

The Compass

Volume 1 | Issue 6

Article 3

November 2019

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Recommended Citation

Rebekah Frater, Arcadia University (2019) "Patterns and Habits Workshop," *The Compass*: Vol. 1: Iss. 6, Article 3.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.arcadia.edu/thecompass/vol1/iss6/3>

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Patterns and Habits Workshop

By: Rebekah Frater, *Arcadia University*

Introduction

Through collaboration with the not-for-profit organization Midnight Basketball Australia, I created a life skills workshop which focuses on assisting individuals with creating daily schedules. Midnight Basketball Australia is a national organization that trains and supports communities to build life skills and foster confidence in teenagers. Other goals of this organization include initiatives to create and support positive mentorships and opportunities within rural and disadvantaged communities. Through their programs, Midnight Basketball Australia aims to reduce the stereotype of degenerate teenagers by reducing deviant behavior.

This paper demonstrates my collaboration with this company by outlining the basis for the positive social change it is aiming to create.¹ While Midnight Basketball Australia's workshop cannot decidedly be the cause of positive social change for teenagers, it is highly correlated with this movement.

Life Cycles

When dealing with teenagers in high at-risk or disadvantaged communities, it is important to focus on the insurmountable issues that help this cycle to continuously hold these teenagers in their impoverished state. These issues include having access to education, food, security, mentorship, and consistency in their lives.

By creating a sustainable and realistic daily routine, it is likely that teenagers from the aforementioned backgrounds can raise their standard of living and increase their chances of having a good life by cutting out distractions and increasing exposure to mainstream society. Midnight Basketball Australia uses the definition of the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) to explain what a 'good life' is.² ARACY defines five Key Result Areas to create a good life, including love and safety, health, education, participation, and material basics. These

key results are utilized throughout the paper as an indication of the level of success Midnight Basketball Australia's Program Model has on its participants. These areas are measured qualitatively through stories, relationships, and baseline community feelings.

To achieve success in the areas needed for a good life, teenagers must avoid getting trapped in a negative cycle. A negative cycle is a distraction that may lead to bad decision making. Choosing a positive path is important, as the choices teenagers make, and the effects of those choices, can affect one's life until late adulthood. Bad decisions made in negative cycles, such as early and prolonged exposure to drugs and alcohol, causes higher chances of substance addiction in adulthood.³ It is often a struggle for adolescents to focus on achieving a positive path, especially if peer pressure is involved. Therefore, in order to help youth find a path to a good life, instead of becoming entrapped in a negative cycle, it is necessary to target their attitudes and actions before they form bad habits.

To aid teenagers in finding a good life, they first must define their own idea of what a good life includes. The majority of the teenagers Midnight Basketball Australia supports define this concept as having a place to live, a stable job, a high school education, feelings of love and support, a sense of belonging in community, and other basic needs. In order to aid teenagers in setting up paths towards a good life and removing themselves from a negative cycle, it is imperative that they understand the idea of scheduling, structure, and accountability. The workshop I created focuses on these concepts. These skills are incredibly important to learn as a teenager, as adolescence is a vital part of development.

Adolescent Development

In order to help youth avoid being trapped in a negative cycle, it is necessary to protect their developing brains from negative influences. Developing brains are the most sensitive and most vital assets teenagers

1 "Strategic Overview." *Midnight Basketball Australia*. (2017): 26 (internal document).

2 Australian Research Alliance for Children & Youth. "Report summary: Towards a National Action Plan for child and youth health and wellbeing – setting our future priorities," 2012, <https://www.aracy.org.au/publications-resources/area?command=record&id=229&cid=22>.

3 Paula Nurius, Dana Prince, and Anita Rocha, "Cumulative Disadvantage and Youth Well-Being: A Multi-domain Examination with Life Course Implications," *Child Adolescent Social Work Journal* 32, no. 6 (2015): 568.

have for influencing their trajectories into adulthood. Brains rapidly develop during adolescence, particularly in the prefrontal cortex. This specific section of the brain handles higher-order functioning, such as cognitive flexibility, self-regulation, and risk-reward.⁴ If the prefrontal cortex or other developmental areas of the brain are damaged by roadblocks like drug or alcohol use, trauma, or mental illness, teenagers can begin to drift off their path and fall into a negative cycle.⁵ By harming the prefrontal cortex through these choices or experiences, the development of connectivity between the prefrontal cortex and other brain areas is damaged.⁶ In addition to this issue, the developing brain will not be able to undergo myelination of axons and elimination of synapses.⁷ If these processes are damaged, it can lead to mental health issues, emotional irregularities, memory issues, learning problems, and other issues. To protect against these outcomes, it is necessary to understand the causes of these roadblocks and their negative outcomes, as well as various theories about community involvement, independence, and program-based solutions.

Causes and Roadblocks

By targeting areas of teenagers’ lives that lead to higher risk behavior, it is possible to make a larger impact on their lives. By focusing on systematic problems that cannot be solved with government assistance programs or charity organizations, it is more likely that teenagers will be able to avoid a negative life cycle. These systematic problems are mainly due to lack of structure, which can lead to boredom, stress, and apathy.

Lack of Structure

Structure within daily routines allows adolescents to better manage their time and focus on important aspects that will help them stay on track towards a good life. A typical schedule for at-risk Midnight Basketball participants on a weekday is rough, vague, and unlikely to be written down or thought about in the adolescents’ daily lives. They tend to make no schedules for themselves, but rather follow the whims of others.

Figure 1. Typical Daily Weekday Schedule of the Average Midnight Program Participant

Sometime around 8:00 am	Wake Up
8:30	School supposed to start
3:30	Schools supposed to end
All day	Hang out with friends/freetime
Sometimes around 2:00 a.m.	Go to Bed

This schedule seems to be accepted by at-risk teenagers as easy to follow and having little responsibility. This lack of scheduled responsibility allows teenagers to be easily swept up by delinquent youth into bad decision making. The high amount of unstructured time may lead teenagers into a negative cycle and stop them from following a path towards a healthy lifestyle. How adolescents react to unstructured time is unique to the person and situation. While it does not always have negative consequences, it can often result in boredom, stress, and apathy.

Boredom

“Boredom is a state of under stimulation, under arousal, lack of momentum, or a lack of psychological involvement associated with dissatisfaction in the task situation.”⁸ Boredom in teenagers can often be observed in school programs that are not mentally stimulating or when youth do not believe they are being held accountable to high academic standards. Being bored with school often leads to a lack of interest in completing outside tasks, such as homework or extra-curriculars. This overall lack of interest and boredom allows teenagers to set themselves up to fail. Continuing in a negative cycle such as this leads to students distancing themselves from their education, making it difficult to achieve a good life. Without an education, job opportunities are limited. The largest problem is that by the time teenagers realize this, they will most likely have given up mentally on their education. This is shown through a lack of work and drive, as well as

4 Ellen Witt, “Research on alcohol and adolescent brain development: opportunities and future directions,” *Alcohol* 44, no. 1(2010): 119-120.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid, 120-121
7 Ibid.
8 Linda Caldwell, Douglas Kleilber, and Susan Shaw, “Boredom, Stress, and Social Control in the Daily Activities of Adolescents,” *Journal of Leisure Research* 28, no. 4 (1996): 276.

decreased attendance at school. If adolescents are not physically attending school, their unstructured free time increases exponentially, and the cycle of possible negative outcomes, as it speeds up, becomes harder for teens to escape. This increased free time may also heighten susceptibility to peer pressure, leading to detrimental behaviors such as delinquency, extreme situation seeking, and substance abuse.⁹ As described before, these behaviors can lead to irreversible negative effects in adult life, as they decrease the likelihood of youth being able to follow a path to a good life.

Stress

Stress is a large concern for youth as it leads to a number of negative consequences, such as poor school performance and low self-esteem.¹⁰ Stress can be caused by factors which at-risk teens may experience every day such as problems at home, difficulty at school, and peer pressure to use drugs or commit crimes. To avoid stress, adolescents may engage in impulsive behaviors, releasing endorphins, as a way to cope. Participating in impulsive behaviors due to stress has been linked to negative effects, such as thought disturbance, negative sense of self, decreased ability to enjoy and complete activities, and increased troublesome behavior.¹¹ Breaking out of the downward spiral of these effects caused by stress becomes increasingly difficult for adolescents as these negative consequences can cause them to be outcast from the adult world and their community. This can make finding the path to a good life even more difficult.

Apathy

A lack of programs aimed towards engaging adolescents in their community can lead to teenagers distancing themselves from the reality of a good life and a fulfilling future. "Lack of goals and engagement make it difficult for adolescents to step out of apathy and head toward more complex and challenging opportunities for action."¹² If adolescents believe they do not have the skills to face the challenges ahead of

them, they will not attempt anything new. This apathy leads to a lack of focus, attention, and/or action. Subsequently, teenagers react to these disadvantages by blaming the system and their environment, claiming their lack of action is out of their control.¹³ If adolescents make no change in their actions and become increasingly apathetic, their "consciousness starts to disintegrate, complexity wanes, and potential social maladjustment and deviant behaviors ensue."¹⁴ Without opportunities available to them, adolescents continue to have an abundance of unstructured free time, which aids in creating a greater likelihood of deviant behaviors. By creating programs that help adolescents plan for their future, they can get help breaking out of a negative cycle. Teenagers will be equipped to engage in their communities and be given a perspective of the good life they can have.

Negative Outcomes

If nothing is done to help teenagers understand and overcome the roadblocks mentioned above, many negative outcomes can occur. The Patterns and Habits workshop I created aims to teach Midnight Basketball Australia's participants about these roadblocks and outcomes. This workshop gives them a chance to create a schedule, to hold themselves accountable, and to begin to manage their boredom, stress and apathy.

Delinquency

Delinquency is often imagined as trouble with the law. However, it can also include neglect of one's duty to a society. It is everyone's responsibility to society to maintain their own wellbeing and not purposefully endanger others. Delinquents, solely focused on themselves, may not think about the consequences their actions cause for others. This often leads to teenagers being excluded, because "Delinquency is related to the general exclusion of adolescents from the adult world."¹⁵ This exclusion comes from making bad decisions based on the roadblocks previously discussed and increases the likelihood of further bad decisions being made. Delinquent behavior can be

9 Ibid

10 Ibid.,275.

11 Leslie Horton, Thomas Kwapil, Donald, Lynam, Sarah Sperry, and Molly Walsh, "Examining the Multidimensional structure of impulsivity in daily life," *Personality and Individual Differences* 94, (2016): 156.

12 Marta Bassi and Antonella Delle Fave, "The quality of experience in adolescents' daily lives: developmental perspectives," *Genetic, Social, and General Psychology Monographs* 126, no. 3, (2000): 362.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.,350.

15 L.L. Caldwell. et al., 'Boredom, Stress, and Social Control in the Daily Activities of Adolescents', *Journal of Leisure Research* 28, no. 4 (1996): 275.

planned or impulsive, a lone act or egged on by friends and peers. Regardless, once a teenager is labeled a delinquent by society, they are viewed differently by the community and can be outcast out of fear of additional disruption of social norms. This alienation further increases adolescent stress and can keep them trapped in the negative cycle.

Lack of Education

Education is necessary for adolescents to find a good path in life, as it offers a protective factor for physical and mental health.¹⁶ Without this protective factor, the trajectory of an adolescent's future path is drastically changed for the worst. Adolescents who cannot overcome roadblocks to focus on school may not be able to complete their education. Not completing one's education has extremely negative consequences and makes it difficult for individuals to find the path to a good life. Additionally, as education requirements for the workforce increase, it is necessary to finish at least secondary schooling to attain a job. Without proper support from their family and community, even this level of schooling may seem unattainable to teenagers.¹⁷

Today, there are less jobs for strong, young individuals with little education. Even to work in a trade job in Australia, like construction work, you often need to have completed at least Year 10 of schooling. Other requirements include having basic understanding of math, understanding power tool safety, being a team player, and having a sense of accountability.¹⁸ These concepts can become challenging if you have no previous experience with responsibilities, such as having a job, sport, or volunteer position, which educational experiences often provide access to. Education also provides a sense of responsibility and can increase the belief one will be able to obtain a job. Without the belief that attaining a job is possible, youth often disassociate with both school and their communities, becoming disinterested in their education. This leads to teenagers quickly falling further into a negative cycle.

Low Self Esteem

Low self-esteem stems from feeling inadequate in one's abilities to complete a task. In order to increase self-esteem, adolescents must gain power over their lives by being held accountable for their actions and obtaining an end goal to strive towards.¹⁹ In order to attain power over one's life, teenagers need support from local communities. However, this is difficult to achieve, as many communities often exclude the adolescents they consider delinquents. Without the support of a community, teenagers with low self-esteem are not able take control of their free time for productive uses because they lack the internal motivation needed. An additional negative effect due to low self-esteem and lack of support is teenagers struggling to learn to believe in themselves. Without believing in themselves or having anyone believe in them, teenagers are easily led into negative lifestyles and off the path towards successful lives.

Cumulative Disadvantage

Cumulative disadvantage is the overall picture of at-risk teenagers' lives. At-risk teenagers have a wide variety of roadblocks creating various challenges towards achieving their good life. "One explanation for the impact of cumulative disadvantage on youth health and achievement problems is through accelerated adulthood, early workforce participation, high school dropout, or early cohabitation, increasing likelihood of early parenthood, truncated educational attainment and poor occupational status."²⁰ Accelerated adulthood is a major component in causing adolescents to be unprepared when an obstacle arises. If teenagers are not taught proper life skills and lessons as they develop, they will be unable to mentally and physically cope with other challenges. Without those skills, teenagers can get stuck in their negative cycle. For example, the increased likelihood of early parenthood can stem from a lack of knowledge about sexual education, contraceptives, healthy relationships, and the hardships of raising a child.

Cumulative disadvantage becomes heightened

16 Nurius, Prince, and Rocha, Anita, "Cumulative Disadvantage and Youth Well-Being," 568.

17 Garner Clancey. "Young People, Crime and its Prevention – A Report for Midnight Basketball Australia," *Sydney Institute of Criminology*, (2012).

18 Careers Online, "Do you want to be a Construction Worker," 2017, <http://www.careersonline.com.au/jobs/construction-worker.html>.

19 Nurius, Prince, and Rocha, Anita, "Cumulative Disadvantage and Youth Well-Being."

20 Ibid., 568

when talking about how “the stacking of social statuses associated with marginalization—immigrant or domestic racial minority member and status-based discrimination experiences—constitute powerful threats to lifetime developmental trajectories.”²¹ The idea that adolescents often are at a disadvantage due to their marginalization is not new. The more disadvantages an at-risk teenager has, the more likely societies and communities are to misunderstand and outcast them. This can easily add to the stress often experienced by disadvantaged adolescents and become a major roadblock to a good life.

Stress can also be caused by generational change. With years of stigma facing aboriginal and at-risk communities, involvement must come from all generations or teenagers will feel excluded from opportunities. “When young people experience a ‘combination of problems’, such as unemployment, discrimination, poor skills, low incomes, poor housing, high crime and family breakdown these problems can prevent social inclusion and can be reinforced through generations.”²² Generational change is difficult to accomplish, as stereotypes and fear are taught at a young age. Without personal connection to disadvantaged youth, older generations will not have a chance to change their opinions or soften their mental picture of the youth. If those changes are not accomplished, teenagers will have less opportunities to break out of their negative cycle and continue along their path to a good life.

Model of Change

In order to begin to help adolescents overcome roadblocks and get onto a path to a good life, Midnight Basketball Australia has employed multiple techniques. One highly popular model to aid adolescents in positive development is based on program participation. Participation in a program allows teenagers to become involved in the community, causing members to soften their judgements of the youth. This new interaction between adolescents and their community, if fostered properly, can help lead to more

independence in the teenager’s daily lives. With more independence, teenagers will have higher self-esteem and a higher ability to stay focused on a good life in the future.

Program Based Solutions

One basis of program-based solutions for aiding adolescents on the path to a better life is that it is possible to divert them from delinquent behavior. However, the solution of participation alone is a short term one: it may work for the duration of the program, but when the program ends, delinquent adolescents will often return to their previous nefarious activities. Rather than targeting roadblocks, program-based solutions focusing on participation alone only ensure delinquents don’t have the time to commit any errant behaviors.

To address these issues, Midnight Basketball Australia’s program goes beyond participation and draws teens in by giving them a chance to learn, have fun, and grow in a community. Participation in community activities is especially important for at-risk teenagers, as it is associated with less psychological distress, better mental health, and both personal and neighborhood wellbeing.²³ By creating a community activity, teenagers and adults in the community can bond and perhaps create a greater impact outside the program. When teenagers feel like they are part of the community, they are more likely to participate in organized recreation activities. This can have positive benefits for all of society since it reduces the amount of unstructured free time at-risk teenagers have, which in turn reduces the risk of teenagers straying from the path to a good life.²⁴

Community Involvement

The idea of community involvement comes from teenagers having a formal or informal mentorship or role model, often provided by family, school, religious, or broader community members. “An individual’s ability to encounter other members of their community is rooted in his/her daily behavioral regularity, explaining the emergence of familiar strangers in daily

21 Ibid.,572

22 Cultural and Indigenous Research Centre Australia, “*Evaluation Report Midnight Basketball: Evaluation of CIRCA Player Survey Reports 2006-2010*,” (2011): 17 (internal document)..

23 Cultural and Indigenous Research Centre Australia, “*Evaluation Report Midnight Basketball: Evaluation of CIRCA Player Survey Reports 2006-2010*,” (2011): 17.

24 Caldwell, Kleiber, and Shaw, “Boredom, Stress, and Social Control in the Daily Activities of Adolescents,” 275.

life.”²⁵ This idea is rooted in simple interactions that youth have with community members on a daily basis. These “interactions may emerge from social contagion enabled by physical proximity: from not noticing each other, to unintentionally interacting, to intentional communicating, to mutual trust.”²⁶ It can also be formed during a structured community program that relies on volunteers from the community to ensure its success. Interactions can occur in a variety of situations such as at work, school, on public transportation, or in any social setting. These moments of positive interaction slowly allow the perception of adolescents to change in the mindsets of community members. However, this concept of forming happenstance relationships and positive memories is challenged if the adolescent is never in the same place at the same times.

As adults begin to trust in the adolescents of their community, their mental picture of the youth may begin to shift. This can open opportunities for interaction between the two distanced groups. A program like Midnight Basketball provides the grounds for this interaction to begin. It gives an “opportunity for attitudinal change and potential re-engagement in education and employment as volunteers have the willingness to advocate for these young people.”²⁷ With increased advocacy and involvement in the community, teens are able to get help breaking free of negative patterns and staying on their path towards a good life.

Independence

Independence stems from communication between teenagers and adults. As communication is facilitated between an adult and a teenager, adolescents are given more choices through education, occupation, recreation, and other opportunities. Making ongoing independent choices is associated with increased motivation and efficient learning.²⁸ This helps with the roadblock of apathy by allowing teenagers to focus on topics of interest to them. Additionally, increased independence addresses another roadblock by building

self-esteem in adolescents. This creates a positive cycle of empowerment that can help lead youth out of a negative lifestyle and back onto a path towards a good life.

By allowing adolescents to have a say in their lives and their schedule throughout the day, the positive results are proven to be greater than a condition forced upon them.²⁹ By writing down their schedules and being accountable for them, teenagers begin to take pride in their activities. Alongside positive reinforcement from the community, this could become the best way to ensure youth continue on the path to a good life.

Future Focus

Another model of change focuses on teaching youth to positively reappraise stressors toward regulating negative emotion in combination with maintaining a future focus. This tactic is called cognitive reappraisal. The method assists teenagers in having less stress, which addresses one of the roadblocks towards fostering better health and functioning.³⁰ With added involvement from community members and a teaching component, adolescents can feel more connected to the program and the lessons they are learning. This method focuses on giving youth the tools to cope with stresses caused by family life, school problems, peer pressure, boredom, trouble with the law, and many other daily stressors. The program also ensures youth are able to use these tools following this program. By allowing youth to shift away from these stressors, it is also possible to give adolescents tools to help foster positive effects that lead towards a good life.

While it creates positive effects and addresses roadblocks like stress, an important part of the shift and persist model is that it focuses on the future through the setting of goals. In the Midnight Basketball Australia program, a goal must be SMART: specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and time bound. If youth do not believe they can attain their goal, they will disassociate more quickly. By creating small mile-

25 Kay Axhausen, Xianfeng Huang, Der-Hong Lee, and Lijun Sun, “Understanding Metropolitan Patterns of Daily Encounters,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 110, no. 34 (2013): 13774.

26 Ibid.

27 Cultural and Indigenous Research Centre Australia, “Evaluation Report Midnight Basketball: Evaluation of CIRCA Player Survey Reports 2006-2010,” 17.

28 Jae Patterson and Elizabeth Sanli, “Learning Effects of Self-Controlled Practice Scheduling For Children and Adults: Are the Advantages Different?,” *61 Perceptual & Motor Skills: Learning & Memory* 116, no. 3 (2013): 742.

29 Ibid., 746

30 Nurius, Prince, and Rocha, 574

stones to help adolescents feel good about sticking to their goals, it may be possible to hold adolescents' attention long enough to help them break out of their negative cycle. With each completed goal, adolescents will learn new methods of coping, gain more confidence in their abilities, and change the perception the community has of them.

Workshop

Through program-based solutions such as ones offered by Midnight Basketball Australia, community interactions, increased chances for independence, and future oriented skills, at-risk adolescents are able to focus on staying on a path towards a positive lifestyle. These solutions are especially effective when they target various roadblocks that can lead at-risk teenagers into a negative cycle.

The workshop I created synthesizes these solutions, as well as targets roadblocks, by assisting teenagers in working with community members to create an independently structured schedule. To begin the workshop, teenagers are prompted by adult community members to think critically about what needs to be accomplished throughout the day to meet necessary needs for themselves, their family members, school-work, and activities. This demonstrates the solution of community interactions, which assist in providing a role model for an at-risk teenager, as well as changes perceptions of delinquent teenagers in the community.

Teenagers begin creating their schedule by simply listing all their activities, then prioritizing them by importance. This allows them to achieve both independence as well as utilize future-oriented tools and target the roadblock of unstructured free time. By prioritizing their day, teenagers begin to independently overcome roadblocks, as well as practice the skills necessary to do so, helping them avoid falling into a negative cycle currently and in the future.

At the end of the workshop, teenagers fill in a pre-designed daily calendar and discuss how they will ensure the tasks are accomplished. Through this, at-risk teenagers begin holding themselves accountable for their actions and gain a sense of accomplishment.

By learning the skills to avoid falling into a negative cycle, at-risk adolescents are much more likely to achieve their definition of a good life. This

good life typically includes the basic necessities, such as a place to live; a stable job; a high school education; and feeling loved, supported, and included in their family and community. The workshop I created aims to assist at-risk teenagers with these goals by building on Midnight Basketball Australia's current program-based solutions. Through creating more evidence-based solutions such as this program and aiming to target the aforementioned roadblocks, it is possible to both alter the idea of delinquent teenagers in the perceptions of society and assist at-risk teenagers in becoming happy, functioning members of society.

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