in what Larson calls *Language of Agency* (Larson, 2000). Such changes include better use of the conditional and of probabilistic language, which reflects a development of hypothetical thinking and a more appropriate style for resolving interpersonal conflicts. Participation in these programmes can also lead to the use of more strategies that require clarification or explanations from peers, and a greater variety of registers – legal, friendly or supportive, formal, and so on – in the adolescents' discourse, depending on the situations (Heath, 1991; 1999; Heath & Langman, 1994).

As proposed by Larson et al. (2004), these activities carried out within the framework of extracurricular

positive youth development programmes have a series of positive consequences for boys and girls that can be summarized in five categories. First, the development of personal initiative, a basic capacity in 21st-century society, and which implies knowing how to organize one's own efforts over time to achieve an objective. Second, the transformation of the adolescents' motivation. Many girls and boys say they are often bored (Larson & Richards, 1991), and curiously, high levels of boredom emerge in activities such as those they must do at school, which are challenging and demand considerable effort (Larson, Ham & Raffaelli, 1989; Leone & Richards, 1989). However, in order to develop appropriately as an adult one must learn to be motivated by challenges and to find enjoyment in work. Organized activities for young people are a fundamental context for learning to enjoy challenges similar to those they will face during adulthood. These programmes offer them an opportunity to involve themselves in new and attractive activities. Moreover, insofar as they are activities they have chosen personally and in which they invest effort, they provide opportunities for experiencing success, a success which will make the task more attractive, and hence more motivating.

A third important consequence of involvement in such programmes is the acquisition of *social capital* (Jarrett, Sullivan & Watkins, 2005). Adolescent development consists in, on the one hand, the acquisition of new skills and aptitudes, and on the other, the formation of interpersonal relations that include adults. Relations with people older than them brings benefits for young people insofar as they gain information and other resources that connect them with the adult world (Benson, 1997). This social capital is good not only for young people and adolescents, but also for the community, since the interchange of knowledge and resources favours the creation of a healthy civil society through the trust developed between its members (Putnam, 2000). Fourthly, these programmes build bridges between differences. In a society such as today's, it is essential for young people to learn to understand, respect and form relationships with other people regardless of their religion, ethnicity or any other aspect of diversity, and programmes for young people have unique potential for developing such competencies (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2002). Finally, these programmes strengthen the development of responsibility. Becoming a responsible person is one of the principal

characteristics defining the passage from childhood to adulthood (Arnett, 2000). Compared to those from other cultures, children in the Western world do not tend to be faced with situations in which their actions have much influence on other people, so that their sense of responsibility is diluted in the adult world (Schlegel & Barry, 1991). However, many of the programmes aimed at positive adolescent development increase the responsibility of their participants, making them agents of their activities and the results of them.

Moreover, some works show that these programmes are especially useful for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, since they can have a compensatory effect on offering them resources – unavailable in their context of reference – that will improve their chances of good academic achievement (Mahoney, 2000; Mahoney & Cairns, 1997).

Continuing with the empirical evidence of the positive consequences of these programmes, longitudinal studies appear to confirm the relationship between participation in these activities and positive development over time, since the effects seem to continue after the programme in question has come to an end (Gardner, Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2008). This leads us to think that through a more or less lasting involvement in the activities, with a certain intensity, the young people will have acquired capacities that generate additional positive growth once the programme is over.

As we have seen, participation in extracurricular activities shows a relationship to different aspects of positive adolescent development; however, some authors stress the need for caution in the presumption of causality, since part of this relationship may result from a selection mechanism on the part of young people themselves, whereby better adjusted adolescents select this type of structured activity to which to devote their free time, whilst the more poorly adjusted would choose other types of activity (Gardner, Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2008; Persson, Kerr & Stattin, 2007). But although this selection mechanism might explain a portion of the relation between participation in extracurricular activities and adolescent adjustment, it does not appear sufficient for a full understanding of that relation.

It is also important to emphasize that the type of activity carried out, the duration of the participation and its intensity are additional factors to be taken into account. As regards the first of these, it is self-evident that the specific benefits of attending a one-hour language class

two evenings a week will be quite different from those of playing in a sports club or participating actively in a theatre group. As far as the other factors are concerned, those young people with more involvement in the programmes and for a longer time show better results in the long term. According to a recent work by Gardner, Roth and Brooks-Gunn there is an interaction between the two factors – intensity and duration of participation –, so that greater intensity of participation has positive effects as long as it implies participation over a reasonable length of time (Gardner, Roth & Brook-Gunn, 2008).

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF SUCCESSFUL PROGRAMMES

Quality extracurricular programmes focused on positive development are a very useful resource for providing the support and opportunities necessary for the general developmental success of adolescents. However, for these programmes to be effective a series of key elements must be present.

In an interesting study, Hall, Yohalem, Tolman and Wilson (2002), basing their work on different studies and intervention programmes, identify a series of elements common to successful programmes (Connell, Gambone & Smith, 2000; Learning First Alliance, 2001; McLaughlin, 2000; Pittman, Irby, Ferber, Tolman & Yohalem, 2002; National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2002; Steinberg, 2001; Thomases & Smith, 2000). Among the most important of these elements are, first of all, that they should be secure and stable contexts in which the young people can find support when they need it. Children and adolescents need access to spaces or facilities in which they feel physically and psychologically secure, and in which they develop a sense of belonging and ownership (Learning First Alliance, 2001). Furthermore, programmes should provide a predictable structure, with clear and consistent routines through which young people perceive that there are limits (National Research Council, 2002). Also, they need to have access to appropriate, free and confidential basic services addressing issues such as sexuality, eating and diet, or mental health. Although the majority of extracurricular programmes are not equipped to provide such attention, they should be able where necessary to refer adolescents to such services.

But it is the creation of positive affective relations that is perhaps the most important element of all for a successful programme. Indeed, one of the most notable features of this type of programme is that they facilitate the creation

of support networks which are a fundamental resource for boys and girls in the process of development (McLaughlin, 2000). Likewise, such programmes can serve to bring young people into contact with significant social institutions from which they would otherwise remain at a distance.

A further important characteristic of programmes that contributes to their success is that they provide relevant and challenging experiences for the young people, offering them opportunities to voice their opinion, make choices and contribute to the group. Adolescents and young people need experiences that involve a challenge, that are diverse and that give them the possibility to try new things, build skills and strengthen their sense of competence. These programmes provide a unique opportunity to involve boys and girls in creative activities that expose them to new ideas, hobbies and experiences. Effective programmes set out to create a culture that affirms the potential of all participants, generating in them a feeling of group membership that facilitates their involvement in the programme. In this regard, opportunities to contribute in a productive way in the extracurricular context may be especially important for adolescents who feel disconnected from other institutions (Hall et al., 2002).

Finally, successful extracurricular programmes should have a certain degree of continuity over time, developing practices in accordance with the age of their participants and offering those participants flexible opportunities for learning adapted to their interests and needs. It is crucial that there is coherence between the needs of the adolescents and the characteristics of the programme, that the activities are designed to provide ever greater opportunities for independence, participation in planning and leadership, and that the programme involves intellectual challenges for participants (Eccles, Lord & Roeser, 1996).

THE SATURATION HYPOTHESIS

Recently, some authors have questioned the benefits of what might be considered excessive involvement in extracurricular activities (Rosenfeld & Wise, 2000). According to these authors, children and adolescents are often subject to such intense pressure from their families to participate in activities that it can result in emotional maladjustment. Moreover, devoting so much time to such activities may leave them with little genuine free time.

With the aim of testing this hypothesis, Mahoney, Harris

and Eccles (2006) reviewed the existing empirical evidence and analyzed the use of free time in a sample of North American adolescents, finding scarce support for it. The results of their study indicated, first of all, that the adolescents' principal motivation for participating in such organized activities was intrinsic, and not due to family pressure; second, that young people were not overloaded, the findings showing an average of 5 hours per week devoted to such programmes and 40% of adolescents who did not participate in any activities; and third, that there was a clear positive association between intensive participation in extracurricular activities and diverse indicators of psychological adjustment. Recently, Gardner, Roth and Brooks-Gunn (2008) have also found that intensive and lasting involvement during adolescence is related to occupational, educational and civic achievement in early adulthood. Hence, the available data do not support the hypothesis of saturation or over-programming of activities, but rather appear to indicate just the opposite – that intensive participation in activities and programmes aimed at positive development during adolescence produces benefits that are even maintained into adulthood.

SOME EXAMPLES OF EXTRACURRICULAR PROGRAMMES IN THE SPANISH CONTEXT

In Spain there are scarce few programmes designed with the specific objective of stimulating positive adolescent development, either in the school context or outside of it. According to the results of a review of studies on health promotion in young Spaniards published between 1995 and 2000, almost 30% of the interventions (29.8%) were focused on the prevention of illegal drug use, 15.9% on the prevention of alcohol use and abuse, 14.6% on avoiding risk sexual practices, and 12.6% on the development of healthy leisure habits. The rest of the programmes addressed, in order of proportion from high to low, the prevention of smoking, the prevention of road accidents, and the development of healthy habits such as doing sport or following a balanced diet (Hernán, Ramos & Fernández, 2001). Moreover, a little over half of these interventions (51.9%) took place in the school. Thus, although the review to which we have just referred deals with research on health promotion, the majority of programmes are aimed at the prevention of problems, with very few whose principal aim is to work on the skills that underpin sound development in this age group, and even fewer with such aims that take place outside of the school timetable.

Nevertheless, in this section we shall look briefly at two examples of extracurricular programmes carried out in our country whose objective was indeed the promotion of positive adolescent development. These are “Promoviendo la adaptación saludable de nuestros adolescentes” (*Promoting the healthy adaptation of our adolescents*) (Ruiz-Lázaro, Puebla, Cano & Ruiz, 2000) and “Abierto hasta el amanecer” (*Open all hours*) (Rotella, 2000).

The first of these is very interesting insofar as not only does it work with youngsters aged 12 to 16 from a particular community, but also seeks the participation of their mothers and fathers. It emerged out of health service initiatives, and has three general objectives: to help parents promote the healthy adaptation of their adolescent children; to contribute resources and formulas to young people that facilitate their personal development and healthy adaptation; and to train the adolescents in the skills necessary for choosing the healthiest behaviours. Examples of specific objectives with regard to the work with parents would be to help them reflect on how to improve their skills of dialogue with their sons and daughters, or to foster positive attitudes toward the youngsters that aid their personal development. Examples of the work with adolescents would be to help them understand and get to know themselves and others better, know how to deal with interpersonal conflicts, or develop the capacity to control, in a free and responsible way, their desires, emotions and behaviours. These objectives are achieved through an active, participatory methodology based on dialogue, which employs a wide variety of techniques, such as presentation of a case, brainstorming, roleplay, case studies, training, and homework. The activities are planned in two cycles of three workshops, one for parents and two for adolescents, made up of three and five sessions each. Each session lasts 90 minutes, and the groups, of between 12 and 15 people, are coordinated by a doctor and two nurses, two external observers (educational and health) and two external experts (health technician and psychiatrist). Each session includes between three and five activities focused on the objectives mentioned above. According to the authors, the assessment of the project yielded excellent results, demonstrating its feasibility and utility (Ruiz-Lázaro, 2004).

The second of the projects we have selected, entitled *Open all hours*, sets out to generate active and participatory leisure alternatives, based on sports and cultural activities in municipal facilities on weekend nights

– as its name suggests. Although it was initially designed to focus on the prevention of drug abuse through the alternative use of free time, it also pursues other aims, such as the establishment of positive social networks, the creation of spaces for the promotion of respect for and sharing with others, and the empowerment of adolescents. In this regard, one of its most interesting aspects is that it is designed and implemented by and for adolescents. Participants are adolescents and young people from the community, as are those who are trained up to work as counsellors, entertainments organizers and social mediators. Users of the programme are not restricted to simply attending the activities proposed, but can also propose and provide other activities themselves, participating in their design and management; this increases their responsibility and autonomy and improves the programme's effectiveness. There is a wide diversity of activities, and in many cases their incorporation emerges from young people's own initiatives. Examples of the activities available would be workshops on flirting or on "household survival" (domestic tasks), first aid courses, multicultural nights, bicycle or car maintenance classes and recycling of paper, toys and clothes. This programme emerged in 1997 in a neighbourhood of Gijón (northern Spain), and testimony to its success is the fact that it remains in force after its continuous implementation since then and has been extended to several other autonomous regions of Spain, including Madrid, Andalucía, Castilla y León and Canarias. The young people participating in *Open all hours* acquire knowledge and experiences that they can put to practical use in other social contexts. Thus, participation reduces the risk of drug and alcohol use, not only because the very fact of taking part in the activities is incompatible with use, but also because the learning that takes place as a result of the experience helps the youngsters to learn about different ways of having fun and to understand that drinking or taking drugs are just two options among many. At the same time, this programme shows on a daily basis how young people can play a considerable role in community life (Arenas, Legaza & Muñoz, 2007).

THE ROLE OF PSYCHOLOGY PROFESSIONALS IN POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMES

As we have seen, extracurricular programmes are a highly useful resource for the promotion of positive adolescent development, and have clear benefits not only for stimulating development itself, but also as instruments

for reducing problems of adjustment that may emerge during this developmental stage. Thus, psychology professionals can play a highly relevant role in relation to these programmes, in their design, their implementation and their assessment.

As regards design, and as referred to above, extracurricular programmes for positive development have as their general objectives the acquisition of a whole series of social, emotional, cognitive and behavioural competencies that have shown themselves to be adaptive in research, mainly within the discipline of psychology. In this regard, concepts such as that of social skills training provide clear examples. Continuing on the topic of design but in relation to the specific activities, psychologists are equipped with the developmental and basic psychological knowledge to be able to conceive activities adjusted to the age, the needs and the potential of boys and girls of a given age group, without overlooking individual differences, and at the same time stimulating the construction of the adolescents' own identity by offering them diverse activities to be explored. The creation of an appropriate atmosphere is a further aspect of design to which psychology can make important contributions, since the discipline has access to sufficient knowledge for creating contexts that facilitate the establishment of interpersonal support networks and adolescent empowerment.

Normally, the people who develop and implement these types of programme are volunteers or technicians who do not belong to the field of psychology. However, the teams responsible for positive youth development programmes should involve psychologists, and for two reasons. First of all, to train the staff who are in direct contact with the adolescents, and second, to give advice on specific matters in which monitors and other programme personnel are not specialized. Thus, for example, psychologists should provide training for monitors in areas such as social skills and general communication, as well as in relation to the specific characteristics of adolescent development, characteristics which will have enormous bearing on the nature of relationships for this age group. As regards the boys and girls themselves, psychologists could provide advice and counselling in specific aspects such as sexuality, eating and diet or general health, issues which will undoubtedly be of concern to the adolescents.

Finally, and although a good assessment process is a crucial element for revealing the benefits of any kind of

intervention, it is often the case that extracurricular programmes are not subjected to such evaluation. In this regard, psychology boasts an abundance of tools for measuring the benefits of any social intervention programme and detecting its possible shortcomings with a view to its improvement.

In sum, these informal educational activities for the stimulation of positive development in adolescence require an entire process involving the planning and design of intervention strategies and activities, as well as having a series of specific needs in relation to their implementation and subsequent assessment. Psychology professionals can make important contributions in all these areas. Indeed, this is a field of activity for psychologists which will undoubtedly grow in importance in the near future, given the increasing interest of political and social institutions in positive adolescent development.

CONCLUSIONS

Whilst the school curriculum is becoming more and more overloaded with activities and programmes, adolescents also have a great deal of free time which they tend to employ in unstructured leisure activities that offer scarce benefits from the point of view of the promotion of development and the acquisition of competencies. Thus, a good supply of positive development programmes represents an important factor in risk prevention and the promotion of adolescent development, especially for young people from disadvantaged environments (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003).

It is important that these programmes meet a series of requirements in order to be effective, such as including a well planned and structured curriculum of activities, being of long duration, providing motivational activities that involve new experiences for their participants, and creating an atmosphere of security and empowerment in which adolescents can form positive bonds with adults and peers. The role of adult figures is also a key element that should be considered with great care; however, the content of the activities does not appear to have a particularly strong influence on the success of the programme, since programmes with a wide variety of content have shown themselves to be effective, from those based on volunteering and work in the community to those revolving around musical, artistic or sporting activities. On the other hand, the assessment of the activities organized is a key aspect to take into account, and one which will facilitate the development and

implementation of genuinely effective programmes. With a view to the fulfilment of all these requirements, psychology professionals should play a greater role in these types of programme, not only in their design, but also in their implementation and assessment.

Positive development programmes do not have as their primary objective the prevention of risk behaviours, but rather the promotion and acquisition of competencies, and although in many cases benefits have also been observed with regard to the former aspect, programmes of this type should not come to constitute a substitute for other specific interventions whose objective is the prevention of behavioural problems. Even so, positive development programmes and those of a preventive nature are interventions that complement one another perfectly.

Although we have some leads as to the specific aspects of these extracurricular activities and programmes that are associated with the promotion of adolescent development, it is important to continue research in this area in order to: identify the specific mechanisms that explain the relationship between the duration and intensity of participation and the benefits for adolescents (Eccles, Barber, Stone & Hunt, 2003); ascertain the extent to which this association might be simply the result of the youngsters' own choice, whereby the most well-adjusted adolescents are more likely to choose to participate in such activities (Gardner, Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2008; Persson, Kerr & Stattin, 2007); detect the mediating and moderating factors of this association – factors such as gender or type of activity (Feldman & Matjasko, 2005); and understand in more depth the roles played by family and peers in the choice and effects of these types of activity (Dishion, McCord & Poulin, 1999; Duda & Ntoumanis 2005).

These are, among others, some of the important questions for future research – work that which will require the joint participation of professionals specializing in basic psychological research and in intervention with young people (Larson, 2000). It is on the results of such research that will depend the development of extracurricular programmes which prepare our adolescents to meet the challenges of adulthood in an increasingly complex society.

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