

Should Youth Work a Part-time or Summer job?

Charley Bates

Should parents and guardians of teens, and youth development professionals advising them, be supportive of youth working in the summers and working part-time during the academic year? Each youth is unique, and therefore this question will need to be asked on an individual basis. Part-time work can be considered more of a typical experience than an untypical experience, given about 80% of high school seniors had held at least one part-time job by the time they left high school (Barling & Kelloway, 1999). That level may have conceivably been lowered somewhat since the beginning of the recession, but we do not have confirmation as to whether this occurred. There is evidence that work can be beneficial for the positive development of youth if maintained within certain parameters, such as performed for only a limited number of hours per week. However, there is also evidence that other activities the youth might be engaged in during the time he or she is committed to work can also have positive developmental aspects. So we need to evaluate what the youth might gain from work while at the same time lose from non-participation in other activities. We need to perform that balancing and weighing off to come up with a decision as parents, and to formulate advice as youth developmental professionals advising parents.

What should the first priority of our youth be? Most parents and youth development professionals would probably agree that priority should be academics. The better our particular youth does academically in high school the more choices he or she has for higher education, and arguably the more likely he or she will go on for further education. There is substantial evidence of a significant personal value as well as a significant societal value in members of a society gaining higher education (The Institute for Higher Education Policy, 1998). This includes the

correlation between education, and salaries and benefits, with the higher the education the higher the annual salary (Bureau of the Census, 1996) and benefits (Smeeding, 1983), along with higher lifetime earnings; and, as would be expected, the correlation between these higher salaries and the payment of higher taxes (Mortenson, 1996). Greater productivity is closely correlated to educational attainment (Decker, Rice, Moore, & Rollefson, 1997; BLS, 1993) as is increased consumption (BLS, 1995), with its positive affects upon both gross national product and tax revenues. Higher education is also correlated with a lower unemployment rate (BLS, 1998), higher savings levels (Eller, & Fraser, 1995), and improved working conditions (Duncan, 1976). Society benefits with the correlation to reduced crime rates – the higher the education the less the propensity to take part in crime, particularly violent crime (Mauer, 1994), and the more one is apt to perform charitable giving and perform community service (O'Brien, 1997). Higher education is also correlated to improved health and longer life expectancy (NCES, 1994; Feldman, Makuc, Kleinman, & Cornoni-Huntly 1989), increased personal status (Terenzini, 1996), and more leisure activities (National Endowment for the Arts, 1993). With these potential benefits awaiting our youth who go on to higher education, it would not be a surprise that most parents and youth development professionals will advocate more time spent studying and obtaining academic assistance to most youth who are not performing well academically, as opposed to the choice of allowing those same youth to work part-time. Part-time, or arguably even summer work, can have negative results if it takes needed time away from academic pursuits. If there are no current concerns regarding academic achievement, then a part-time or summer job may be appropriate if some potential concerns secondary to academics are evaluated as well, and determined not to be a concern.

Youth working can potentially have negative effects if it takes time away from extra-curricular activities. There are positive benefits associated with after-school activities, including evidence that adolescents who participate in extracurricular activities, such as sports and music, have better academic performance and are less likely to drop out of high school (Zedd, Brooks, & McGarvey, 2002). Naturally, if work interferes with these activities, parents may be concerned that these benefits are not gained by the youth who miss them due to work. Youth taking part in recreational activities and recreational-based youth programming have been found to benefit from that participation in a number of ways. These benefits include the development of close relationships with adults in the community (perhaps beyond what they would with an adult employer), meaningful involvement in their communities, spending time in an atmosphere which allows youth to build their own competencies and become engaged as partners in their own development as well as in the development of the community, and otherwise assist youth in preparing to become productive adults (Outley, Bocarro, & Boleman, 2011).

The above cautions made, parents monitoring the work of their teens and youth development professional advising teens regarding work, will need to ensure they are appropriately applying the above generalities to the situation of the specific youth. Actual time surveys of teens who are not employed, employed less than 20 hours a week, and employed more than 20 hours a week indicate there is little, if any, reduction of taking part in other activities (Johnston, Bachman, O'Malley, & Schulenberg, 2011). For example, 14% of youth took part in arts and crafts regardless of which work category they fell into, and youth who worked less than 20 hours a week were just as apt to take part in playing a musical instrument as those who did not work at all. There were only small reductions in reading for leisure and playing sports for working, and working heavier hours. Interestingly, the greatest reduction in a non-school

activity was watching television, which 68% of non-working teens took part in, 64% of teens who worked less than 20 hours a week, and only 58% of teens working over 20 hours a week. Clearly, if working impinges on time doing other activities, our youth are at least arguably applying appropriate priorities to what they do with their limited available time.

It is difficult not to acknowledge that part-time work by youth can be a potential benefit to the development of the youth, particularly some specific types of work, and if that work is performed within a specified range of hours. Adolescents themselves indicate they gain benefits from working part-time, a majority citing responsibility, money management, social skills, work ethics, independence, and time management (Aronson, Mortimer, Zierman, & Hacker, 1996). Many of these benefits will accrue or not accrue, of course, based upon the type of job the youth is working and the adult supervision provided. If a youth works at a job that entails learning new skills, that will correlate positively with psychological wellbeing and self-esteem, with some jobs providing opportunities for skill development, advancement, and interaction and mentorship with adults (Mortimer, 2003).

A key factor for the success of work in appropriate youth development appears to be the number of hours of work, with working much more than 10 hours a week having potentially negative consequences. Working more than 10 hours a week is associated with lower academic performance, lower class attendance, and lower educational aspirations (Marsh & Kleitman, 2005), psychological symptoms (Frone, 1999), and declines in school commitment, lack of sleep, less time spent doing homework, and a lower grade point average (Bachman & Schulenberg, 1993). Many parents and youth development professionals may encourage youth to take part in part-time employment in hopes of gaining some of the benefits that appear to be yielded in the Aronson, et. al. study, yet caution strongly against working more than about 10 hours a week

during the school year in hopes of avoiding some of the negative associations that have been identified in other studies.

The above analysis does mean, of course, that there may be some fundamental differences in what parents and youth development professionals believe is appropriate for youth in terms of work performed during the summer versus work performed during the school year. During the summer youth are not normally engaged in their academic studies or in extracurricular and after-school community activities, so working may be more feasible. During the school year, the youth may be very busy. Therefore, a careful consideration will need to be made by parents and youth development professionals, based on each youth, their desire to work, the type of work they would be performing, whether the work is part-time during the school year versus summer work, and the adults they would be working with, and perhaps most of all, how many hours a week they would be committing to a job.

References

- Aronson, P.J., Mortimer, J.T., Zierman, C., & Hacker, M. (1996). Generational difference in early work experience and evaluations. IN T.J. Mortimer & D.M. Finch (Eds.), *Adolescents, work and family: An intergenerational developmental analysis*. Thousand Oaks, C: Sage.
- Bachman, J.G., & Schulenberg, J. (1993). How part-time work intensity relates to drug use, problem behavior, time use, and satisfaction amongst high school seniors; Are these consequences or just correlates? *Developmental Psychology*, 29, 220-235.
- Barling, J., & Kelloway, E.K. (1999). *Young workers: Varieties of experience*. Washington DC: American Psychological Association.
- BLS (1993). Labor composition and U.S. productivity growth, 1948-90. *Bulletin 2426*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Labor.
- BLS (1998). Employment status of the civilian population 25 years and over by educational attainment. January, 1998, BLS website, www.stats.bls.gov.
- Bureau of the Census (1996). Current population reports: Series P-60. Summary of 1995 Data, Census Bureau website, www.cwnsus.gov.
- Decker, P.T., Rice, J.K., Moore, M.T., Rollefson, M.R. (1997). Education and the economy: An indicators report. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, March, 1997.
- Duncan, G.J. (1976). Earnings functions and nonpecuniary benefits. *Journal of Human Resources* 11(4), p463-483. Fall, 1976.

- Eller, T.J. & Fraser, W. (1995). Asset ownership of households: 1993. Current Population Reports, Series P70-47. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, September, 1995.
- Feldman, J., Makuc, D., Kleinman, J., & Cornoni-Huntly, J. (1989). National trends in educational differences in mortality. *American Journal of Epidemiology*, 129, 5, pgs. 919-933.
- Frone, M.R. (1999). Developmental consequences of youth employment. In J. Barling & F.K. Kelloway (eds.), *Youth workers: Varieties of experience* (pp.89-128). Washington DC: American Psychological Association.
- The Institute for Higher Education Policy (1998). Reaping the benefits: Defining the public and private value of going to college. The new Millennium Project on Higher Education Costs, Pricing, and Productivity. March 1998. Sponsored by The Institute for Higher Education Policy, The Ford Foundation, and the Education Resources Institute. Washington, D.C.
- Johnsonton, L.D., Bachman, J.G., O'Malley, P.M., & Schulenberg, J.E. (2011). *Monitoring the Future: A continuing study of American youth (12th-grade survey), 2010*. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research.
- Marsh, H.W., & Kleitman, S. (2005). Consequences of employment during High School: Character building, subversion of academic goals, or a threshold? *American Educational Research Journal*, 42, 331-369.
- Mauer, M. (1994). Americans behind bars: The international use of incarceration, 1992-93. Washington, D.C.: The Sentencing Project, 1994.

- Mortenson, T. (1996). Federal incomes taxes paid by college educated taxpayers. *Postsecondary Education Opportunity*. July 1996.
- Mortimer, J.T. (2003). *Working and growing up in America*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- National Endowment for the Arts (1993). Arts participation in America: 1982 to 1992. Washington, D.C.: National Endowment for the Arts, 1993.
- NCES (1994). Health-related behavior of adults, by level of education, Indicator 36. *The Condition of Education*, 1994. National Center for Education Statistics. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 1994.
- O'Brien, C. (1997). Now what? Life after college for recent graduates. Washington, DC: The Institute for Higher Education Policy and The Education Resources institute, August, 1997.
- Outley, C., Bocarro, J.N., & Boleman C.T. (2011). Recreation as a component of the community youth development system. *New Directions for Youth Development* (130, Summer 2011). Wiley Periodicals. DOI:10.1002/yd.397.
- Smeeding, T. (1983). The size distribution of wage and nonwage compensation: Employer cost versus employee value. Triplett, J., editor. *The Measurement of Labor Cost*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Terenzini, P.T. (1996). First generation college students: Characteristics, experiences, and cognitive development. *Research in Higher Education* 37, (1), pgs 1-22.
- Zedd, Z., Brooks, J., & McGarvey, A.M. (2002). Educating America's youth: What makes a difference? *Child Trends Research Brief*. Washington, DC.

Companion articles on this web site

See article “Legal Concerns Regarding Youth Employment” in the Policy section of this web site.

See article “Youth Employment Resumes” in the Youth section of this web site.

See article “Looking for and Finding a Part-Time or Summer Job” in the Youth section of this web site.