THE EXPLORING EXPERIENCE

A National Program-Outcomes Study Conducted by
Louis Harris & Associates
Introduction

Exploring is a part of the Learning for Life career education program for young men and women who are 14 (and have completed the eighth grade) through 20 years old.* Exploring exists to accomplish a major goal: To provide the structure and resources needed for the youth of America to learn about career opportunities, to make ethical choices, and to achieve their full potential as individuals.

In May 1998, the results of a Learning for Life program evaluation were released in a booklet titled *Character Building With Learning for Life*. This research study, conducted by Syndics Research Corporation and Dr. Kevin Ryan of Boston University, found that elementary school–age youth who participated in Learning for Life scored higher than students who did not participate in Learning for Life on questions related to a variety of ethical and moral issues covered in lessons. Additionally, after six months, teacher evaluations of student behavior indicated that students participating in Learning for Life exhibited better behavior than those who were not in the program.

*This segment of the research focuses on the Exploring program of Learning for Life. It became an official program of Learning for Life on August 1, 1998. Before this date, Exploring and Venturing were combined in a single program. Venturing is now a separate part of Boy Scouts of America.
Although that study illustrated the effectiveness of the character-building aspect of Learning for Life among elementary-age youth (ages 6 to 12 years old), it did not address issues among young adults (ages 14 to 20) in the Exploring program. The importance of measuring and reporting on program outcomes aimed at teens continues to grow. Educators, parents, and community leaders who must decide which organizations to join, support, or utilize need solid data that validate program effectiveness.

In response to this need, the Boy Scouts of America commissioned Louis Harris & Associates of New York to undertake the challenge of identifying and uncovering the aspects of the Exploring program that serve as indicators of positive outcomes.

The Exploring program is specifically designed to incorporate the following experience areas: career opportunities, life skills, service learning, character education, and leadership experience. A close analysis of the activities, relationships, and experiences in the program demonstrates success in meeting the elements of healthy youth development.
Elements of Healthy Youth Development

The Exploring program contributes to the healthy development of today’s young adults by providing them with the environment, resources, and relationships they need to learn and grow. This study addresses the issue of how healthy development is fostered by addressing a key question that a growing number of organizations concerned with youth development have attempted to answer: What are the specific components or elements of youth development that contribute to healthy, positive outcomes?

Two organizations in particular, the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development and the Search Institute, have focused attention on desirable traits that youth programs should address. The Carnegie Council, after a decade-long research effort, offers the following 10 conditions as “fundamental human requirements” that must be met if children are to grow up to be healthy, constructive adults:

- Develop sustained, caring relationships with adults.
- Receive guidance in facing serious challenges.
- Become a valued member of a constructive peer group.
- Feel a sense of worth as a person.
- Become socially competent.
- Know how to use support systems.
- Achieve a reliable basis for making informed choices.
- Participate in the constructive (age-related) expression of curiosity and exploration.
- Believe in a promising future with real opportunities.
- Find ways of being useful to others.

* Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development; Great Transitions, Preparing Adolescents for a New Century, page 49

Exploring exists to accomplish a major goal: To provide the structure and resources needed for the youth of America to learn about career opportunities, to make ethical choices, and to achieve their full potential as individuals. In a new study, researchers at Louis Harris & Associates have built on the work of two particular organizations, the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development and the Search Institute, that are pioneers in the study of desirable characteristics that youth programs should foster.
Similarly, youth development researchers at the Search Institute in Minneapolis, Minnesota, have developed the following framework of developmental assets that give young people a strong foundation for life:* 

- **Support**—Receive support from family, teachers, and other adults.
- **Empowerment**—Feel useful and safe.
- **Boundaries and expectations**—Move in an environment with rules, structure, and high expectations.
- **Constructive use of time**—Spend time creatively on hobbies, with friends, and in religious functions.
- **Commitment to learning**—Engage in learning and spend time daily on schoolwork and other reading.
- **Positive values**—Learn honesty, integrity, personal responsibility, as well as to care for others, and act on this knowledge.
- **Social competencies**—Develop respect for others and become comfortable with people of different cultures.
- **Positive identity**—Develop a sense of purpose and self-worth.

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From the important youth-development variables identified by these two comprehensive sources, several common elements emerge. Integrating these common elements yields the following six critical elements of healthy youth development:

1. Strong personal values and character
2. A positive sense of self-worth and usefulness
3. Caring and nurturing relationships with parents, other adults, and peers
4. A desire to learn
5. Productive/creative use of time
6. Social adeptness

The following results of this report demonstrate that the Exploring program addresses each of these important elements.
Strong Personal Values and Character

Providing young people with experiences to help them mature into responsible and caring adults is one of the purposes of the Exploring program. Making ethical choices and helping others are key components of this goal.

Ethical decision-making opportunities arise in Exploring when the post is faced with decisions about right and wrong. Three of four Explorers (75 percent) indicate that their group has dealt with such a decision during the past three months.

One of four Explorers (25 percent) participates in a service project during a typical three-month period. For teens, the importance of service projects is threefold: First, the projects help meet important physical and emotional needs; second, they communicate the value and importance of other people; and third, they allow young people to develop empathy for people who are in need.

Ethical Decision Making

“Your post has been faced with situations when the group had to make decisions about right and wrong.”
A Positive Sense of Self-Worth and Usefulness

Exploring is focused on teaching youth about career fields that might interest them and encouraging them to prepare for the future. In doing so, the program aims to build self-worth and self-confidence in youth. In part, it does this by providing an atmosphere of teamwork, learning, and accomplishment. Nearly all Explorers (98 percent) agree that Exploring activities help to prepare them for the future. The belief among members that Exploring contributes to their self-esteem is also strong: 92 percent of Explorers agree that being an Explorer has taught them to have more confidence in themselves and their abilities.

Self-worth is closely tied to relationships with others. Relationship building between youth, their peers, and adults plays an important developmental role by establishing a place of belonging and security and by fostering feelings of value. In Exploring, “The activities in Exploring help you prepare for the future.”
positive self-worth is reinforced through encouragement from others. Overall, 91 percent of Explorers agree that they receive such encouragement from other Explorers, and 94 percent agree that they are encouraged by their parents to participate in Exploring activities.

Positive self-worth is also supported through early leadership experiences in Exploring. About one in five Explorers (22 percent) hold an elected or appointed leadership position within the post.

“Being an Explorer has taught you to have more confidence in yourself and your abilities.”

92% Agree
8% Disagree

“It has been a good learning experience. He wants to be a police officer.”

—Mother of a 16-year-old Explorer
Caring and Nurturing Relationships With Parents, Other Adults, and Peers

A key reason young people join Exploring is the opportunity it gives them to establish relationships with others. Specifically, 87 percent of Explorers indicate that “socializing with others” was an important factor in their decision to join. Furthermore, 90 percent indicate that such social development contributed to making their program experience positive.

Exploring serves as a catalyst for interaction and communication between members, their parents, and other adults. Almost all Explorers are encouraged to share their ideas and opinions with the group (95 percent) or have made new friends in their Exploring post (94 percent). The strength of such peer-to-peer interaction is further evidenced by 88 percent saying they talk with other Explorers about what they learn in the program.
A clear majority of Explorers (90 percent) talk to their parents about what they learn at meetings and outings, and almost two-thirds (64 percent) talk to adults other than their parents about their Exploring experiences. Perhaps more importantly, nine of 10 (91 percent) agree that they can talk to their post Advisors about things that are important to them.

“[Exploring] has given her a strong sense of community participation and leadership skills.”

—Father of a 15-year-old Explorer
A Desire to Learn

The Exploring program matches youth who share common career interests with community members who can inform, encourage, and develop those interests. Given Exploring’s goals, perhaps it is not surprising that in a typical three-month period, a majority of Explorers have learned about a career field.

Explorers value the program for these new learning experiences. In total, 96 percent agree that Exploring gives them a chance to do things and go places they would not be able to experience otherwise.

In general, further learning is important to the youth involved in the Exploring program: 99 percent of Explorers say that going to college is important to them.

“Exploring gives you a chance to do things and go places that you would not otherwise do or visit.”
Productive/Creative Use of Time

Presentations, mentoring, and hands-on experiences in career fields are the activities Explorers experience most commonly in the program. Three-fourths (74 percent) participate in presentations or lectures by experts during a typical three-month period, and two-thirds (63 percent) have hands-on experiences in career fields.

Exploring provides members with an incentive to stretch themselves and reach beyond what they already know, see, and feel. During a typical three-month period, a majority of Explorers have learned about a career field (82 percent) or talked with a professional or expert (81 percent). Two-thirds (67 percent) have done something they have never done before, and about half (49 percent) have gone somewhere they have never been before.

Another important outcome related to productive use of time is found in Exploring’s component of goal setting and accomplishment. Because of Exploring, almost all of the members (92 percent) agree that they were encouraged to think about and plan for their futures. Eighty-five percent of Explorers set personal...
goals for meetings and activities, and 75 percent indicate having to rely on themselves to accomplish these goals.

An important element of Exploring is that the program encourages young people to fulfill personal development needs while working to meet the needs of others. Over a typical three-month period, one-quarter (25 percent) of Explorers participate in a service project. Among these, 42 percent work with children, which is by far the most common type of service project.

- Exploring encourages me to think about and plan for the future.
- I set goals for myself at meetings and activities.
- I had to rely on myself to accomplish my goals.
Social Adeptness

The Exploring program teaches teamwork, leadership, and other life skills, with a particular focus on the development of career interests. These tools equip Explorers to effectively and productively contribute to collaborative efforts and cooperate with people who are different from themselves. In a typical three-month period, more than nine of 10 Explorers agree that their participation in the program helped them learn to get along with people who are different from themselves (94 percent) and learned something about how to be a team player and work in a group (93 percent). Also, about eight of 10 (79 percent) participated in group discussions, whereas just under three of four (72 percent) participated in a vote or decision made by the group.

Conflict resolution is an outcome of participation in the Exploring program, as 76 percent of members agree that they were able to resolve conflicts they had with others while participating in Exploring outings and activities.
Methodology

At the time that Louis Harris & Associates was commissioned to conduct this study, the Exploring (Learning for Life) and Venturing programs were combined in one Exploring program. The sample methodology was based on the entire universe of Exploring (Learning for Life) and Venturing units combined. At the completion of the study, the units were separated into their new designations and the results analyzed separately.

The original study methodology was to be a panel-based diary method, for which Explorers would complete surveys at meetings. One of the unique features of the Exploring (Learning for Life) and Venturing programs, however, is the extent to which members of the units are engaged in outings and activities in the community and outdoors, rather than meeting together in central locations. Therefore, very few units were able to participate in the diary-based methodology because the unit members were not consistently together at meetings in locations where they could easily participate.

In March of 1998, the study methodology was adapted to include a telephone survey. In total, 133 Venturers in 30 crews and 339 Explorers (Learning for Life) in 42 posts were contacted, along with 28 youth in units that remain unclassified (mostly because the units completed their programs or became inactive before the designations were determined), for a total of 500 representative interviews. Only the Exploring data are reported in this summary.