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**Author:** Coskun, Begum  
**Title:** Time-out: an evaluation of rebound facilities  
**Issue Date:** 2015-09-30
5. School adjustment and leisure activities inside and outside home: a comparative study between students sent to Rebound facilities and their non-referred peers

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Students in the Netherlands who show poor school adjustment are more likely to be referred to Rebound facilities than their better adjusted peers. The current study compared the time spending on structured, unstructured, and family activities and their school adjustment between students referred to Rebound facilities (N = 170) and their non-referred peers (N = 348), and analyzed the relations between the time spending variables and school adjustment. Self-reports on school adjustment and time spending were used. Referred students reported lower school adjustment, less structured leisure participation and less engagement in family activities than their non-referred peers. For both referred and non-referred students, family activities predicted school adjustment whereas time spending on structured leisure did not predict school adjustment. Partaking in unstructured leisure activities only predicted school adjustment in the non-referred group. Results suggest that students with poor school adjustment would benefit from more frequent engagement in family activities.

SUBMITTED
Students in secondary schools in the Netherlands who show poor school adjustment, disturb lessons and put teacher and peer security at risk through their behavior can be referred to a so-called Rebound facility (Van Veen, Van der Steenhoven, & Kuijvenhoven, 2007). Rebound facilities are educational centers for secondary school students who are not diagnosed with a psychiatric disorder, but do show poor school adjustment (predominantly behaviorally) in such a manner that the school order and safety is at stake.

The term ‘Rebound’ stands for a ‘second chance’. Profiles of referred students often include externalizing behaviors, with disruptive behaviors in classrooms and verbal violence against school staff. Moreover, more than half of the Rebound students show poor school motivation and low interest in academic performance (Van der Steenhoven, Van Veen, & Kuijvenhoven, 2012). In Rebounds students can work in groups of maximally 12 students on assignments selected by their own teachers, and they follow an intervention program meant to make them more aware of the consequences of their behavior and to have them acquire competences that allow them to better regulate their behavior themselves. A stay in the Rebound should decrease problem behaviors and increase school adjustment, and thus prepare the students for a return to their old school.

The whole procedure leading to a Rebound referral and the educational approach followed in a Rebound institution are inspired by the notion that children are primarily the responsibility of the school and that a referral to a Rebound should be primarily inspired by school experiences. However, schools can help students to improve their chances of a prosperous and healthy future, but they “cannot compensate for society” as depicted so eloquently by Bernstein (1970). Students carry their characteristics, their worries and particular competences with them when they enter school, and schools have not found a way to mold the resulting diversity of their students in a way that eventually makes students more equal in terms of health, competence, and wellbeing. In an earlier study we found that those students’ that are referred to Rebound facilities demonstrate more externalizing problem behavior than their peers (Coşkun, Van Geel, & Vedder, 2015), and it are mostly these school problems that are the reason and justification for a referral to a Rebound facility. Though these problems are experienced and signaled in school, it is unlikely that their origin lies in school only. By focusing on behavioral problems in schools we might miss other important factors that underlie student referrals (Coşkun et al., 2015). In the current study we focus on some of these supposedly important other factors. We examine differences in leisure time spending, and school adjustment between students referred to a Rebound facility and non-referred students and the relationship between these two variables.
Structured, Unstructured, and Family Leisure Activities

Previous studies have focused predominantly on two forms of leisure activities: structured versus unstructured (Abbott & Barber, 2007; Bartko & Eccles, 2003; Mahoney & Stattin, 2000). Structured leisure activities are organized and supervised by one or more adults, have a rule-guided structure with standard participation schedules, and emphasize skill development. They require attentive engagement, which is frequently followed by clear performance feedback of supervising adults or experts (Mahoney & Stattin, 2000). Examples are training for sports and music clubs. Ample research documents that participation in well-structured leisure activities is related to higher academic engagement and performance (Cooper, Valentine, Nye, & Lindsay, 1999; Eccles & Barber, 1999; Jordan & Nettles, 1999), lower prevalence of school dropout (Davalos, Chavez, & Guardiola, 1999; Mahoney, 2000), less antisocial behavior (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Mahoney & Stattin, 2000), and less substance abuse (Barnes, Hoffman, Welte, Farell, & Dintcheff, 2007; Darling, 2005). Participation in extracurricular and well-organized out of school activities may benefit academic performance, diminish drop-out, raise intrinsic motivation, improve school adjustment (Fredricks & Eccles, 2006; Marsh & Kleitman, 2002; Vandell, Shernoff, Pierce, Bolt, Dadisman, & Brown, 2005), and contribute to higher self-esteem and lower depression (Barber, Eccles, & Stone, 1999; Mahoney, Schweder, & Stattin, 2002). In a longitudinal study on school-based extracurricular activities Darling (2005) found that adolescents who ran a high risk of life-stress events felt protected and supported by their involvement in extra-curricular activities.

Unstructured leisure activities, are more spontaneous, less planned, pre-structured and less binding, than structured leisure activities, and often lack adult supervision (Abbott & Barber, 2007). Examples are hanging out with friends, watching television, or just listening to music on your own. These activities are not started to enhance particular competencies (Mahoney & Stattin, 2000). Spending time with friends increases adolescents’ pleasure in activities (Patrick, Ryan, Alfeld-Liro, Fredricks, Hruda, & Eccles, 1999). It is a rewarding experience making peers to join activities and to continue their engagement (Borden, Perkins, Villarruel, & Stone, 2005; Persson, Kerr, & Statin, 2007). However, the risk of developing antisocial behaviors increases when the activities involve no agenda, are unsupervised, and when deviant peers join in (c.f., Dodge, Dishion, & Lansford, 2006; Osgood & Anderson, 2004). Compared to well-structured leisure activities, unstructured leisure pursuit provide more opportunities for engaging in antisocial behaviors (Darling, 2005; Fredricks & Eccles, 2006; Gottfredson, Gerstenblith, Soulé, Worner, & Lu, 2004; Mahoney, 2000). After accounting for demographic and behavioral differences between participants pursuing unstructured leisure,
studies have shown increases in substance abuse and delinquency in adolescence (Bartko & Eccles, 2003; Mahoney & Stattin, 2000).

Next to structured and unstructured leisure activities we included activities for and with family as a separate variable in this study. Though such family activities may in some cases be a form of structured or unstructured leisure, we wished to treat it as a separate variable on account of the strong relations it has with adolescent outcomes. Studies suggest that time spent with family is related to fewer problem behaviors and delinquent acts (Barnes, Hoffman, Welte, Farrell, & Dintcheff, 2007), less substance abuse (Barnes et al., 2007; Flannery, Williams, & Vazsonyi, 1999), and lower susceptibility to peer pressure (Flannery et al., 1999). A recent study among 1,147 low-income urban youth and mothers found that family routines (for instance, family regularly talking, playing, and reading) were associated with higher educational expectations and their realization through better academic performance. In particular, young adolescents between 11-16 years benefitted from family routines. Destabilizing family life events, on the other hand, predicted lower academic achievement and lower educational expectations (Roche & Ghazarian, 2012). The evidence of a relationship between family activities and school adjustment, made us decide to use this variable as a third predictor of school adjustment.

Current Study

For the current study we aimed to compare the school adjustment, structured as well as unstructured leisure activities, and family activities between students who were sent to Rebound facilities and their non-referred peers. By comparing these variables between referred and non-referred students we hope to better understand the risk and protective factors of student referrals. Because problematic school adjustment weighs heavy in decisions about Rebound referrals (Van der Steenhoven et al., 2012), we expect referred students to score lower on school adjustment than non-referred students. Because previous studies suggested a negative correlation between unstructured leisure activities and school adjustment (Dodge, Dishion, & Lansford, 2006; Osgood & Anderson, 2004) we expect that referred students will score higher on unstructured leisure than non-referred. Structured leisure activities (Cooper et al., 1999; Eccles & Barber, 1999; Jordan & Nettles, 1999) and shared family activities (Roche & Ghazarian, 2012) have previously been found positively related to school adjustment. Hence, we expect that referred students will score lower on these variables than non-referred students. In addition to our expectations with respect to referred and non-referred students’ average scores for time spending, we expect to confirm that students time spending predicts
their school adjustment: structured and family activities contribute positively to the prediction and unstructured activities negatively.

**Method**

**Subjects**

**Rebound students.** A total of 170 Rebound students recruited from three Rebound facilities participated in the study. Prior to their referral to a Rebound facility 148 Rebound students visited junior vocational high schools (87.1%) and 22 students were from academic streams. The ages of students in the Rebound group ranged from 12 to 16 years ($M$-age = 14.22 years; $SD = 1.19$). The sample consisted of 123 (72.4 %) boys and 47 girls (27.6 %) and included 123 (72%) students with an immigrant background.

**Non-referred students.** A total of 348 8th grade students from four junior vocational high schools participated in the study. The mean age was 13.67 years ($SD = .66$) and ranged from 12 to 16 years. The sample consisted of 146 boys (42.0%) and 171 girls (49.1%) (31 students did not report their gender) and included 286 (77%) students with an immigrant background.

**Instruments**

**School adjustment.** School adjustment was measured with a selection of items used by Wentzel (1994; 2002) to measure the attainment of goals that define school adjustment. The scale consisted of seven items. Sample items are ‘How often do you try to do what the teacher asks you to do?’ or ‘How often do you try to help your classmates solve a problem once you’ve figured it out?’. A 5-point Likert scale ranged from ‘never’ to ‘always’. Cronbach’s alpha for the present study was .66 for Rebound students and .69 for non-referred students.

**Structured leisure activities.** The seven item scale was adapted from a measure presented by Barber, Stone, and Eccles (2005). Students rated seven activities (e.g., How often do you take part in a sports activity organized by a club, association, or school?) Some other activities were “going to theater or museum” and “learning how to play or make music”. A 5-point Likert scale ranged from ‘never or less than one hour per week’ to ‘very often or more than 16 hours per week’. Cronbach’s alpha for the structured leisure scale was .69 for Rebound students, and .70 for non-referred students.

**Unstructured leisure activities.** This questionnaire was an adapted version of a self-report presented by Bartko and Eccles (2003) and consisted of seven items. Sample items were
‘How often do you spend time on MSN?’ and ‘How often do you hang out with friends?’ The same 5-point Likert scale was used again ranging from ‘never/less than one hour per week’ to ‘very often/more than 16 hours per week’. Cronbach’s alpha for the unstructured leisure scale was .79 for Rebound students and .82 for non-referred students.

**Family activities.** Participants were asked to rate the following three items: ‘How often do you cook or do housework?’, ‘How often do you take care of a family member?’, and ‘How often do you do things together with family members? Again the same 5-point Likert scale was used. Cronbach’s alpha for the present scale was .55 for Rebound students and .61 for non-referred students.

**Procedure**

Questionnaires were administered in students’ first week in the Rebound, before starting any behavioral interventions. Rebound teachers were asked to inform and ask parents for their sons’ and daughters’ participation at students’ first intake session at Rebound facilities. Knowing that most Rebound students were from junior vocational high schools, the schools invited to serve as controls were also junior vocational high schools. Four schools received a letter inviting them to participate in the current study. This was followed up by a phone call to arrange a visit to explain the school director the purpose of the investigation. Parents received information prior to the study, and were asked to allow their children to participate. A trained researcher administered questionnaires during a regular school hour, with teachers present. Participants were assured anonymity and confidentiality, and were told that their participation was voluntary. Both the Rebound facilities and the four mainstream schools were located in highly urbanized areas.

**Results**

**Preliminary Analyses**

Age, gender, and ethnicity were compared between the Rebound and non-referred students. An ANOVA showed that the Rebound group ($M = 14.22, SD = 1.19$) was older than the non-referred group ($M = 13.67, SD = .66$), $F (1, 490) = 45.01, p < .01, \text{Cohen’s } d = .57)$. Chi-square tests showed an overrepresentation of males in Rebound institutions ($\chi^2 (1, 487) = 30.95, p < .01$). Finally, a chi-square test demonstrated equal distribution of ethnicity between Rebound and control students ($\chi^2 (1, 487) = 1.39, p = .25$). Based on these findings it was decided to correct further analyses for age and gender.
Prevalence and Correlations of School Adjustment and Leisure Activities

Table 1 presents means, standard deviations and one-way ANOVA’s for the main variables by Rebound and non-referred students. With a medium to large effect size, non-referred students scored significantly higher on their school adjustment ($F(1, 465) = 22.497, p < .01$, Cohen’s $d = .45$) than Rebound students. Furthermore, non-referred students partook more (with a medium effect size) in structured leisure activities ($F(1, 429) = 8.526, p < .01$, Cohen’s $d = .30$) and family activities ($F(1, 449) = 10.458, p < .01$, Cohen’s $d = .33$). No group differences between Rebound and non-referred students were found for unstructured leisure activities. Furthermore, school adjustment in general was not related to structured and unstructured leisure activities. Family activities on the other hand were positively but weakly related to school adjustment and both structured and unstructured activities.

Table 1
Means, standard deviations, and ANOVA’s of the main study variables.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>$F(p)$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. School adjustment</td>
<td>Rebound</td>
<td>2.47</td>
<td>.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-referred</td>
<td>2.73</td>
<td>.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Structured activities</td>
<td>Rebound</td>
<td>1.26</td>
<td>.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-referred</td>
<td>1.41</td>
<td>.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Unstructured activities</td>
<td>Rebound</td>
<td>3.31</td>
<td>.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-referred</td>
<td>3.17</td>
<td>.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Family activities</td>
<td>Rebound</td>
<td>2.18</td>
<td>.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-referred</td>
<td>2.46</td>
<td>.91</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** $p < .01$.

Leisure Participation and School Adjustment

Multiple regression analyses were performed with school adjustment as dependent variable and structured, unstructured and family activities as independent variables (see Table 3). Gender and age were entered as control variables. The overall regression was significant for the non-referred group $R^2 = .13, F(5,237) = 6.84, p < .01$, but not for the Rebound group $R^2 = .04, F(5,121) = .99, p = .95$. For the Rebound group school adjustment was only significantly predicted by family activities ($b^* = .234, p < .05, pr = .20$). For the Rebound students more spent time on family activities was related to better school adjustment; however, because the overall regression for the Rebound group was not significant, this effect should be interpreted with caution. For the non-referred students, school adjustment was also predicted by family activities ($b^* = .383, p < .01, pr = .34$). In addition, however, these students’ school adjustment was predicted by unstructured leisure activities. The more students were active in unstructured
leisure activities, the lower their school adjustment ($b^* = -.204, p < .01, pr = -.19$). Structured leisure activity participation did not predict school adjustment in either group.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. School adjustment</td>
<td>Rebound</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-referred</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Structured activities</td>
<td>Rebound</td>
<td>-.008</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-referred</td>
<td>.012</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td>3. Unstructured activities</td>
<td>Rebound</td>
<td>-.035</td>
<td>.065</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-referred</td>
<td>-.087</td>
<td>.269**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Family activities</td>
<td>Rebound</td>
<td>.204*</td>
<td>.285**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Non-referred</td>
<td>.264*</td>
<td>.371**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$.

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>School adjustment</th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rebound ($\beta$)</td>
<td>Non-referred ($\beta$)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>-.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structured activities</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>-.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unstructured activities</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>-.20*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family activities</td>
<td>.23*</td>
<td>.38*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total $R^2$</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.13*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Standardized beta weights are shown. Gender was coded as 0 = boys, and 1 = girls.
* $p < .05$.

Discussion

In the current study we compared the school adjustment, structured as well as unstructured leisure activities, and family activities between students who were sent to Rebound facilities and their non-referred peers. Overall, Rebound students reported lower school adjustment, less structured leisure participation and less engagement in (shared) family activities than their non-referred peers. Furthermore, after controlling for age and gender, results showed family activities to be a predictor for school adjustment in both groups. Structured leisure participation did not contribute to the prediction of school adjustment. In the non-referred sample, next to family leisure participation, participation in unstructured activities negatively contributed to the prediction of school adjustment.
Family routines or shared family activities, particularly with adolescent involvement, so far received little attention in family research (Crosnoe & Trinitapolie, 2008; Roche & Ghazarian, 2012). This may be due to the fact that adolescents usually strive for independence and autonomy which easily conflicts with parents’ desire for joint activities (Collins & Steinberg, 2006; Crosnoe & Trinitapolie, 2008). However, research suggests that supportive and positive relationships with parents are related to higher levels of school adjustment (Garcia-Reid, Reid, & Peterson, 2005; Gonzalez-DeHass, Willems, & Holbeain, 2005; Woolley & Bowen, 2007). Furthermore, students who have a higher sense of responsibility towards their caregivers or family, generally demonstrate more positive school adjustments and academic achievements (Fuligini, 2001; King, McInerney, & Watkins, 2013; Van Geel & Vedder, 2011). Also, recent studies showed beneficial effects of family activities on academic achievement (both verbal, quantitative achievement tests and school grades), positive expectations of adolescents’ about educational success (Roche & Ghazarian, 2012) and overall social adjustment (Lanza & Taylor, 2010; Taylor & Lopez, 2005). Our study replicates and adds to these results by demonstrating that both for non-referred, ‘regular’ students and students referred to Rebound facilities family time-spending is related to school adjustment. This suggests that family activities is appreciated by at risk youth and as such may be important for striking a balance between adolescents’ positive and negative developmental adaptations. Furthermore, the fact that referred youth scored lower on family activities than non-referred youth suggests that family time-spending may be a protective factor against youth’s referrals to facilities for problematic behavior. Of course, longitudinal studies would be needed to get a better understanding of the causality between family activities and referrals.

Rebound youth also scored lower on structured leisure activities and higher on unstructured leisure activities than non-referred youth, though for these variables we did not find significant relations with school engagement amongst the referred youth. However, given the existing literature that ties structured leisure to positive outcomes among adolescents (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Mahoney & Stattin, 2000) and unstructured leisure to negative outcomes (Darling, 2005; Fredricks & Eccles, 2006; Gottfredson et al., 2004; Mahoney, 2000), it may be that the lower participation in structured leisure activities and the higher participation in unstructured leisure activities affected the referral through other types of behavior than those captured in the variable school adjustment. After all, students may be referred for other reasons than just school adjustment problems, such as substance abuse, or aggressive behaviors (Barth, Dunlap, Dane, Lochman, & Wells, 2004).
After controlling for age, gender, and including other leisure forms in the equation, unstructured leisure participation predicted poorer school adjustment for non-referred students, but not for referred students. The two groups of students did not differ with respect to unstructured leisure participation, but Rebound students overall reported significantly poorer school adjustment than their non-referred peers. It may be that the smaller range of scores for school adjustment reported by Rebound students, did not allow to capture a possible relationship with time spent on unstructured leisure activities. Furthermore, we found structured leisure activities not to be associated with school adjustment. The low average and low standard deviations among both the referred and the non-referred groups suggests that the youths in our sample did not engage in structured leisure often, and perhaps the participation in structured leisure activities amongst these youths was just too low to establish any positive relationships with school adjustment. The low averages and standard deviations for both the referred and non-referred samples may be because the participants were predominantly inner city youths from relatively poorer neighborhoods. In Dutch neighborhoods characterized by few sidewalks, high traffic pressure, and relatively high crime rates children participate little in structured leisure activities, particularly sports activities (Hosper, Klazinga, & Stronks, 2007; Van Lenthe, Brug, & Mackenbach, 2004). A lower socio-economic status is a strong predictor for parental decisions that their children do not participate in organized activities (Wimer et al., 2008). The unsafety of the neighborhood may also influence parents’ decision to withhold their children (Furstenberg et al., 1999; Shann, 2001).

Limitations and Implications

Several limitations of the current investigation require mention. First, we did not control for socio-economic circumstances of the participants. Although family time sharing is not always monetary dependent (Crosnoe & Trinitapoli, 2008) it is a consistent finding that adolescents from high socio-economic circumstances are more likely to participate in structured leisure activities (e.g., Crosnoe & Trinitapoli, 2008; Fredricks & Eccles, 2006; Simpkins, Ripke, Huston, & Eccles, 2005). Due to fewer monetary resources parents may not be able to afford organized activities and they may be constrained in the means of transportation and time needed to involve their children in organized activities (Halpern, Baker, & Mollard, 2000; Shann, 2001). Second, students’ activity participation was analyzed by self-reports only. The quality of the study would likely have benefitted from reports of other persons or by using more advanced registration systems, such as actigraphs. Finally, the correlational nature of this study precludes to distinguish directions of relationships as well as causative reasoning.
The present study supported previous findings on the importance of shared family activities (e.g., Chin & Phillips, 2003; Crosnoe & Trinitapoli, 2008). Shared family activities not only facilitate bonding between parents and children, they also indirectly provide the opportunity to transmit values, and support the development of children’s social, emotional, cognitive, and physical competences (Wigfield, Eccles, Schiefele, Roeser, & Davis-Kean, 2006). Bonding is beneficial to the psychological well-being as it provides secure foundations that give youth more confidence for exploring and monitoring their social and physical context, facing new challenges, and steering clear of the many psychosocial and emotional challenges typical of puberty and emerging adulthood (Chu, Saucier, & Hafner, 2010).

Our study found support for the benefits of family activities on students’ school adjustment and showed that Rebound students reported less shared family activities at home. In general, Rebound facilities in the Netherlands offer training to improve students’ moral and social skills and reduce cognitive distortions. However, the current findings suggest that a family-centered approach, in which a guidance for parents in family routines and activities, might also benefit school adjustment among adolescents. Although limited research has been conducted on the effects of family routines on overall school adjustment, family interventions in general show positive effects on adolescents’ behavior (e.g., Gutman & Feinstein, 2010; Kirp, 2011; Stack et al., 2010). Positive parent-child interactions are basic to a healthy child development. Family based interventions that promote some level of structured, organized routines at home are likely to decrease school disengagement and antisocial behaviors among youth (Lanza & Taylor, 2010; Taylor, 1996). Future research should continue to study family routines and build and validate new interventions supporting the use of family routines as a basis for promoting healthy school adjustment.
References


