

# RESEARCH



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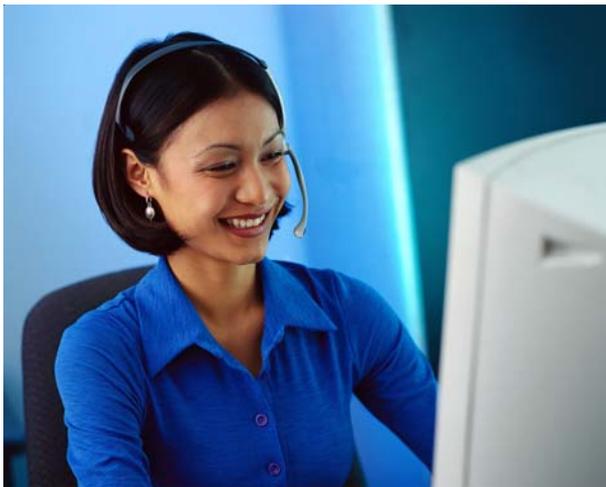
# FINDINGS

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## Promoting Youth Development in Workplaces

by Stephen F. Hamilton and Mary Agnes Hamilton



Working for pay is a common experience for youth in the United States. If informal jobs like baby-sitting and lawn mowing are included, 69% of youth work for pay at some time when they are age 15. During the year when they are age 18, 91% work (U.S. Department of Labor, 2003, p. 3). This may seem an unremarkable fact, but it reflects a unique convergence of forces. As formal schooling became universal through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, youth moved progressively out of the labor force and enrolled in school instead. Compulsory education and child labor laws were passed not only to protect children but to protect adult workers from competition. But in the mid-twentieth century combining employment with school enrollment became increasingly common, especially as students worked after

school and on weekends. In other highly developed countries this combination is much rarer. Students in most European and Asian countries are expected to devote all their time to school.

### Where are the Jobs? Who Works?

The nature of the labor market in the United States explains both the historical trend and the cross-national difference. Retail trade in the United States is concentrated in suburban shopping malls, near where many teenagers live. Stores remain open in the evenings and on weekends, providing low-skill part-time jobs that can be combined with school attendance. Retail trade accounts for 62% of jobs held by 16-17 year-olds, and the largest share of those, not surprisingly, are in eating and drinking places (U.S. Department of Labor, Chart 4.7, p. 37, 2000).

The concentration of youth jobs in malls has two major consequences. One is that, paradoxically, youth who don't need the money are more likely to work than those who do. White youth work more than non-whites, but this results primarily from residential location. Non-whites tend to live in neighborhoods with fewer job opportunities and to lack transportation to the suburbs (Ruhm, 1997, pp. 752-753).

### When Does Work Promote Youth Development?

The other consequence is that the types of jobs youth typically hold are limited as settings for development. Psychologists Ellen Greenberger and Laurence Steinberg (1986) conducted the first major study of the impact of work on adolescent development. Their findings challenged the assumption that work is good for youth. They pointed

out that many youth workplaces are occupied predominantly by youth, both as workers and as customers, maintaining the age segregation found in schools rather than placing youth in close proximity to adults. They also found that high school students working more than 20 hours per week earned lower grades, and were more likely to use alcohol, tobacco, and illegal drugs than their peers who did not work or worked less. In addition, working youth reported more instances of stealing and lying.



In contrast to these negative findings, economists have found predominantly positive effects of employment during high school on post-high school employment and earnings, despite some reduction in educational attainment, and the positive effects endure as long as 9 years (Ruhm, 1997). A serious limitation to these studies is that they cannot account fully for pre-existing differences in youth. For example, those who care less about school might invest more time in work. Their grades might have been lower even if they had not found jobs. Those who are more industrious might work more hours and earn higher wages both while they are in school and after they graduate.

The most extensive study of youth employment followed a large cohort of youth in St. Paul, Minnesota from high school well into adulthood. Mortimer (2003) examined not only the number of hours worked but also patterns of employment (i.e., intensity and duration) and the nature of the work. Like Greenberger and Steinberg (1986) and others, she found that working more than 20 hours per week is most likely to have harmful effects, but unlike them she concluded that those effects were fairly small. She also found that regular employment for less than 20 hours per week had almost entirely positive effects, even on academic achievement. Examining the nature of jobs, she found predominantly positive effects from those jobs where youth 1) have a manageable level of responsibility and autonomy, 2) can learn new things and use skills, 3) are reasonably well paid and 4) are not unduly stressed. Such jobs boosted young people's sense of efficacy and positive work values. The key message from Mortimer's work is that simply comparing working youth to those who do not work is not sufficient. The impact of work experience depends upon the nature of the jobs youth hold and the patterns of employment they follow.

Working is part of life for most youth, not just something they are preparing to undertake as adults. The "transition

from school to work" is not a onetime step. Rather, school and work are likely to be combined in various proportions over a decade or more. The growing need for lifelong learning means that managing this combination is an important skill. Adults must recognize the place of work in young people's lives and help them make good decisions about work.

### Gaining Self-Confidence at Work

*A high-school student talks about her workplace mentor...*

"She always gave me things that I first thought were so difficult to complete. But afterwards I would feel good about myself, because she actually helped me out and made me feel like I can do it. Maybe at the moment it felt a little overwhelming, but I knew that I had to push myself to do it. She was always there to tell me, just to encourage me. She always had these high expectations of her work, to give the best. So, it's just something that you just learn from being with her. Something that she projects onto others."

[http://www.human.cornell.edu/youthwork/mentoring/what\\_personal\\_confidence.html](http://www.human.cornell.edu/youthwork/mentoring/what_personal_confidence.html)

### What Can Communities Do?

Because working is so much a part of teenagers' lives, a community-wide focus on promoting youth development must target workplaces along with families, schools, and youth-serving organizations. One goal is to make the benefits of work experience more readily available to those with the greatest needs. This goal could be advanced by reducing discriminatory hiring, by adding support for disadvantaged youth, and by improving transportation. A second goal is to make work experience a more positive contributor to youth development. This entails moderating work hours so that they do not interfere with school and create high stress. Ideally it also means encouraging more employers to make youth jobs into learning opportunities.

Youth apprenticeship is the most ambitious approach to making work a learning experience. Internships, service

learning, and cooperative education also combine work with learning. (See Hamilton & Hamilton, 1997, for definitions of these forms of work-based learning and for guiding principles.) The relationship between youth and their adult supervisors and co-workers is a critical determinant of its impact. Workplaces can be places where youth and adults come together around common goals and naturally develop mentoring relationships with warm and enduring connections (Hamilton & Hamilton, 2002). (For training materials to help adults mentor youth at work, see [www.human.cornell.edu/youthwork](http://www.human.cornell.edu/youthwork).)

Despite improvements in workplace safety, work can be physically harmful to youth. Farms are among the most dangerous

workplaces, yet children are allowed to perform tasks on family farms that would be illegal elsewhere. Fast food restaurants, where the largest number of youth are employed, appear benign, but hot grease is a major source of injury there and some youth have been killed in late-night armed robberies. A committee of the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (1998) that reviewed such threats recommended that communities develop procedures to identify “commendable workplaces for youth” as a way of providing guidance to parents and recognition to employers who take steps to make their workplaces safe and supportive of youth development.

## Principles and Criteria for Youth Jobs That Promote Learning and Development

- 1. Technical Competence. Youth gain basic and high-level technical competence through challenging work.**
  - √ Identify work tasks that teach technical competence.
  - √ Organize learning objectives as modules in core and elective units.
  - √ Design a multi-year learning plan that is increasingly challenging.
- 2. Breadth. Youth gain broad technical competence and understand all aspects of the industry through rotation and projects.**
  - √ Inform youth about all aspects of the industry.
  - √ Rotate youth through several departments or placements.
  - √ Support projects and activities that teach multiple skills and broad knowledge.
- 3. Personal and Social Competence. Youth gain personal and social competence in the workplace.**
  - √ Recognize personal and social competencies as key learning objectives.
  - √ Systematically teach social and personal competence in context.
  - √ Provide extra assistance to youth who lack personal and social competence through case management.
- 4. Expectations/Feedback. Workplace teachers convey clear expectations to youth and assess progress toward achievement.**
  - √ State expectations in advance for behavior and learning.
  - √ Regularly monitor and document acquisition of competency.
  - √ Provide feedback on progress to youth, school, parents, and firm.
  - √ Encourage youth to assemble a portfolio.
  - √ Eventually use industry-wide standards to provide portable credentials.
- 5. Teaching Roles. Youth learn from adults with formally assigned teaching roles.**
  - √ Assign clear teaching roles and responsibilities to a coordinator, managers, coaches, and mentors.
  - √ Authorize teaching roles in job descriptions and performance assessments.
  - √ Orient, train, and support adults who teach youth.
- 6. Academic Achievement. Youth achieve high academic standards.**
  - √ Work closely with schools and postsecondary institutions to set high academic standards.
  - √ Specify courses and degrees related to the career areas.
  - √ Open multiple options for postsecondary education.
- 7. Career Paths. Youth identify and follow career paths.**
  - √ Provide career exploration opportunities and information on related careers.
  - √ Advise youth about career paths, coordinating with high school and college advisers and with parents.
  - √ Pay particular attention to the post-high school transition.

[http://www.human.cornell.edu/youthwork/rtools/app\\_crit.html](http://www.human.cornell.edu/youthwork/rtools/app_crit.html)

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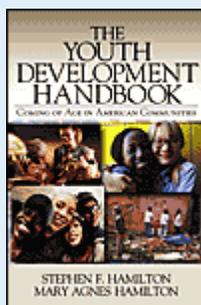
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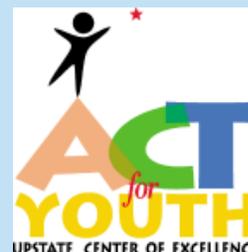


This FACT Sheet was adapted from Hamilton, M.A. & Hamilton, S.F. (2004). Designing work and service for learning. In Hamilton, S.F., & Hamilton, M.A. (Eds.). *The handbook of youth development: Coming of age in American communities*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Youthwork website: [www.human.cornell.edu/youthwork](http://www.human.cornell.edu/youthwork)

**The Upstate Center of Excellence invites you to visit the ACT for Youth website where additional copies of this newsletter and many other youth development resources are available.**

**[www.actforyouth.net](http://www.actforyouth.net)**



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