

YOUTH PERSPECTIVES ON ENGAGEMENT AND RESILIENCE: A Representative Study on Summer Learning

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nsia
national summer
learning association

WHAT IS THIS STUDY ABOUT?

This study was designed to help practitioners, policy-makers, and researchers understand the youth perspective on two kinds of summer experiences—structured and unstructured—including what youth do under each scenario, and what they learn academically, recreationally, socially, and emotionally from their activities.

Significance:

Summer is an important opportunity to help young people “catch up” socially, emotionally, and academically. Growing evidence suggests that structured summer experiences—including summer camps, programs, classes, and jobs—are especially effective for preparing youth for a successful future. It is essential to hear from youth about their experiences, needs, and priorities to inform planning and investment decisions.

Context:

This study builds upon findings from the [2021 Parent/Caregiver Summer Survey](#), which found that parents and caregivers of K-12 children valued all types of summer experiences but believed structured summer experiences were more beneficial for their children’s social, emotional, and academic resilience than unstructured summer experiences. This follow-up survey examines summer experiences from the youth perspective.

Team:

The Harvard Medical School/McLean Hospital team at the [Institute for the Study of Resilience in Youth \(ISRY\)](#) was commissioned by the National Summer Learning Association (NSLA) to survey key summer stakeholders: parents/caregivers (2021), children/youth (2022), and school/program staff (2023). The ultimate goal is to build a data system to inform practitioners, policymakers, and researchers.

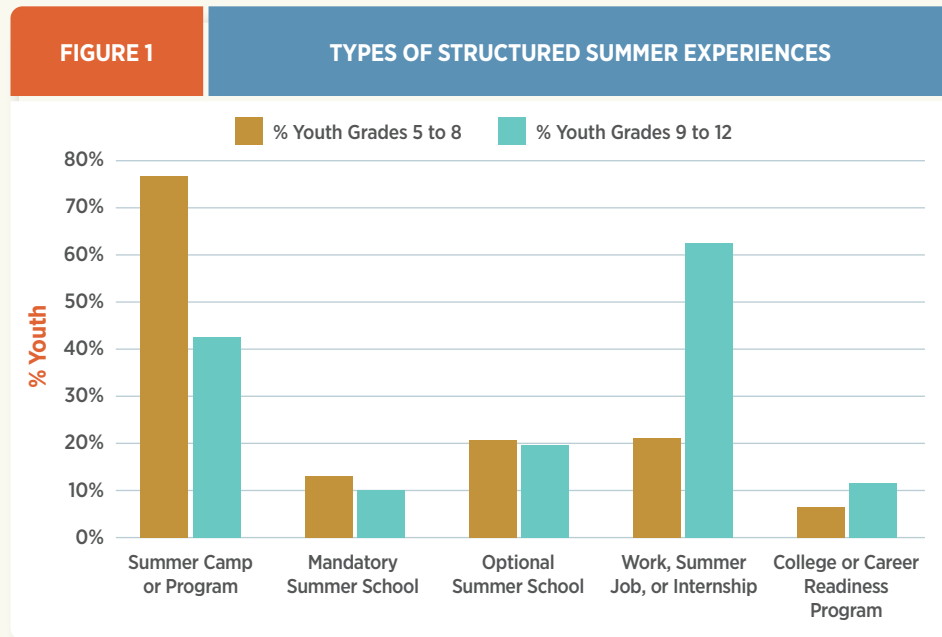
WHAT WERE THE STUDY METHODS?

- A nationally representative survey was fielded online between August 11-22, 2022.
- Youth respondents (n = 2,068) were rising 5th to 12th grade students from all 50 states and Washington, D.C.
- Respondents engaged in one or more structured summer experiences (50%, n = 1,040) or had an unstructured summer experience (50%, n = 1,028).
- Parents/caregivers and their children were recruited through an online non-probability sample with quotas set to ensure demographically representative audiences, with oversamples of Black and Hispanic youth.
- Post-stratification weighting ensured survey results aligned with the racial and ethnic composition of the U.S. population based on the [2021 U.S. Census population estimates](#).



HOW WERE SUMMER EXPERIENCES DETERMINED?

- The survey presented youth respondents with a list of different summer experiences from which to choose. All options except “none of the above” were considered structured experiences (see **Figure 1**).
- Youth reporting an unstructured experience (“none of the above”) were asked to describe their summer activities.



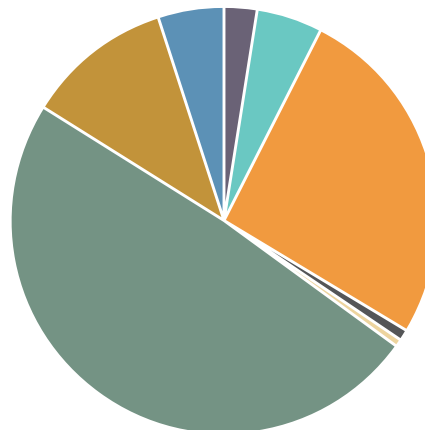
WHAT WAS THE STUDY'S SAMPLE?

- The study was designed for a balanced and representative sample. Youth reporting structured (50%) and unstructured (50%) summer experiences were similar in region, state, race, ethnicity, age (10 to 18), and grade level (Grades 5 to 12).
- 53% of youth self-identified as female, and the sample was racially and ethnically diverse (see **Figure 2**).
- 25% of youth self-identified as Hispanic/Latinx, and 25% reported speaking a language other than English in their homes.
- 19.8% of youth reported having an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or 504 Plan, a proxy for disability status.
- 7.7% of youth reported that they (or their families) did not have enough food to eat or money to buy food, a proxy for lower-income status.

FIGURE 2

YOUTH SELF-REPORTED RACE

- American Indian or Alaska Native: 2.3%
- Asian or Asian American: 4.8%
- Black or African American: 26.8%
- Middle Eastern or Northern African: 0.5%
- Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander: 0.3%
- White or Caucasian: 49.3%
- Two or More Races: 11.2%
- Additional Race Not Listed / Prefer Not to Say: 4.8%



2,068 youth in 50 states—50% structured experiences, 50% unstructured experiences

WHAT ARE THE KEY FINDINGS?

Happiness with Summer:

- 85% of all youth felt happy/very happy about their summer experience.
- Happiness varied by experience: 90.1% in structured and 79.7% in unstructured experiences.
- Happiness varied by income: 86.6% higher-income and 66.0% lower-income youth.

Concern with Pandemic:

- 75.3% of all youth agreed/strongly agreed that “life felt as normal as before COVID/the pandemic.”
- Sense of normalcy varied by experience: 81.7% in structured and 68.7% in unstructured experiences.
- Sense of normalcy varied by income: 76.6% of higher-income and 59.4% of lower-income youth.

Social-Emotional Well-Being:

- 73.5% to 91.8% of youth reported that they often/almost always felt positive emotions (safe, supported, listened to, and included) when thinking back on their summer experiences.
- Well-being varied by experience: youth in structured experiences more often felt listened to, and less often felt lonely, sad, angry, and unmotivated, compared to youth in unstructured experiences. However, youth in unstructured experiences more often felt safe than youth in structured experiences.

Social-Emotional Growth:

- Youth perceptions of social-emotional growth, measured using the Holistic Student Assessment-Retrospective survey (HSA-R), varied by skill, type of experience, grade, gender, race, and income. (Subgroup differences will be detailed in the full report.)
- Youth in structured experiences reported significantly more social-emotional growth for 9 out of 10 skills assessed—all except emotion control—compared to youth in unstructured experiences (see **Figure 3** for differences by skill and grade level).
- Of all the youth surveyed, most reported growth in Reflection (82.6%) and Perseverance (77.0%). Growth was not as high, but still significant, in Trust (56.5%) and Emotion Control (51.5%).

Interest:

- 80.5% of all youth described their summer experience as something they were most/very interested in doing.
- Interest varied by experience: 86.5% in structured and 74.3% in unstructured experiences.
- Lack of interest in offerings was the most frequent reason for not participating in a structured experience (44.7%), followed by wanting to relax and make own plans (31.9%), and monetary cost (30.7%).

Empowerment:

- Voice: 84.3% of all youth agreed/strongly agreed they had a say in what they learned.
- Choice: 70.9% of all youth reported they often/almost always got to choose their summer activities.
- Importance: 68.2% of all youth felt that what they learned often/almost always was important to them and their families.
- Opportunity: 64.5% of all youth felt that they often/almost always had the chance to participate in the summer activities that they wanted.
- Support: 91.3% of all youth agreed/strongly agreed that they got the help they needed if they had a problem.

School Preparedness:

- On average, youth agreed that their summer experience will help them academically (“get good grades”), socially (“make friends”), and emotionally (“deal with challenges”) in the new school year, but youth in structured experiences had a higher rate of agreement (see **Figure 4**).
- 53.7% of all youth felt their summer experiences prepared them very well/extremely well for the upcoming school year.
- Level of preparedness varied by experience: 65.5% in structured and 41.7% in unstructured experiences.
- Level of preparedness varied by income: 55.4% of higher-income and 34.5% of lower-income youth.



FIGURE 3

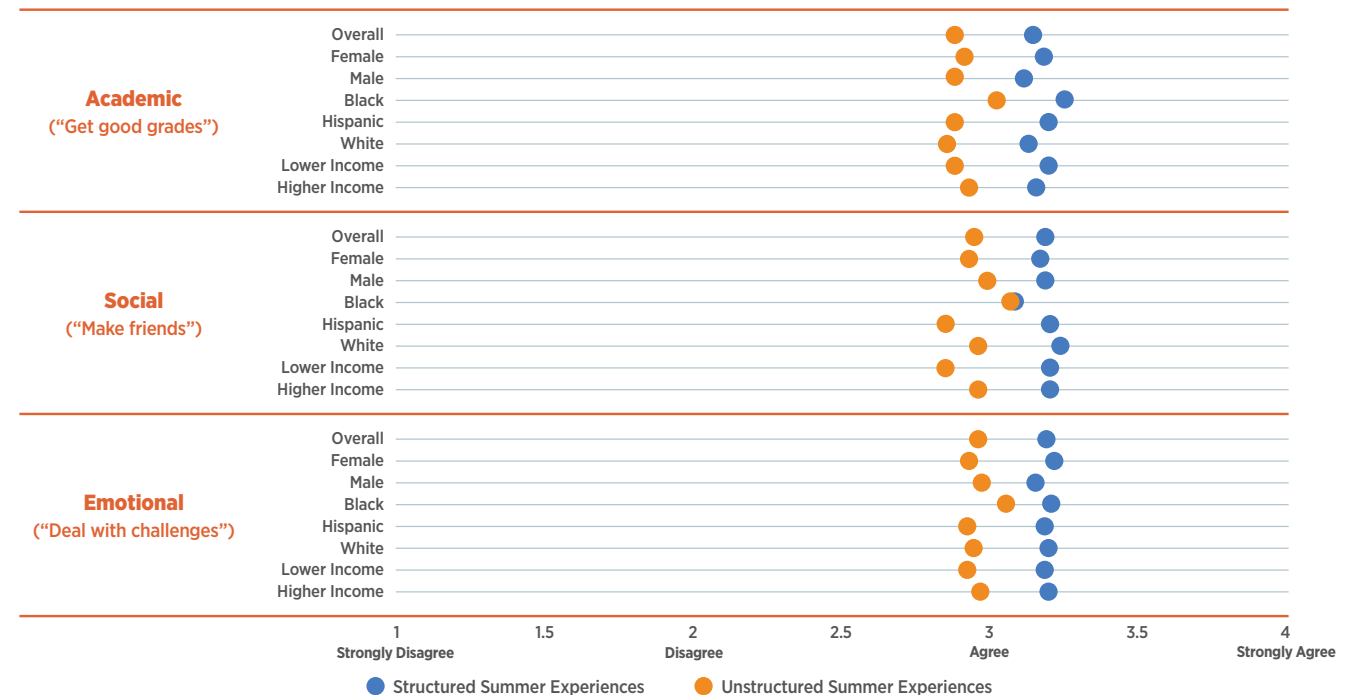
A greater percentage of youth in structured summer experiences reported social-emotional growth compared to youth in unstructured summer experiences



% Youth Reporting Positive Change

FIGURE 4

Youth in structured summer experiences reported a greater level of agreement with three statements that their summer experiences prepared them for the return to school—academically, socially, and emotionally—than youth in unstructured summer experiences (disaggregated by gender, race, ethnicity, and income status)



Mean Level of Agreement for Each Statement

WHAT INSIGHTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS CAN WE TAKE FROM THE SURVEY DATA?

The results of this study show that youth perceived **significant, positive impacts of summer on multiple domains of learning and resilience, especially after participating in structured summer experiences.** However, these benefits are not reaching all youth equally. Below we summarize key findings and our recommendations. A detailed report will explore group differences, including by race and ethnicity, gender, and income. This report will be shared online by the NSLA and ISRY and sent to all participants of the 2022 NSLA Annual Conference.

Positive Impression of Summer

- Structured and unstructured summer experiences were interpreted positively by young people. Most youth felt they had voice and choice in what they did and learned.
- **We recommend keeping summer activities fun, enjoyable, and low-pressure.** While most youth were excited to have active and productive summers that will prepare them for a successful future, the need to relax and worry less about school was also often expressed.

“...it was so much fun just to get that experience at the summer camp to help with my reading and writing.” —11th grade male, North Carolina

Sensing a Return to Normalcy

- Three in four youth reported that their lives felt as normal as before the pandemic, nine in 10 youth often/almost always felt safe, and only one in ten youth in an unstructured experience reported safety due to COVID-19 as a barrier to participation (in contrast to one in every two parents/caregivers of a child in an unstructured experience in summer 2021).
- **We recommend continued focus on the effects of the pandemic on young people.** While it is important that youth are feeling more stable and “back to normal,” the past few years have brought many challenges and disruptions to children’s lives that will require time and support for recovery.
- **Considering that youth in structured experiences perceived more benefits in terms of resilience, reaching more youth with these opportunities may help buffer against ongoing or delayed effects of the pandemic.** Although it is good for kids to feel “back-to-normal,” academic and research data show that the pandemic affected grades and mental health, and we recommend continued/increased attention to trauma that youth may have experienced.

“It was finally time to go out and socialize after being in the lockdown for a while. It was cool to see my friends in classes again.” —5th grade female, California

More Positive Results for Structured Programs

- Consistent with the results from the [2021 parent/caregiver survey](#), and across multiple demographics, youth perceptions of their own social-emotional well-being and growth—as well as other outcomes, including preparedness for the return to school, and voice, choice, and support—were statistically more positive among youth who had structured experiences compared to unstructured experiences.
- **We recommend continued investment in summer camps, classes, programs, jobs, and internships** to make them as high-quality and effective as possible so more young people can benefit from these experiences.

“I had a great summer working at a camp! It was a new and scary but fun experience! I’m happy I had the experience because some things that happened during the summer would’ve hurt me more if I hadn’t had something wonderful to look forward to and focus on.” —11th grade female, Kansas

Increase Engagement by Targeting Community Priorities

- Nearly half of youth in unstructured experiences cited a lack of interest in available programs, camps, or jobs, and nearly one-third of all youth surveyed often felt that what they learned during the summer was not important to them or their family.
- **We recommend understanding and targeting the interests, needs, goals, and priorities of youth and their families.** This can be accomplished by collecting data (formally or informally) from parents/caregivers and youth, with methods such as listening sessions or focus groups with families, or informal conversations at drop-off/pick-up, family events, fairs, or expos.

“Working at an Animal Hospital. I got to gain valuable knowledge that will help me in my future. I also got to work with a great team of people to help me achieve my goals.” —12th grade female, Massachusetts

Access to Structured Experiences is Not Equally Distributed

- Consistent with the results from the [2021 parent/caregiver survey](#), youth responses suggest that access to structured experiences is not equitably distributed. Cost and lack of knowledge about the availability of options were commonly cited. Additionally, twice as many youth in unstructured experiences had low-income status than youth in structured experiences. Qualitative data suggest that families with limited resources must prioritize basic needs (rent, food, etc.) and do not have sufficient resources to access youth opportunities for academic enrichment or work experiences.
- **We recommend creating policies to fund and scale high-quality structured summer experiences in ways that prioritize families with less access and greater needs,** such as subsidizing the cost of attending structured experiences for lower-income families and combatting other issues that may cause prospective youth to turn away from opportunities (such as availability of options, transportation, location, safety, and other commonly cited barriers).

“Well, I have been homeless with my family for about 9 months now. We’ve been living in our car, so we got to travel all over Maryland.” —12th grade female, Maryland

Focus on Social-emotional Learning & Development

- This study provides evidence, directly from youth, that structured summer experiences provide stronger development of social and emotional skills than unstructured summer experiences.
- **We recommend targeted training for summer staff and parents/caregivers to ensure that they have the knowledge and skills to support youth social and emotional development.** This survey identified priority areas for further focus—notably, findings from the HSA-R show that youth felt the least growth in emotion control and trust, even in structured experiences. To address the need in these areas, programs should provide professional development and measure youth outcomes.
- Youth reported some negative emotions, which serve as a proxy for mental health and wellness issues that must be addressed. This will require coordinated and consistent support for young people in all settings, including summer programs and jobs. In addition to further training for adults (caregivers, program staff, teachers) there should be a system for referrals and access to resources that support all our youth.

“One helpful thing that I learned this summer was to slow down and enjoy things. I have ADHD so sometimes I get overly excited and hyper. I just had to remind myself to breathe, calm down, and enjoy the moment. If I take my time, I enjoy things more.”

—9th grade male, Virginia

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

This study’s results allow us to add the direct youth voice to the thoughts and experiences shared by parents and caregivers last summer (2021). The field of summer learning is moving in the right direction, but there is a continued need to increase youth access to interesting and exciting structured summer experiences—especially high-quality opportunities that can help youth feel more prepared to succeed in school and work without added stress or pressure. As a next step, we will provide a report that details additional information, including insights from thematic and subgroup analyses to examine differences by student background. In summer 2023, we will conduct a third wave of surveying that will center the thoughts and experiences of summer program staff.





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