

BUILDING RESILIENCE IN YOUTH THROUGH SUMMER EXPERIENCES:

Structured Summer Programming Promotes Social-Emotional Growth and School Preparedness



WHAT IS THIS STUDY ABOUT?

This study was designed to help practitioners, policy-makers, and researchers understand the caregiver perspective on both kinds of summer experiences—structured and unstructured—including what children do under each scenario, and what they learn academically, recreationally, and socio-emotionally from those activities, whether structured or unstructured.

Significance:

One of the most important choices every family makes is, “What should our child(ren) do this summer?” All families must **decide whether children should spend the summer in structured programming outside the home—with scheduled and organized activities facilitated by adults—or having unstructured experiences—with unscheduled, self-directed leisure**. Of course, many families choose both.

COVID:

Safety concerns due to the COVID-19 pandemic have made summer options more limited and the decision more fraught, but parents/caretakers have always struggled to decide whether their children are better served in structured environments where they are being taught, supervised, and supported by adults outside the home.

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 conduct a nationally representative survey of caregiver attitudes and perceptions to gain more insight into the question of how structured summer programs, compared with unstructured experiences, impact children and youth in grades K through 12.

WHAT WERE THE STUDY QUESTIONS?

Exploring Structured and Unstructured Summer Experiences

How are “structured” and “unstructured” summer experiences described by caregivers?

Are there socio-demographic differences between families that engage in structured vs. unstructured summer experiences?

How do structured summer programs support families, and what are the barriers to access?

Understanding Social-Emotional Growth Over the Summer

Do caregivers perceive growth in their children’s social-emotional skills over the summer? Which and how much?

How do caregiver perceptions of social-emotional growth vary by experience type (structured vs. unstructured)?

Do caregiver perceptions of their children’s social-emotional growth over the summer vary across socio-demographic groups?

Examining the Value of Summer Experiences

Are caregivers satisfied with their children’s summer experiences, and do they feel that summer has prepared their children for the return to school?

How do caregiver satisfaction and perceptions of school preparedness vary by experience type (structured vs. unstructured)?

Do caregiver satisfaction or perceptions of school preparedness vary across socio-demographic groups?

2,000 caregivers in 50 states—50% structured, 50% unstructured

WHAT WERE THE STUDY METHODS?

Survey design and data collection were rigorous. Survey data were collected between August 23 and September 8, 2021 from 2,000 respondents in the U.S. (inclusive of 50 states plus Washington D.C.). The respondents were caregivers (parents and guardians) of K-12 children and youth who engaged in structured summer programs ($n = 1,000$) or unstructured summer experiences ($n = 1,000$). Post-stratification weighting ensured survey results are reflective of the racial and Hispanic composition of the U.S. adult population based on 2019 U.S. Census population estimates.

WHAT WAS THE STUDY'S SAMPLE?

The structured and unstructured groups had similar numbers of caregivers by race, ethnicity, and grade level of child (K to 12) as part of the sampling design.. **Overall, the sample was racially and ethnically diverse.** (See Figure 1.)

Seven out of 10 respondents were female (71.8%), and most caregivers self-described as parents: mothers/step-mothers (69.6%) and fathers/step-fathers (27.0%). **Families accessing structured programs reported higher income and higher educational attainment** (four-year college degree or higher) than families engaging in unstructured experiences, **and were more likely to reside in urban communities.**

WHAT ARE THE KEY FINDINGS?

Social-emotional Growth:

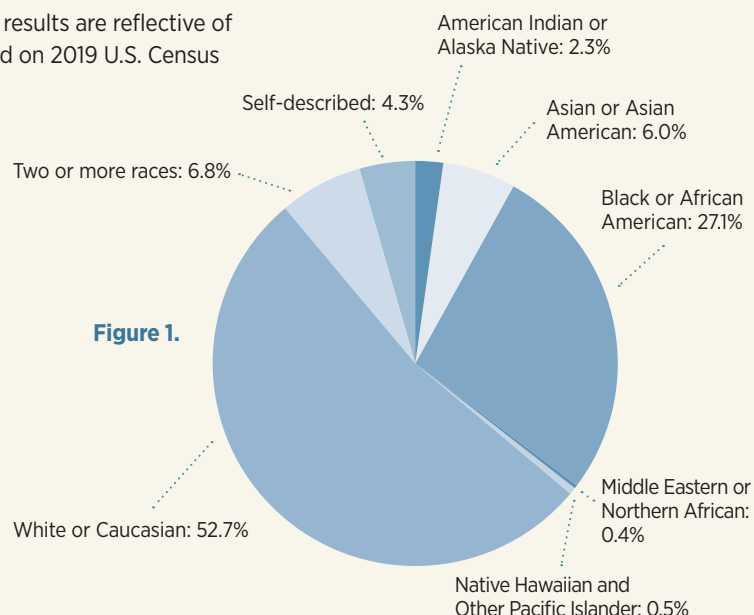
- Caregiver perceptions of their children's social-emotional growth, measured using the Holistic Student Assessment-Parent/Caregiver survey (HSA-Parent/Caregiver), varied by skill, type of experience, and child's grade level (see Figure 2).
- Caregivers of children engaging in structured summer programs reported significantly more growth for six out of 10 social-emotional skills (action orientation, quality of relationships with adults, assertiveness, empathy, optimism, and perseverance).
- By end of summer, caregivers of children accessing structured programs rated their children higher for nine out of 10 social-emotional skills (all except emotion control, data not shown).

Confidence in the Return to School:

- On average, about 89% of caregivers were somewhat/extremely confident that their children's summer opportunities will help them succeed socially, emotionally, and academically in the upcoming school year.
- While this was true for structured and unstructured summer experiences, caregivers of children in structured programs (92.0%) were significantly more confident that their child will succeed (86.8%).

School Preparedness:

- On average, about 67% of caregivers felt their child was very well/extremely well prepared for the return to school.
- While this was true for structured and unstructured summer experiences, caregivers of children in structured summer programs



were significantly more likely to feel that their child was well-prepared (78.2%), relative to caregivers of children in unstructured summer experiences (57.1%). See Figure 3 for mean ratings of preparedness.

Caregiver Insights:

“What do you think would have better prepared your child over the summer for the upcoming school year?”

- “Honestly. The programs they attend are extremely beneficial to them. They learn many things that I myself as a child never had access to. It enriches them greatly and they constantly amaze me how quickly they pick up on skills and interactions.”
- “A more rigid routine as far as time and schedule through the summer. I see his first week of school feels draining to him because during the summer he had so much idle time off.”
- “I think more problem-solving capabilities and learning to communicate with others.”

“Is there anything else you would like to share about yourself, your family, or your child(ren)’s summer experience with the National Summer Learning Association (NSLA)?”

- “I think more free activities for children will help them and parents.”
- “Wish there were more summer programs of different sorts for different ages that could help them prepare for whatever comes next or is expected for or from them in life.”
- “Include special needs camps and activities. Most people don’t know about them and they are important too. Be a good way to get the word out.”

Figure 2.

Caregiver perceptions of children's social-emotional growth varied by type of summer experience (structured vs. unstructured)

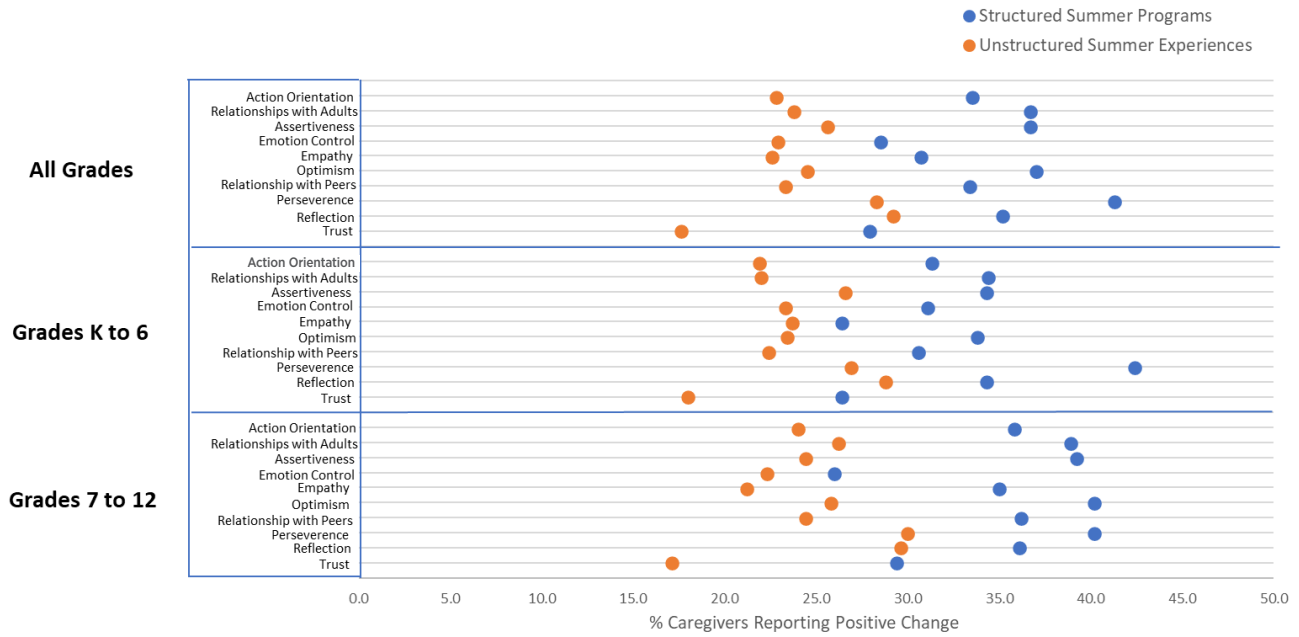
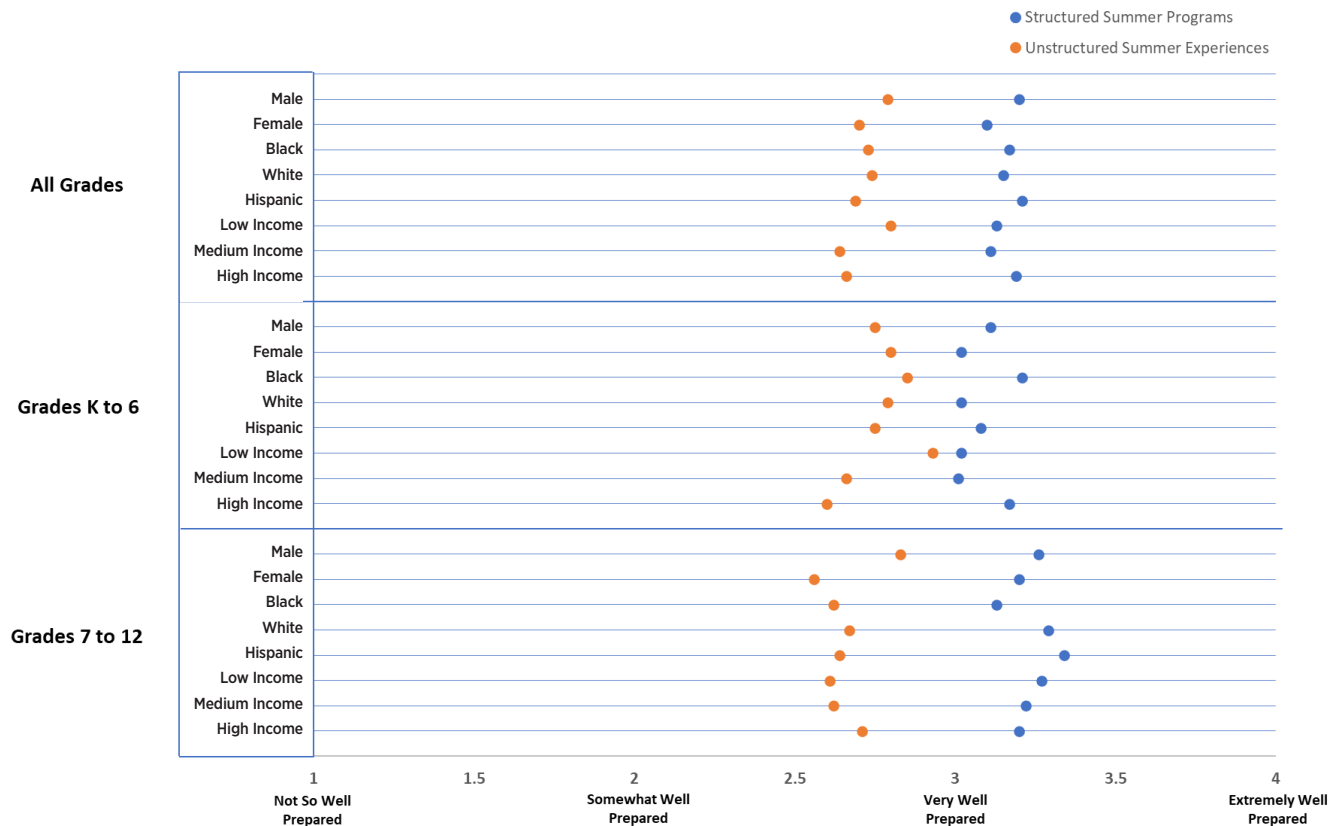


Figure 3.

Caregiver perceptions of children's preparedness for the return to school varied by type of summer experience (structured vs. unstructured)



WHAT ARE INSIGHTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS?

The results of this study show that caregivers believe structured summer program experiences have significant, positive impacts on multiple domains of learning and thriving – but these benefits are not reaching all families equally. Below we summarize key findings and our recommendations. The detailed report will be distributed online by NSLA and ISRY, and sent to all participants of this convening.

Positive Results for Structured Programs

- Caregivers across multiple demographics see value in both structured and unstructured summer experiences, but **satisfaction and perceptions of youth social-emotional growth and school preparedness were significantly more positive among caregivers of children in structured programming**, with the strongest positive effects of structured programming for Grades 7 to 12.
- To protect summer from becoming more time-on-task, the field should **find exemplar programs that successfully promote youth social, emotional, and academic growth and preparedness** for school. These examples will indicate what training and tools are needed to improve youth social, emotional, and academic outcomes over the summer.

Access to Programs is Not Equally Distributed

- Caregiver responses suggest that **access to structured experiences is not equitably distributed**. Families with higher educational attainment and income are more likely to engage in structured summer experiences.
- We recommend the creation of policies to **fund and scale high-quality structured summer programming for families, especially those with less access**, with attention to rural communities, childcare considerations, and transportation issues.

COVID Concerns are a Significant Barrier

- **Pandemic-related health and safety concerns, program costs, and child's lack of interest were the most commonly cited barriers** to participation in structured summer experiences.
- Programs must prioritize safety and become more affordable and engaging. Leadership should **work with youth and families to co-design and co-create programming** that meets the interests and needs of the community.

More Data are Needed on Summer Learning

- This survey's **measure of social-emotional development (HSA-Parent/Caregiver) builds on developmental theory and connects to a student self-report** survey. The measure was sensitive to differences between groups and socio-demographic factors, providing useful information to assess summer trends.
- The field should **conduct research and evaluation to define and assess “quality” summer programming and identify the factors that lead to stronger outcomes**. This will require the collection of evidence from multiple perspectives (children, educators, caregivers, etc.).



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