

Implementing Sports-based Positive Youth Development

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INTRODUCTION

Sports-based youth development programs can benefit children during out-of-school time. These programs use a specific sport, such as basketball, baseball, or soccer, to promote learning and life skill development (Perkins and Noam, 2007). For many young people, participating in organized sports has become a rite of passage. While a precise figure of youth sports involvement remains elusive, research shows that sports participation accounts for the largest amount of adolescents' leisure time activities (Child Trends DataBank, 2005; Larson and Verma, 1999). When properly supervised, sports can help promote positive growth. However, discrepancies within youth sport structure and implementation have been cited as main causes of the ill effects associated with participation (Danish, Taylor, and Fazio, 2004; Mahoney and Stattin, 2000). As a result, many stakeholders, including funders, organizers, parents, and participants, have called for a better approach to implementing youth sports programming.

RESEARCH TO PRACTICE POINTS

1. To maximize youth development, the organization and structure of the sports context must be intentional.
2. Developing and strengthening affective relationships are powerful results of sports participation.
3. Sports participation provides a way to learn sport- and life-based skills.
4. The organizers of youth sports programs must incorporate all aspects of players' lives.

DETAILS ON RESEARCH TO PRACTICE POINTS

To maximize youth development, the organization and structure of the sports context must be intentional.

Research suggests that safety, both physical and psychological, are the most important attributes of a quality program (Watts, Witt, and King, 2008). Safety is promoted through clear rules and expectations, positive social norms, and developmentally appropriate activities. To be positive youth development, the sports context must identify and foster specific assets young athletes need to build their capacity for succeeding despite challenges (Perkins and Noam, 2007).

Developing and strengthening affective relationships are powerful results of sport participation.

Sports participation provides a way for players to form meaningful and lasting relationships with peers and non-parent adults such as coaches. Teammates can impact a player's self-worth (Vazou, Ntoumanis, and Duda, 2006) and competence (Horn, 2004). Coaches can influence a player's enjoyment and motivation (Black and Weiss, 1992) and play an important role in psychological, social, and physical growth (Conroy and Coatsworth, 2006). Adults involved in sports organizations must be intentional about building positive relationships and providing opportunities for players to form friendships.

Sports participation provides a way to learn sport- and life-based skills.

Positive youth development practices help young people develop skills that will enable them to succeed in school, home, and community. Sports provide an interactive way to learn. Whether the skills are sport-specific or broader, organizers encourage youth to take positive risks and value self-improvement over winning. Participation on athletics teams lets players work with culturally different peers. An intentional approach can help players learn acceptance of and respect for cultural differences (Perkins and Noam, 2007).

The organizers of youth sports programs must incorporate all aspects of players' lives.

Sports-based positive youth development programs address multiple facets of players' environments. These programs also equip players with the skills needed to become healthy and contributing. Youth develop in a number of environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1992), with sport participation one element. As such, positive youth development is most effective when adults provide clear, consistent, and positive messages (Perkins and Noam, 2007; Witt and Caldwell, 2005).

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Participating in youth sports promotes positive development. Some researchers view this setting as a developmental intervention (Strean, 1995) and suggest that understanding how this context can promote positive growth is essential. However, most youth sports programs rely on volunteers to serve as coaches and organizers (Weiss and Fretwell, 2005; Wiersma and Sherman, 2005), and many of those volunteers have little or no time to receive proper training (Ewing, Seefeldt, and Brown, 1996; Huebner, Walker, and MacFarland, 2003). Therefore, researchers and practitioners must determine how to intentionally construct sports-based positive youth development programs. By creating a safe sports setting, promoting meaningful relationships, developing sport-specific and life-based skills, and including the multiple environments within a child's life, youth sport coaches and organizers can build a solid foundation of positive development in their players.

AREAS WHERE ADDITIONAL RESEARCH IS NEEDED

General sports-based positive youth development literature is limited because research has grouped all sports together rather than exploring differences such as team vs. individual, competitive vs. recreational, traditional vs. non-traditional (Holt and Jones, 2008). Further research is needed to determine if specific sports characteristics provide certain benefits or risks. Most sports-related research treats athletics as a homogeneous experience for all participants. More research is needed to tease out differences in individuals' experiences within a specific context. Learning why some athletes have negative experiences may uncover better ways to provide positive developmental opportunities for all. Finally, some research has been hampered by the omission of contextual aspects, such as the coach's competence, the use of ambiguous measurement criteria, and unreliable measurement tools (Menestrel and Perkins, 2007). Additional process-centered research is needed to discover how specific processes and elements contribute to the positive growth of players.

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES AND REFERENCES

- National Alliance for Youth Sports <http://www.nays.org>
- CoachSmart New Hampshire <http://coachsmart.org/hhsonline/coachsmart>
- The Institute for the Study of Youth Sports <http://www.educ.msu.edu/ysi>

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