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ABSTRACT

Noting that there has been increasing interest in the past 20 years in the contributions of children's everyday experiences to their intellectual growth, this study examined the contribution of everyday experience during middle childhood to the cognitive skill of planning. The major focus of the study was to identify whether children have opportunities to develop and practice planning skills in their everyday experience, describe how parents are involved, and compare practices across European American and Hispanic communities. Participating in the 3-year longitudinal study were 118 mothers (83 European American and 35 English-speaking Latino American) and their children (61 girls, 57 boys), beginning when the children were 7 or 8 years old. The Daily Activities Survey was given to mothers and children separately at all three waves of data collection. Findings indicated that 85 percent of children went home after school, and 12 percent went to day care. Children regularly participated in 2.98 organized activities and 8.48 informal activities. Findings indicated that children's opportunities to decide on their after-school activities changed over middle childhood. Much of children's experience deciding future behaviors occurred for informal activities, and this experience increased over middle childhood. Hispanic parents were more likely than European American parents to decide on their children's informal activities on their own. Girls had more opportunity to decide on informal activities on their own than boys did during these years. Gender-related patterns differed in European American and Hispanic families. Parents of European American boys or Hispanic girls and their children were more likely to share decision making regarding informal activities than the other dyads. Parents and children tended to share in the decision making for organized activities, and there was little change in this pattern over middle childhood. (Eight tables detail findings. Contains 12 references.) (KB)

Children's After-School Activities as Opportunities to Develop Cognitive Skills

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Paper presented as part of a symposium entitled Children Lives After School: Opportunities for Development, Society for Research in Child Development, April 2001, Minneapolis, MN.

Over the last two decades there has been increasing interest in the contributions that children's everyday experiences make to intellectual growth. This research is based on the view that cognitive development relies in part on children's participation in activities and practices available in the context in which growth occurs (Goodnow, Miller, & Kessel, 1995; Rogoff, 1998). In this paper, we discuss the contribution of everyday experience during middle childhood to the development of one type of cognitive skill, planning. The ability to plan is critical to mature social and cognitive functioning. In fact, a basic assumption of development is that with increasing age children will have greater regulation of their own activities, and this relies in important ways on the ability to plan (Kopp, 1997).

There are many changes in children's skill at planning over the years of middle childhood (Gauvain, 2001). Because children's activities during these years are managed to a large degree by their parents, we are particularly interested in how parents may facilitate the development of children's competence at planning during these years. The main questions we are asking in our research are (1) do children have opportunity to develop and practice planning skills in their everyday experience, (2) how are parents involved in this process, and (3) are these practices similar across two cultural communities, specifically European American and Hispanic communities. These questions stem from both theoretical interests regarding the connection between everyday activity and cognitive growth, as well as practical concerns about how children spend their time when they are not in school and how this may contribute to the development of cognitive skills like planning.

As background to this project, two sources are particularly noteworthy. One is David Elkind's 1981 book The Hurried Child and the other is a 1999 report published by the Packard Foundation. In his book, Elkind characterized young children's lives outside of school as harried and stressful. When this book appeared it aroused both professional and public attention because psychological stressors identified with adulthood, such as overscheduling one's day, shifting from activity to activity in a day with few breaks in between, and a fixation on achievement, were now being associated with youth. This circumstance resulted from many societal trends, trends that made everyday life for children in the late 20th century markedly different from that experienced by the post World War II generation. These include increased numbers of single parents and dual-wage-earning families that necessitate long hours in after-school care for many children; parental anxiety about maximizing future options for children that led to an upsurge in various types of apprenticeship programs outside of school; parental dissatisfaction with public schools that led to increased compensatory after-school tutorials for children; and heightened concern about child safety that led to increased privatization of play and regulation of children's play time by parents. Although these after-school experiences differ in many ways, they are similar in that they all leave children with little time outside of school that is not controlled or supervised by adults. These experiences also leave children with little time outside of school to devise their own activities or be with small groups of children in unstructured activities where relationships and activities are developed and negotiated by the children themselves.

The report from the Packard Foundation (1999) examined children activities outside of school. The papers in this report focus mainly on programmatic and policy issues, but they also

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address the concerns parents have regarding after-school care for their children. However, there is little discussion in this report about the contribution and changing role over development that children themselves have in deciding how to organize and spend their time outside of school. This is surprising given the types of social, emotional, and cognitive changes of middle childhood, changes described in an article by Eccles (1999) in the report. Building on the ideas of Erikson, Eccles describes the period between 6 and 14 years of age as driven by basic psychological needs to achieve competence, autonomy, and relatedness. During this time, children strive for competence in many spheres of life: academic, social, physical and emotional. Research indicates that children who do not experience competence during this period are at greater risk for depression, feelings of social isolation, and antisocial behaviors than are children who experience a sense of competence in these domains (Eccles, Wigfield, & Schiefele, 1998). Opportunities to develop competence outside of school can be obtained in a number of ways, including participation in organized activities and informal play. Coupled with competence is the development of autonomy, a sense of oneself as a unique individual with a sense of control over one's own experiences. Much of the development of autonomy during middle childhood is played out in the family context as children negotiate and struggle with their parents about who controls the child's life. Over middle childhood there is a shift in the power balance between children and their parents, and parents provide different types of support and encouragement of this transition. And individual children present different demands in this regard.

Our research focuses on this process by examining what children do after school and their role in deciding on this participation. In addition to changes that occur over middle childhood in this participation and decision making, we are also interested in whether parental expectations regarding child development in this domain relate to these experiences as well as how children feel about the number of activities they do on a regular basis after school. The data we report today are part of a three-year longitudinal project investigating opportunities between 7- and 10-years of age for children to decide on their activities after school. By deciding on their regular after-school activities children are involved in one important aspect of planning, namely the determination of actions and goals that take place in the future. The years between 7 and 10 were chosen because over this time children become more self-reliant and begin to take on more responsibility. The nature of parent-child interaction changes accordingly. Parents expect children to act more independently and they provide them with opportunities to do so either on their own or under their tutelage. These changes necessitate different parenting strategies as well as different involvement of children in helping regulate their everyday experiences, a process Maccoby (1994) calls co-regulation. One part of co-regulation involves collaboration by parents and children on mutually acceptable plans. Thus, effective parenting in middle childhood involves the nurturance of self-regulatory skills and increased opportunity for independence. These changes are made possible, in part, by children's increased ability to plan and organize future behaviors. How children learn to use their planning skills in the context of the family to manage their everyday experiences and achieve their own goals is an important part of development during middle childhood.

Participants

Participants visited the laboratory once a year for three years. They were recruited from the Riverside Unified School District and target children were between 7 and 8 years of age during the first wave of data collection. The sample for the 3 years of the study is described in Table 1 and includes European American and Hispanic children and their parents. The larger sample from which these data are drawn includes two groups of Hispanic families, those in which English is the primary or sole language spoken at home and those in which Spanish is the primary or sole language spoken at home. Today we report on results from the European American and English-speaking Hispanic families. The Spanish-speaking Hispanic families are not included in the table. The European-American and English-speaking Hispanic groups did not differ in social status measured by the Hollingshead (1957) index of social position, however both of these groups differed significantly from the Hispanic families that spoke

primarily or solely Spanish. Because children's after-school experiences are greatly affected by family income, our initial step in analyzing these data concentrate on the ethnic groups that are most similar in socioeconomic status.

Participants in year one included 118 mothers (83 European American, 35 Latino American) and their 7-year-old children (61 girls, 57 boys). In year two, 107 (76 European American, 31 Latino American, 57 girls, 50 boys) of those participants returned. In year three, 95 (67 European American, 28 Latino American, 52 girls, 43 boys) returned. The educational attainment of mothers in both groups ranged from some high school to graduate school with a median of some college or vocational school after high school. Finally, in terms of generational status, Hispanic mothers were evenly dispersed among first to fourth generation or greater (first generation = 25.7%, second generation = 22.9%, third generation = 22.9%, fourth generation or greater = 28.6%).

Measures

At all three waves of data collection we asked mothers and children separately, using the Daily Activities Survey (Gauvain & Huard, 1993), about the children's after-school activities and who decided on these activities, parent, child, or both parent and child. Questions asked about the child's *after-school care*, *daily after-school responsibilities* (chores, running errands for parent, working at parents business), *participation in organized after-school activities* (e.g., sports teams, music/dance lessons), and *participation in informal after school activities* (e.g., reading, playing in yard). Sum scores were created for the number of organized and informal activities in which the child participated as well as for the number of activities of each type decided by parent, child, or both parent and child. Today we describe the mothers' responses to these questions only. At each data collection period, mothers and children were also asked about how the child feels about the amount of things (s)he has to do after school (1 = not enough, 5 = too much). Children answered this question by choosing among five drawings of thermometers that ranged from not very full to exploding the thermometer that best described how they felt about the amount of things they have to do after school. We will report on both mothers' and children's ratings, which we refer to as child stress regarding after-school activities.

In addition to activity participation and decision making, we also collected information from mothers at Waves 1 and 3 about their *Expectations* (Savage & Gauvain, 1998) of the age at which they expect that most children should be able to decide to do eleven different types of activities (e.g., take music or dance lessons, decide what to watch on TV). A principle components analysis with varimax rotation was conducted on the items. A two-factor solution was revealed with one factor representing decisions about organized activities (factor loadings ranged from .819 to .881) and one factor representing decisions about informal activities (factor loadings ranged from .658 to .834) (see Table 2). Mean scores were calculated for organized activities ($\alpha = .80$) and informal activities ($\alpha = .90$).

Before describing our results, we will describe the after-school care and responsibilities of the children as a means of generally characterizing the sample. On average, 85% of the children went home after school, 12% went to day care, 3% went to their parent's place of business, and 5% went to someone else's house. Regarding after-school responsibilities, 99% of children completed chores, 7% ran errands for their parents (e.g. go to the store for a parent), and 10% worked at their parent's business. There were no differences between the European American and Hispanic children in these behaviors nor were there any differences across the three time periods.

Children's participation in after-school activities. In general these children were pretty busy after school (see Table 3). They regularly, that is every day or several days a week, participated in 2.98 (SD = .12) organized activities and 8.48 (SD = .09) informal activities (see Table 3). There was an increase in their participation in organized activities from Grades 2 to 4,

$F(2,148) = 32.97, p < .001$, and a difference between the participation rates of boys and girls in organized activities, $F(2,148) = 3.25, p < .05$. However, this gender difference was qualified by a significant Ethnicity x Gender interaction, $F(1,74) = 4.32, p < .05$. Although all children increased their participation in organized activities, Hispanic boys in particular showed a significant jump from Grades 2 to 3, which was primarily accounted for by increased involvement in sports teams and neighborhood clubs. There were no group differences nor interactions over time for children's participation in informal activities, however, there was a main effect for Ethnicity, $F(1,74) = 5.63, p < .02$. Over all three time periods European American children participated in more informal activities than Hispanic children did.

Who decides? Now we turn to the question of who decides on children's after-school activities. Table 4 reports the proportions of decisions regarding after-school activities made by the parent alone, the child alone, and the parent and child together for organized and informal activities.

Parents and children together (66%) mostly decide children's participation in organized activities. Children decide to participate in these types of activities on their own on average 26% of the time, and parents decide on their own about 10% of the time. These patterns did not change over the three time periods studied, and there were no main effects for Gender or Ethnicity. There was a marginally significant Gender x Ethnicity interaction between subjects, $F(1,74) = 3.61, p < .06$. Means indicate higher rates for European American boys ($M = .14$) and Hispanic girls ($M = .13$).

In terms of informal activities, we found that children decide on these activities on their own an average 47% of the time. There was a quadratic trend over the three time periods, $F(2,148) = 2.48, p < .09$, with pairwise contrasts indicating a significant difference between Grades 2 and 3 ($p < .04$) only. Girls ($M = .52$) have more opportunity to decide on informal activities than boys ($M = .42$), $F(1,74) = 4.05, p < .05$. Parents and children share in making decisions about informal activities 45% of the time. Although there were no within subject effects for this variable, there was a marginally significant Gender x Ethnicity interaction across the three time periods, $F(1,74) = 3.61, p < .06$. Means indicate higher rates for European American boys and Hispanic girls. Finally, parents decide on children's informal activities on their own 7% of the time, with a main effect for Ethnicity, $F(1,74) = 11.85, p < .001$. Means indicate higher rates among Hispanic ($M = 11\%$) than European American ($M = 3\%$) parents.

Parental expectations and children's participation. The next question we addressed was whether parental expectations about the age at which children should be able to decide on these types of after-school activities related to children's participation and decision making. Mean ages reported by the parents are in Table 5. There were no effects over time, however there were several differences when the data were collapsed across the two time periods. A main effect for ethnicity for both organized, $F(1,90) = 27.29, p < .001$, and informal activities, $F(1,90) = 13.38, p < .001$, appeared. In both cases Hispanic mothers reported higher age expectations than European American mothers. The effect for organized activities was qualified by a significant Ethnicity x Gender interaction, $F(1,90) = 4.19, p < .05$ with means indicating that the highest age expectation was for parents of Hispanic girls.

Table 6 reports the correlations between parental expectations and children's participation and decision making regarding after-school activities. Although parents age-related expectations differed at Waves 1 and 3, the patterns of relations between the expectations and the participation measures are consistent, so we only report on the relations for Parental Expectations reported at Wave 1. Parental expectations and children's participation in organized activities were negatively related at Grade 2, which means that parents who reported older ages for when they expect a child to be able to decide to participate in organized activities, had children who participated in fewer organized activities in Grade 2. A negative relation also

appeared for parental expectations regarding informal activities and children's participation in these types of activities at Grade 4. This means that parents who reported older ages for when a child is able to decide on informal activities had children who participated in fewer informal play activities in Grade 4.

In terms of decision making and organized activities, parents' expectations were correlated with parents deciding on their own on children's participation at Grades 3 and 4, and negatively correlated with parents and children deciding together at Grade 2. For informal activities, there are no relations between parental expectations and children's participation. However, parental expectations were consistently and positively correlated with parents deciding on their own on children's participation in these activities, and these expectations were consistently and negatively correlated with children deciding on their own or their participation in these activities. These patterns suggest that children's opportunity to participate in decision making regarding organized and informal activities is related to parental expectations or beliefs about children's readiness to do so.

Children's stress about their after-school activities. The final issue we examined was children's feeling of stress about the amount of activities they do after school. Table 7 shows mothers' and children's ratings of child stress regarding the amount of activities children do after school for the three time periods. These ratings are not correlated (r 's ranged from $-.03$ to $.05$) nor do they differ when children are in Grades 2 and 3. However, they do differ when children are in Grade 4, $t(90) = 2.42$, $p < .02$, with children's ratings higher than mothers'.

Examining children's reports further, we found that there was a marginally significant increase over the three year period in this rating, $F(1,77) = 3.14$, $p < .07$. There was also a significant linear effect for Ethnicity, $F(1,77) = 3.97$, $p < .05$, with Hispanic children showing a greater increase over the 3-year period than European-American children (see Table 8). Over all three time periods, girls report more stress than boys, $F(1,77) = 4.61$, $p < .04$, though this is qualified by a significant Gender x Ethnicity interaction, $F(1,77) = 6.75$, $p < .02$. Means indicate that Hispanic girls show the most stress of the four groups of children about the amount of after-school activities in which they participate.

When these ratings are correlated with child participation in activities, the only relations that appeared were for when children were in Grade 3. There was a significant relation between children's report of stress and their participation in informal activities, $r(106) = .19$, $p < .05$, and a positive trend between children's participation in organized activities and children's rating of stress at this same age, $r(106) = .16$, $p < .10$. Recall that there was an increase in children's participation in organized activities between Grades 2 and 3 ($p < .001$), though there was not an increase in children's participation in informal activities at this time period.

Looking at decision making and children's stress, the only significant relations appeared when children were in Grade 3. There was a positive relation between children's stress and parents deciding on children's informal activities, $r(106) = .19$, $p < .05$, and a marginal relation in the same direction for organized activities, $r(106) = .16$, $p < .10$. In contrast, children's rating of stress was negatively related to both parent and child deciding on children's informal activities, $r(106) = -.22$, $p < .02$. Finally, when parental expectations were examined in relation to children's rating of stress, we found no relations between parental expectations reported at Wave 1. However, parental expectations reported at Wave 3 were significantly related to children's rating of stress at Grade 4 for informal activities, $r(92) = .29$, $p < .005$, and there was a marginal relation in the same direction for organized activities, $r(92) = .19$, $p < .07$. It seems that the older the age expectations that parents have for children being able to decide on these types of activities on their own, the more stress the child feels about the amount of activities they do after school. Decision making patterns, reported above, suggest that this may reflect the role that parents play in deciding on children's informal activities at Grade 3. This

age may be a significant growth point for children in deciding how to spend their time after school. When parents support and encourage this type of competence and autonomy in children, either by sharing in the decision making or giving the child opportunity to decide on their own, children not only gain practice in this type of future-oriented behavior, they may feel more satisfied and less stressed about their after-school experiences.

In conclusion, these results indicate that children's opportunities to decide on their after school activities changes over middle childhood. Much of children's experience deciding future behaviors occurs for informal activities and this experience increases over middle childhood. Ethnicity plays a role in this process. Hispanic parents are more likely to decide on their children's informal activities on their own than European American parents are. In general, girls have more opportunity to decide on informal activities on their own than boys do during these years. Gender-related patterns differ in European American and Hispanic families. Parents of European-American boys or Hispanic girls and their children were more likely to share decision making regarding informal activities than the other dyads. In terms of organized activities, parents and children tend to share in the decision making and there is little change in this over middle childhood, a pattern consistent with Maccoby's (1994) concept of co-regulation.

The patterns observed reflect the coordination of changes in the child and the support provided by parents for these changes. This coordination appears in what parents and children do and it is informed by parental expectations regarding child development. We also see evidence of the child's contribution to this process, both in the role they play in deciding on after-school activities and in the emotional response they have to this experience or lack thereof. These observations suggest some of the ways in which children's everyday experiences, especially experiences with their parents, may contribute to cognitive development in the years of middle childhood. They also underscore children's active role in this process.

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Table 1

Sample Size for Each Year of the Study Broken Down by Child Ethnicity and Gender

	European American		Hispanic	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Grade 2	39	44	18	17
Grade 3	35	41	15	16
Grade 4	30	37	13	15

Table 2

Items in Parental Expectations Questionnaire Regarding When Children Are Able to Decide On Their Own to Participate in Various Organized and Informal Activities and Their Factor Loadings

<u>Type of Activity and Items</u>	<u>Factor 1</u>	<u>Factor 2</u>
Organized activities (alpha = .80)		
Decide to be on a sports team	.881	.086
Decide to participate in a club or organization	.830	.152
Decide to take music or dance lessons	.819	.261
Informal activities (alpha = .80)		
Decide what to do after school	.276	.834
Decide what to watch on TV	.150	.820
Decide what to do in the evening before bedtime	.267	.799
Decide what to eat for breakfast and lunch	.165	.792
Decide what chores to do around the house	.115	.746
Decide what to wear to school	.155	.714
Decide when to go to bed	.012	.689
Decide how to spend allowance	.149	.658

Table 3

Means (and Standard Deviations) of Number of Organized and Informal Activities that European-American and Hispanic Children Participated in on a Regular Basis (Daily or Several Days a Week) from Grades 2 Through 4 by Gender

	European American		Hispanic	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Grade 2				
Organized	2.36 (1.04)	2.62 (1.13)	2.22 (1.48)	2.08 (1.08)
Informal	8.92 (.95)	8.47 (.95)	8.11 (.93)	8.00 (1.41)
Grade 3				
Organized	3.12 (1.05)	3.34 (1.21)	4.00 (1.11)	3.08 (1.00)
Informal	8.88 (.78)	8.50 (.76)	8.44 (1.01)	8.17 (1.19)
Grade 4				
Organized	3.08 (1.08)	3.41 (1.16)	3.00 (1.50)	3.42 (1.00)
Informal	8.80 (.87)	8.59 (.87)	8.44 (.88)	8.42 (1.00)

Table 4

Proportion of Decision Making Regarding Children's Participation in Organized (and Informal) Activities by Parent Alone, Child Alone, and Parent and Child Together from Grades 2 Through 4 by Ethnicity and Child Gender

	European American		Hispanic	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Grade 2				
Parent alone	.12 (.04)	.04 (.04)	.11 (.12)	.13 (.12)
Child alone	.21 (.36)	.26 (.52)	.22 (.40)	.35 (.45)
Parent and child	.67 (.59)	.70 (.44)	.67 (.47)	.51 (.40)
Grade 3				
Parent alone	.15 (.03)	.03 (.04)	.09 (.15)	.15 (.07)
Child alone	.20 (.52)	.25 (.56)	.28 (.44)	.21 (.49)
Parent and child	.65 (.44)	.71 (.37)	.62 (.43)	.64 (.43)
Grade 4				
Parent alone	.16 (.02)	.02 (.02)	.07 (.14)	.10 (.06)
Child alone	.22 (.42)	.31 (.53)	.26 (.37)	.35 (.59)
Parent and child	.62 (.55)	.67 (.42)	.64 (.48)	.55 (.34)

Table 5

Average Age (and Standard Deviation) Reported by Parents as to When Children Are
Able to Decide on Their Own Participation in Organized and Informal Activities at Grade
2 and 4 by Ethnicity and Child Gender

	European American		Hispanic	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Grade 2				
Organized	6.56 (1.31)	6.12 (1.31)	7.54 (2.20)	7.90 (2.04)
Informal	8.66 (2.30)	8.09 (2.11)	10.13 (3.61)	10.04 (2.48)
Grade 4				
Organized	7.14 (1.36)	6.81 (1.16)	7.64 (1.46)	7.86 (1.84)
Informal	8.80 (2.15)	8.64 (1.71)	9.94 (2.24)	11.71 (2.78)

Table 6

Correlations Between Parental Expectations at Wave 1 and Children's Participation in
and Decision Making in Organized Activities from Grades 2 Through 4

	Parental Expectations Organized Activities	Parental Expectations Informal Activities
Grade 2		
Participation in activities	-.23**	-.15
Decided by parent alone	.05	.27***
Decided by child alone	-.03	-.30**
Decided by both	-.29***	.11
Grade 3		
Participation in activities	.001	-.14
Decided by parent alone	.22*	.36***
Decided by child alone	-.06	-.30**
Decided by both	-.09	.11
Grade 4		
Participation in activities	.06	-.21*
Decided by parent alone	.27**	.30**
Decided by child alone	-.03	-.26**
Decided by both	-.17	.14

Note. *** = $p < .001$, ** = $p < .01$, * = $p < .05$

Table 7

Average Rating (and Standard Deviation) by Mothers and Children Regarding How the Child Feels About the Number of Activities They Have to Do After School^a

	Mothers' Rating	Children's Rating
Grade 2	2.94 (.84)	3.08 (1.18)
Grade 3	3.13 (.88)	3.21 (1.16)
Grade 4	3.03 (.75)	3.33 (.87) *

* p < .02

^a Rated on a 5-point scale with 1 = not enough and 5 = too much.

Table 8

Average Rating (and Standard Deviation) by Children Regarding How the Child Feels About the Number of Activities They Have to Do After School by Ehtnicity and Child Gender^a

	European American		Hispanic	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Grade 2	3.44 (1.16)	3.03 (.98)	2.43 (1.22)	3.45 (1.44)
Grade 3	3.20 (1.29)	3.06 (1.03)	3.36 (1.15)	3.55 (.93)
Grade 4	3.04 (.61)	3.39 (.72)	3.14 (1.03)	4.00 (.89)

^a Rated on a 5-point scale with 1 = not enough and 5 = too much.



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