

# Sport for All - Children in American Sport 大眾體育 - 美國的少兒體育

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## Abstract

Youth sport has much to offer children and society when it is organized and conducted in the best interest of children. While more than 20 million children are involved in youth sport through sport agencies and local service organizations in the United States, educators, physicians, and psychologists have been hesitant to encourage competitive opportunities for children younger than 12. This article addresses youth sport reviewing the purpose of organized, formal sport opportunities for young children, problems associated with young children's sport as it is promoted by parents and interested laypersons, and potential modifications in sport for youth age 5—12 provided by community sponsored organizations. Studies in youth sport indicates that the handling of early sport participation by parents and coaches, rather than the participation experience itself, determines the outcome of organized youth sport experiences.

## 摘要

在美國有兩千多萬少年兒童參加地方體育服務組織和社會代理機構組織的體育活動。當教育家、醫生和心理學家還在猶豫是否應該為十二歲以下兒童提供競賽機會的時候，他們的父母和一些感興趣的外行人就一直在為此積極奔走。本文總結回顧了美國的少年體育、競賽活動的組織及組織形式的問題，以及探討在贊助團體提供的五至十二歲兒童的競賽活動中進行改進的可行性。

## Purpose of Youth Sport in America

The commonly perceived purpose of youth sport programs in the United States is that they transmit cultural values to children. These values mirror the democratic and capitalistic ideology of the United States. As stated by Eitzen and Sage (1997) and Coakley (1994), youth sport is purported to be instrumental in developing personal-social skills which lead to higher self-esteem; promoting attitudes and values corresponding to the dominant ideology including competition, sportsmanship, discipline, and authority; supporting social relationships including respect for others, teamwork, and sportsmanship; and developing culturally relevant sport skills. Congruent with this purpose many parents view organized youth sport opportunities as aiding their children in developing the qualities needed to succeed in American society.

Many sport sociologists such as Loy, Coakley, Grey and Eitzen, Kohn, McCormack and Chalip, McPerson, and Sage (Coakley, 1994) do not support that sport participation in and of itself leads to the development of particular character traits.

Likewise, McGuire & Cook, Medrick et al. Orlick Botterill, and Roberts et al (Coakley, 1994) indicate that competitive sports attract and select people with unique character traits, thus sport does not develop these traits. Yet, youth sport continues to be of major importance in the United States with only minimal efforts to control the environment of young children's sport. When the sport environment is not structured to meet the needs of young children, problems arise.

## Challenges in Youth Sport

As Coakley (1994) further indicates, many youth sport programs are widely supported while, at the same time, widely criticized. It does appear that the handling of early sport participation by parents and coaches, rather than the participation experience itself, determines the outcomes of organized youth sport experiences. When process oriented and developmental goals are established the outcomes are more beneficial for the participants. Problems arise in youth sport primarily based upon the manner in which coaches, sponsoring organizations, and parents structure the environment.

While adult supervision and organization is necessary for these programs to survive too often parents and coaches live vicariously through the children. When this happen technique, efficiency, and winning become the goal rather than the development of the children. When parents are living vicariously through youth sport they often lose perspective and engage in behavior that promotes social—norm deviance rather than cultural values. Parents who yell at the opponents, boo the officials, and try to get their child to engage in activities to take advantage of the opponent all lead to children learning contradictory values. This point was highlighted recently when an entire youth soccer association in Ohio outlawed parent and coach interaction during games for the day. Parents and coaches could not yell at the children or the officials and the children actually got to just play and enjoy the experience and loved it.

A second problem that arises in youth sport as more parents push for success is the potential for injury. As everyone pushes to be the best, training regiments become more demanding. As cited in Eitzen and Sage (1997) physicians have seen a dramatic increase in overuse in-juries among children in organized sports. Child-athletes engaged at the elite status are at greatest risk. It is still too early in their research efforts to have made conclusions, but the potential is certainly there for young people to have injuries that will prevent them from being active adults which is so important in living a healthy, active, and quality life.

Perhaps the root of many of the major problems is the “winning is the only thing” ethic. For young athletes trying to achieve elite status this ethic may be accepted, but for youth sports for all, which are designated to educate, and provide personal development, this ethic is counterproductive. When win/loss records become the basis for assigning worthiness of individuals, there is potential for devastating consequences to youth engaging in sport. Often the pressure is so intense that children decide to drop out which may mean they do miss opportunities provided by youth sport programs for personal development. Another problem is the formal organization of children’s play. Devereux (1976) indicates that children may be robbed of valuable learning experiences because formal competition undermines informal games and the ability to organize and run games themselves. Until further research is conducted, however, both formal and informal games should be encouraged as different experiences are had in each.

Promoting the Developmental Goals of Youth Sports how can the developmental goals of youth sport be accomplished? Providing opportunities where the emphasis is on personal expression, the value of participation, and upon offering everyone the opportunity to engage in sport is the true essence or grass roots, non-school youth sport. To accomplish this the ambitions adults need to be placed behind the personal-social needs or children.

Children are active and want to be involved. Structuring the sport experience to provide for maximum involvement and activity may mean altering the structure of the sport setting. Sport is competitive in nature, but especially for young children accentuating the other qualities of sport such as cooperation, self-esteem, and being part of the team may be more important. This can be accomplished by not playing miniature adult sport, but changing playing areas with fewer children playing at a time so they are more active, having larger targets so children will be more successful, and changing some rules to increase the involvement of all children. Children should rotate positions often and playing time should be regulated to ensure all children get an opportunity to play. There is the paradox of competition and cooperation, but young children should learn cooperation skills and respect for opponents as well as something about competition. Children should help opponents up when they fall, congratulate them when they make a good play, and respect them as people rather than seeing them as the enemy.

The training of coaches is another problem that can create undesirable situations in youth sport. In non-school sports volunteer coaches, often parents, conduct the programs. Often without training, these volunteers are conducting sport as they have experienced themselves. Many volunteer coaches do not understand growth and development characteristics of children physically and psychologically. They often ask children to execute skills or strategies, which they are not developmentally ready to do. There are opportunities for training through the American Coaching Effectiveness Program which helps coaches learn how to teach skills and strategies, plan effectively for the season, prepare athletes for competition, and understand the developmental needs of young people. The difficulty seems to be to require volunteer coaches to spend the time in training.

## Conclusions

Youth sport has much to offer children and society when it is organized and conducted in the best interest of children. Keeping things in perspective can make sport a rewarding experience for all. A Bill of Rights for Young Athletes (Eitzen & Sage, 1997) to provide guidance in the establishment of organized, formal youth sport programs has been formulated by a group of medical, physical education, and recreation leaders. (see Figure 1) Perhaps following these guidelines will help ensure valuable experiences for all. Perhaps as countries around the world support sport for all some of the challenges of youth sport in America can help them avoid such problems and provide valuable experiences for all youth throughout the world.

Figure 1. Bill of Rights for Young Athletes.

Bill of Rights for Young Athletes	
The right to participate in sports.	
The right to participate at a level commensurate with <b>each</b> child's maturity and <b>ability</b> .	
The right to have qualified adult leadership.	
The right to play as a child and not as an adult.	
The right to share in the leadership and decision making of their sport participation.	
The right to participate in safe and healthy environments.	
The right to proper preparation in sports.	
The right to an equal opportunity to strive for success.	
The right to be treated with dignity.	
The right to have fun in sports.	

From *Sociology of North American Sport* (p. 76-77), By D.S. Eitzen and G.H. Sage. (1997). Dubuque, IA: Brown & Benchmark.

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