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Youth Sports

Organizational leaders, coaches and parents must remember that involvement in youth sports is for the benefit and well being of our children. Any nonprofit organization that works with children has a responsibility to help prepare our youth for the many challenges in life. The term **youth sports** have been applied to any of the various athletic programs that provide a systematic sequence of practices and contests for children and youth (Seefeldt, Ewing, & Walk, 1991).

Participation in organized sports has become a common rite of childhood in the United States. In the early part of the twentieth century, agencies began sponsoring sports and recreational activities to provide wholesome leisure time pursuits, initially designed to keep kids out of trouble. Schools sponsored intramural sports programs to provide instruction in sports skills, plus an opportunity to engage in controlled, competitive activities.

Although educators, parents, child welfare workers, and leaders of agency-sponsored sports programs do not always agree about the benefits and the objectives of youth sports programs, the notion of providing wholesome, character-building activities to occupy the leisure time of children and youth, to enable them to make the transition from childhood to adulthood (Berryman, 1996), has become an accepted view.

Prior to 1954, most of the organized sports experiences for children and youth occurred within social agencies such as the YMCAs/YWCAs, Boys and Girls Clubs, and Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts (LeUnes & Nation, 1989). Since 1954, the opportunities for

youth to participate in sports have moved from social agencies and activities organized by the youth themselves to adult-organized programs.

It is clear that participation in youth sports can have many benefits for the individual and for our society in general. It is also clear that sports are a double-edge sword in that negative consequences may result if programs are not well run. Proper education of coaches and paying attention to important guidelines outlined by various professional associations are all factors that can help sports programs have optimal benefits for youth.

The mission of nonprofit youth sports programs strives to keep the fun in fundamentals. Upon walking into the Camp Lejeune youth sports building, customers are met with a sign that reads:

Welcome to Camp Lejeune Youth Sports, where kids come first, where everyone sets a good example, where everyone has fun, where everyone is supportive. (Camp Lejeune is a United States Marine Corps training facility in Jacksonville, North Carolina).

This message gets delivered to all the volunteer coaches and parents. Camp Lejeune has approximately 300 coaches that complete training through the National Youth Sports Coaches Association (NYSCA) each year. This program enforces Camp Lejeune's philosophies by teaching coaches how to create a fun and safe youth sports environment through topics like keeping players active at practice, building confidence, the role of winning in youth sports and working with parents.

At the end of the NYSCA training, coaches sign a Code of Ethics agreeing to uphold basic tenants of being an ideal coach, such as treating each player as an individual and being a role model of fair play and sportsmanship. To the staff at Camp Lejeune Youth Sports, accountability does not end when a coach signs the Code of Ethics. Rather, it is just the beginning. Volunteers are expected to

ensure a fun experience, a safe environment and promote sportsmanship and teamwork to the children entrusted to them.

Good news and bad

Youth sports organizations are popping up everywhere you look. You'll notice boys and girls from 5 to 18 years of age occupying nearly every baseball diamond, basketball court, football and soccer field, gymnasium, golf course, tennis courts, extreme skate park, driving range, ice arena, and swimming pool in sight. This enthusiasm for youth sports has produced large numbers of youth sports clubs staffed by a large number of volunteers. In the United States, there are now more than 100,000 nonprofit, all-volunteer youth sports clubs offering team competition within leagues in nearly every conceivable sports activity.

Youth sports in nonprofit organizations bring both good and bad news. The good news is that there are many opportunities available for youth to play in organized youth sports programs today. As an example, Little League baseball is a nonprofit organization, which is the largest youth baseball, and softball programming organization in the world. "There are more than 7,400 little league programs in more than 100 countries around the world providing baseball and softball opportunities for over 3 million children". (Structure of Little League, 2011)

At some time during their childhood and adolescence, nearly all children have some experience with organized sports in either community based recreation programs like Little League baseball and Pop Warner football or in nonprofit sponsored leagues and classes in Jewish Community Centers or YMCA's.

The number of children involved in youth sports has risen significantly over the last 10 to 20 years, according to Dr. Steve Carney, a professor of sport management at Drexel University in Philadelphia. (Hilgers, 2006) "In just about every sport, there's

been an increase" he says. When children were asked in a nationwide survey why they participate in sports, the top responses are to have fun with their friends, to improve their skills, to stay in shape, to play as part of a team and to do something they are good at.

There are many benefits to youth participation in sports at a Y or JCC. Children are taught teamwork and leadership skills when they participate in sports. Even at the earliest ages, children have the opportunity to learn the importance of working as a team: a long-term skill that is beneficial in sports and in life. In addition, youth sports provide children with socialization, an important component of healthy adolescent development.

In Pop Warner Football, participation has nearly doubled in the last 15 years, from about 130,000 players to 260,000 players, according to the organization. The cheerleaders, who have competitions of their own, are now 140,000 strong. Even sports like skateboarding, mountain biking and snowboarding, in which kids participate rather than compete, have grown substantially, Carney says. (Hilgers, 2006)

According to another nonprofit organization, US Youth Soccer, (www.USYouthSoccer.org) their mission is to provide a healthy activity through recreational and small-sided games programs. Their programs emphasize fun and de-emphasize winning at all costs. They believe that every child is guaranteed playing time and the game is taught in a fun and enjoyable atmosphere. US Youth Soccer is the largest member of the United States Soccer Federation, the governing body for soccer in the United States. US Youth Soccer is a nationwide body of over 600,000 volunteers and administrators and over 300,000 dedicated coaches, most of who also are volunteers. US Youth Soccer registers over 3,000,000 youth players between the ages of 5 and 19. US Youth Soccer is a nonprofit and educational organization whose mission is to foster the physical, mental and emotional growth and development of America's youth through the sport of soccer at all levels of age and

competition. They believe that it is their job to make soccer fun and instill in young players a lifelong passion for the sport.

The bad news is that about seventy percent of these youngsters quit playing by the time they turn ten, and that nearly all quit by the time they turn fifteen. When researchers ask youngsters why they quit organized youth sports, the answers are quite eye opening. The answers given most often are that practice sessions and games stopped being fun, there was too much pressure to win, and the coach played favorites or was a poor teacher.

Studies contrasting spontaneous youth play versus youth sport organized by adults indicate that children, if left to their own devices, will successfully organize, administer, and manage their own games. They will choose sides and mediate disputes. They will set their own rules. In some cases, those rules may change from game to game. But they will be rules that work for the children. Children will handicap the game to make sure it is evenly matched, interesting, and fun. Such organizational, mediating, and interpersonal skills are valuable characteristics that children are not permitted to develop because they are forced to play by the adult, supposedly, right way. (Gerdy, 2000)

Children make adjustments in their games to ensure that it is fun for everyone and that everyone participates. Their purpose in participating is, after all, to have fun. If the game is not fun, children will quit playing and, if enough quit, the game will end. The primary goal of games organized by children is to play the game. That being the case, they must work to make the game interesting and fun enough so that everyone will want to continue to play. Without adult enforced structure, rules, and expectations, there is nothing besides the children actually wanting to play the game because it is fun holding the game together. In youth leagues organized by adults, the adult imposed goal of winning replaces the goal of maximizing fun and participation. (Gerdy, 2000)

“If parents really do want their children to enjoy amateur sports, while it's wonderful to be supportive, as you should be, it's really about having your child go out and learn life lessons from the actual experience,” he said. Darrell Burnett, a California clinical psychologist who specializes in youth sports, said that sports could give kids the building blocks of self-esteem. Each parent should encourage their children to participate in youth sports regardless of their degree of success or skill level.

Youth Sport in American Culture The following six categories of youth sports programs have been defined with examples given: they are agency-sponsored programs (Little league baseball & Pop Warner football), national youth service organizations (Boys & Girls Clubs, YMC's & JCC's), club sports (fee-based gymnastics, ice-skating & swimming programs), recreation programs (sponsored by recreation departments and open to anyone), intramural programs (middle, junior high school and high school), and interscholastic programs (junior and senior high school). Of these six categories, four are nonprofit community-based and two are conducted within the schools.

Being active and playing sports for kids has to be more than winning a trophy. Victory on the court, ice or field does not necessary produce a healthy child. We need to find better ways to get kids up and moving. Providing coaches and parents with better tools to get kids engaged in play is essential. Organizations like the National Football League launched in October 2007 NFL PLAY 60 (www.nfl.com/play60), a national nonprofit youth health and fitness campaign focused on increasing the wellness of young fans by encouraging them to be active for at least 60 minutes a day. Their mission is to make the next generation of youth the most active and healthy.

The Catholic Youth Organization, (CYO) (www.cyocamphoward.org) a member agency of Catholic Charities USA in their Youth Sports Manual states, “Developing

the individual is the focus; the sport event is merely the tool”. Further the CYO manual affirms that “Winning is an important objective in sports. To not seek victory is to be a dishonest competitor, but winning must not be the only objective. Adults must help athletes understand that there is more to sports than a win/loss record. Youth must be taught that success is found in striving for victory”.

In our youngest age divisions we rewarded maximum effort and skill development. Every player participated for a significant period of time in every practice and game. There was no emphasis on winning or losing, only on participation and fun. Every child received a trophy for participating. Our goal was to ensure that every child enjoyed and appreciated their experience, learned the fundamentals, skills and rules of the game and got plenty of exercise.

As the players got older and moved up in the higher age divisions, we began to record the scores at each games but emphasis was still placed on fostering good sportsmanship and encouraging positive experiences for our kids.

Early in my professional career when I served as a youth sports director, our goal was to educate the players, coaches, parents and officials in our youth sports programs that we were in business to provide a safe and enjoyable experience for everyone. That our coaches would be ethical in their actions, and parents would be supportive and act in a responsible manner in all situations. We emphasized participation and fair play over winning. We asked that our parents and coaches serve as positive role models and encourage good sportsmanship, honesty, responsibility and beneficence.

Parents need to demonstrate good behavior and be a positive influence in supporting all children and not just their own in the program. They need to reinforce the concept that if the kids give

their maximum effort and strive for success, then there are no losers. If parents and coaches can keep winning in perspective, with the emphasis on youth coming first and winning second, nonprofit sports programs will produce youth who feel good about themselves, respect others, accept responsibilities, strive for excellence, improve skills, and have fun. If these behaviors exist, then maybe the kids will look forward to a bright future filled with positive and healthy experiences in sports. This is what all youth sports programs should strive for and be about.

Many people will agree that a solid youth sports program can be a great experience for children of all ages. Young athletes would probably state that youth sports are wholesome and fun. Youth sports are generally where many professional athletes got their start. Youth sports are also the platform where many children develop their morals and values and competitive spirit. However, youth sports are not just orange slices and sunflower seeds. Youth sports are also the place where at times parents can tarnish the purity of youth sports. There is not a year that goes by where there is not an example of a little league parent, who gets thrown off the field, or a parent at a peewee football game tackles another kid, or a passionate parent will be in conflict with an umpire. As a culture it is easy to become desensitized to this tale of violence and inappropriate behaviors from parents because it happens often and that is a problem.

What the Numbers Say About Sports Participation

According to (Seefeldt & Ewing 1996) their advice is for parents to encourage children to participate in many different sports, but always place academics first. That when possible, children should be exposed to a broad array of sports opportunities during their elementary years. In addition, youth should be exposed to sports that have potential for lifetime use. We all need to be realistic about our children's future in sports. Early education involvement in sports should emphasize instruction more than competition. The

statistics don't lie, only a select few earn a college scholarship; compete in the Olympic games or go on to play in the pros.

The National Council of Youth Sports estimates that about 41 million boys and girls play organized sports, and that number has been growing steadily. Rick Wolff, who's also the author of "Coaching Kids for Dummies," said that it's good for kids to learn how to bounce back if they strike out or get cut from a team and to talk to their coach if they don't think they're getting enough playing time. (Williams, 2006)

Of the close to 41 million kids playing youth sports, 1 in 4 middle school youth players make their high school team. The odds are 6,000 to 1 for a high school football player to make it to the

NFL and the odds are 10,000 to 1 for a high school basketball player to make it to the NBA. So, what happens to all these enthusiastic young athletes who so willingly participated at the middle school level? They had the desire, the enthusiasm, the love of the sport, enjoyed participating in practices and competing in games.

Children in grades one thru four can benefit most from games that are modified to meet their needs and abilities. Play and fun are more important to this age group than highly structured sports that emphasize the outcome rather than the process. Parents and coaches are usually the ones concerned about winning and losing. When helping a child select a sport, keep balance in mind. Encourage children to try many sports and activities when young and not to think of specializing or playing competitively until they reach middle school. Make sure a balance also occurs between adult organized activities and free playtime. Children need time to just be kids and to play with other kids without a set of rules or adult involvement. (www.ksnusa.org)

The most important decisions to make are which youth sports

organizations and which coaches are best for your child. Make sure that you take the time to find out about the league, its leaders and coaches. Better yet, get involved and volunteer to coach.

Participating in sports is a healthy way, both physically and socially, for children to channel their youthful energy in a positive direction. Make sure the children's first experience encourages them to begin a lifelong interest in physical activities and good health. (www.ksnusa.org)

In summary, parents must put children in sports venues where they can maximize their potential and, hopefully, win. If given the proper reinforcement, this attitude will carry over from organized little league baseball to a simple game of hopscotch in the driveway. Moreover, each parent needs to look at and understand their child because parents remain the greatest influence on their child's development in the early years, in all situations.

It is clear that participation in youth sports can have many benefits for the individual and for society in general. It is also clear that sports are a double-edge sword in that negative consequences may result if programs are not well run. Proper education and training of coaches, limiting the influence of overzealous parents, and paying attention to important guidelines outlined by various professional associations are all factors that can help sports programs have optimal benefits for youth.

Playing sports offers children more than just physical benefits. Sports typically help kids academically and socially as well. The benefits are the same whether or not the child actually shines at their sport. However if they really excel they will probably want to continue playing when they get older. Regular exercise increases quality of life. Children who engage in exercise are more likely to continue the practice into adulthood. If a child isn't good enough to play competitively on a school team encourage them to sign up at a recreation type league or simply encourage them to just go shoot some hoops with their friends.

Ultimately, it's up to the parents to decide what kind of youth sport experience our children will have. It can be one of fun and learning, or it can be a nightmare based on unreasonable expectations and unrealistic goals. Which one would you choose?

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