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NATIONAL LONGITUDINAL TRANSITION STUDY 2

LIFE OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM FOR YOUTH WITH DISABILITIES

A Report from the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2
(NLTS2)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The choices youth make about how they spend their time outside of school can confer important benefits or result in serious negative consequences that may reverberate for a lifetime. In their nonschool hours, youth can choose activities that allow them to explore a wide range of interests, hone nonacademic skills, try out alternative modes of learning, develop interpersonal competencies, earn money, or become proficient in the increasingly complex activities of daily living. In contrast, youth can make choices that detract from their ability to perform at their best in school or that even cause harm to themselves or others. The directions youth take in their lives outside of school are important for all youth, but may be particularly critical for youth who have disabilities that present challenges to their academic learning, social engagement, or functional independence.

The National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2) provides the most in-depth look yet available on life in the nonschool hours for youth with disabilities nationally. This report from NLTS2 focuses on youth with disabilities who were ages 13 through 17 when information was first collected about them from parents in 2001, and addresses the following aspects of their nonschool experiences:

- Use of free time (Chapter 2)
- Interactions with friends (Chapter 3)
- Participation in extracurricular activities (Chapter 4)
- Employment (Chapter 5)
- Relationships between nonschool activities and the social skills of youth (Chapter 6).

Methods

The findings presented in this report come from telephone interviews with parents of students included in NLTS2. Parents who could not be reached by telephone were mailed a questionnaire with a subset of the items included in the telephone interview. Taken together, the interview and survey yielded information for 82% of youth with disabilities in the NLTS2 sample.

The statistics presented in the report are weighted estimates for the population of youth with disabilities nationally. They generalize to and are reported for that population as a group, as well as for each special education disability category. Findings also are reported for youth who differ in gender, age, household income, and race/ethnicity.

Use of Free Time

Parents of youth with disabilities were asked to report how youth spend “most of their time” when they are not in school or working. They report that youth with disabilities spend their time in many of the same ways as youth in the general population.

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- According to parents, watching television and videos fills much of the free time of adolescents with disabilities, just as it does for many youth of the same ages in the general population.
- Youth with disabilities also are about as likely as youth in the general population to spend their time involved in sports and physical activities, although fewer than half spend most of their time in these active pursuits.
- More than one-third of youth with disabilities are reported by parents to spend most of their time using a computer.
- Many youth with disabilities also spend a great deal of time in social interactions with their families and friends, both on the phone and face-to-face.

All nonschool activities investigated by NLTS2 are engaged in frequently by at least some youth in every disability and demographic category, and the rates of participation in these activities are quite similar across groups. However, some understandable differences among youth are noted.

- Some disabilities, such as orthopedic or sensory impairments, appear to encourage the choice of less-physical activities. In contrast, outdoor or physical activities are more common among youth with learning disabilities or speech or other health impairments.
- Some disabilities that can limit social interactions, such as autism, are related to lower levels of involvement with friends or others outside the family.
- Not all youth share equally in the potential benefits of computer use. Youth with cognitive or multiple disabilities are less likely than others to use computers, as are youth from lower-income households.
- Gender differences are apparent and continue to reflect traditional stereotypes. Boys more frequently choose sports, games, and physical activities, and girls appear to prefer less-active and more-intimate pursuits, such as spending time with family members and talking with friends on the phone.

Interactions with Friends

A large majority of youth with disabilities have informal interactions with individual friends apart from time in class and in organized group activities. Parents report that most youth meet with friends, receive telephone calls from friends, are invited to friends' social activities, and/or communicate with peers electronically. Only 2% of youth reportedly participate in none of these forms of interaction with friends.

However, large differences in social activities associated with primary disability categories demonstrate how functional limitations may have significant effects on social interactions.

- Youth with learning disabilities or speech/language, hearing, or other health impairments tend to be the most socially active.
- Youth with autism, multiple disabilities, and deaf-blindness have much less frequent contacts with friends, including a sizable percentage of each group who have none of the forms of social interaction investigated in NLTS2. Nevertheless, most are not wholly out

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of touch with their peers; the majority do visit with friends at least occasionally, and most are invited to other youth's social activities.

- There is a pattern of greater social interaction among older youth, consistent with research on the general population of students.
- Gender differences also are noted; boys favor frequent in-person visits with friends, whereas girls are more likely to use the telephone for that purpose.
- The social activities of youth with disabilities also vary with race/ethnicity and income; higher-income youth with disabilities tend to be more active and Hispanic youth less active in several of the activities measured by NLTS2.

Extracurricular Activities

More than three-fourths of youth with disabilities participate in extracurricular activities and programs through which they can explore interests, learn skills, develop friendships, and participate actively as members of their schools and communities. However, rates of participation are significantly lower than those of youth in the general population, mainly because of lower rates of participation of youth with disabilities in lessons and volunteer activities. Participation in school- or community-sponsored group activities is actually more common among youth with disabilities than among youth in the general population. Youth with disabilities who participate in extracurricular activities tend to be those who also have more frequent interactions with individual friends.

Participation in extracurricular activities is not equally common for youth across disability groups. Youth with such disabilities as mental retardation, multiple disabilities, or deaf-blindness are much less likely to participate in extracurricular activities, whereas youth with speech, hearing, or other health impairments are the most active overall.

Choice of activity and participation level among youth with disabilities are related to a variety of demographic factors that generally mirror those of youth in the general population.

- Boys and girls with disabilities engage in extracurricular activities in about the same proportions, although differences in their choices of the kinds of group to which they belong reflect traditional gender stereotypes.
- Financial barriers may hinder participation in some kinds of extracurricular activities; youth from lower-income households participate in extracurricular activities at a lower rate overall, as do minority youth.

Employment

Holding a job is an important marker for youth as they begin to take on adult roles and responsibilities and is a common experience for youth with disabilities.

- Almost 60% of youth with disabilities are employed during a 1-year period, an employment rate that is very similar to that of youth in the general population.
- Approximately 15% hold work-study jobs in a given school year.

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- During a 1-year period, more than half of youth with disabilities work at one or more jobs that are not associated with school, with more than 20% of youth working at a given time.

In many respects, the jobs held by youth with disabilities are typical of those held by teens in the general population.

- Approximately 60% of employed youth with disabilities hold maintenance, personal-care, or food service jobs.
- During the school year, more than half of youth work up to 8 hours per week; youth tend to work more hours during the summer.
- Half of youth with disabilities earn the minimum wage of \$5.15 or more.

Disability, age, gender, household income, and race/ethnicity all are associated with youth's employment rates and job characteristics.

- **Disability.** Youth with learning disabilities, emotional disturbances, or other health impairments are the most likely to work at regular jobs. In contrast, work-study jobs are a particularly common source of work for youth with mental retardation, autism, multiple disabilities, or deaf-blindness. The majority of working youth in all categories work up to 8 hours per week, although the percentage working at this level varies from about half of youth with emotional disturbances to more than two-thirds of youth with autism. Across disability categories, from 41% to 56% of working youth earn at least the minimum wage; youth with visual impairments are the least likely and those with other health impairments are the most likely to earn the minimum wage or more.
- **Age.** Older youth are more likely to work—fewer than half of 13- and 14-year-olds work in a 1-year period, whereas two-thirds of 17-year-olds do. With age, the percentages of youth working in informal types of maintenance and personal-care jobs (e.g., lawn mowing, babysitting) decrease, and employment in food service, trades, and clerical jobs increases. Few young teens work more than 16 hours per week, and fewer than 40% earn the minimum wage or more. However, at age 17, more than one-quarter of working youth with disabilities work more than 16 hours per week, and almost two-thirds earn at least the minimum wage.
- **Gender.** Boys and girls with disabilities are about equally likely to work, but some of their employment experiences are different. Girls are more likely than boys to work in personal-care jobs, including babysitting, whereas boys are more likely to work in maintenance jobs (many of which are lawn mowing or gardening). In addition, boys tend to earn more than girls; more than half of boys earn the minimum wage or more, compared with just over one-third of girls.
- **Household income.** Youth with disabilities from higher-income households are more likely to work than those from lower-income households. Higher-income youth also tend to earn more than those from lower-income households, even though they do not differ significantly in the kinds of job they hold or the number of hours they work.
- **Race/ethnicity.** Paralleling findings related to income, white youth are more likely to work than others, and they tend to earn more than African American youth. Differences in earnings exist despite similarities in both the kinds of job held and the hours worked by youth of different racial/ethnic backgrounds.

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Relationships Between Nonschool Activities and Social Skills

Not surprisingly, there is an association between the social skills and the nonschool activities of youth with disabilities. For most kinds of friendship interaction and extracurricular activity, including employment, a larger proportion of youth with high social skills are found among active youth, whereas a larger proportion of less socially skilled youth are found among those who are less active. However, this is not a defining relationship. Youth with low social skills still are found among those with very active friendships and among participants in all kinds of extracurricular activity. Limited social skills may challenge youth when interacting with friends and in extracurricular pursuits, but do not prevent them from engaging in these activities.

Life Outside of School—A Summary

- **Active youth.** In their nonschool hours, youth with disabilities are involved with activities at home, personal friendships, organized extracurricular activities, and jobs. However, with the exception of paid employment, rates of participation in these kinds of extracurricular activity fall somewhat short of those of the general student population, suggesting that the benefits associated with such activities accrue to youth with disabilities less than to their nondisabled peers.
- **Possible causes for concern.** A minority of youth appear not to be experiencing the positive supports and activities that are reported for most. For example, more than one in four students participate in no organized extracurricular activities, and 2% have no interactions with friends of the kinds explored in NLTS2. Autism and multiple disabilities, including deaf-blindness, are disabilities that appear to present significant obstacles to these kinds of interaction.
- **Widespread computer literacy.** Many teens with disabilities, like their nondisabled peers, appear to have acquired skills and familiarity with computer technology and use technology in a variety of ways. Their computer literacy could be an important foundation on which to develop career interests or employment opportunities in the future.
- **Disability isn't everything.** Although students with different kinds of disability differ in some of the activities that fill their nonschool hours, they are quite similar in others. For example, watching television and videos, participating in sports or other physical activities, and using a computer are the most common activities of youth in their free time, regardless of disability category, and large majorities of youth in all categories are involved with friends. However, there is much wider variation in the extent to which youth take part in groups and hold regular paid jobs, suggesting that individual relationships may be less affected by variations in disability than the more complex social interactions required to take part in extracurricular activities, including working.
- **Shifting uses of time with age.** Younger and older students are equally likely to spend their time in a variety of activities at home, but in their activities outside the house, there are some notable differences. Older youth are less likely than younger students to spend a significant amount of their time playing sports or engaging in other kinds of outdoor or physical activity. Instead, an increasing amount of their time is spent working. These

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differences among youth with disabilities are quite similar to those documented for youth in the general population, affirming the developmental importance of age in understanding variations in their experiences, regardless of disability.

- **Gender makes a difference.** Differences between adolescent boys and girls with disabilities emerge in areas in which personal preferences are exercised. For example, boys and girls with disabilities are equally likely to be involved in extracurricular activities, but they choose different kinds of activity. However, gender differences in the employment domain may be less reflective of personal preferences than of social norms. Boys and girls are about equally likely to work, but girls are more likely than boys to engage in informal jobs, such as babysitting—jobs that may not build the same kinds of skill or employment “track record” as the regular jobs for licensed employers that are more common among boys. These differences in the kinds of early work experiences of girls and boys may contribute to the pattern of substantially lower earnings among girls with disabilities than among their male peers.
- **Money matters.** Youth from lower-income households have experiences in their nonschool hours that are distinctly different from those of youth in wealthier households. Friendship interactions of many kinds are less common among youth from lower-income households, who also are less likely to participate in extracurricular activities of every kind. Employment, too, is less likely to fill the nonschool hours of youth from poorer households, and when they work, they tend to earn less.
- **Cultural influences.** Differences between racial/ethnic groups are apparent with regard to some aspects of nonschool experiences. For example, white youth are the most active participants in organized extracurricular activities overall and in volunteer or community service activities in particular. Employment also is significantly more common for white youth than for African American or Hispanic youth, and when white youth work, they tend to earn more. Hispanic youth generally are less involved with individual friendships than other youth are.

Looking Ahead

These findings from NLTS2 provide the most comprehensive look yet at the activities of youth with disabilities in their nonschool hours. The important question remains, however: what difference does having these nonschool experiences make in helping youth succeed in school and in the transition to adult life? Future NLTS2 analyses will address this question in depth. The longitudinal nature of NLTS2 also gives a solid base of information for examining such important issues as the development of the labor market experiences of youth with disabilities as they age and transition out of high school into early adulthood.