



*American Alliance for
Health, Physical Education,
Recreation and Dance*



POSITION STATEMENT

Maximizing the Benefits of Youth Sport

Position

Youth sport can provide a healthy context for positive youth development. Young people report that they are more highly motivated and engaged in sports than in many other contexts (Larson & Kleiber, 1993; Weiss, 2008), and these conditions often create rich environments for personal and interpersonal development (Larson, 2000).

However, playing sports during childhood does not automatically produce benefits. Research shows that positive outcomes depend on:

1. The manner in which sports are organized.
2. What occurs in a young person's relationships with parents, peers and coaches.
3. The meaning that a young person gives to sport experiences.
4. The way a young person integrates sport experiences into other spheres of life.

Knowledge of those factors is crucial when creating a framework that maximizes the benefits of sport participation. Some of the benefits mentioned below also apply to general physical activities, as well as organized sports.

Based on research findings across multiple fields, it is the current position of the American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance (AAHPERD) that:

- Young people who play sports are likely to experience physical, psychological, academic, and social benefits, but those benefits do not occur automatically, nor do they occur in the same way for all young people who play sports.
- Positive benefits are most likely to occur when young people:
 - a. Have positive and supportive relationships with teammates, coaches and parents.
 - b. Develop physical and interpersonal skills, knowledge and competencies.
 - c. Have opportunities to make decisions about their sport participation.
 - d. Have experiences that are consistent with their particular needs and developmental levels.

Maximizing the Benefits of Youth Sport *(Cont.)*

- Coaches and other adults involved with youth sport should make life skills and positive development a priority and should implement strategies that effectively create such experiences.
- The benefits of participating in youth sport are maximized when participation:
 - a. Occurs in a safe environment.
 - b. Involves positive social norms.
 - c. Emphasizes self-improvement.
- The outcomes of playing youth sports depend on how young people perceive and give them meaning in their lives; therefore, it is essential for coaches and parents to listen to young people and help make their sport experiences positive ones.
- When coaches and parents are not in touch with the needs and experiences of young people or pursue their own agendas through youth sport, it raises the probability for outcomes such as loss of self-confidence, frustration, burnout and injuries.
- When young people perceive excessive pressure to win, they are less likely to experience positive outcomes when playing sports.

To maximize the benefits of youth sport, AAHPERD recommends that parents, teachers and coaches:

1. Encourage young people to participate in multiple sports, including those that are organized informally, rather than specializing in a single organized sport, especially before age 15 (NASPE, 2010).
2. Encourage an environment that emphasizes skill development rather than a competitive environment that focuses only on winning.
3. Remember that children are not miniature adults, and they do not see or interpret the world around them as adults do.
4. Respect and accommodate the physical and psychosocial developmental stage of young people playing sports.
5. Ensure that the goals of each youth sport program are stated clearly and are conveyed so that parents can determine whether participation is appropriate for their children.
6. Identify and discuss with young people the lessons learned through sport experiences and how they can be useful in other areas of their lives.

7. Support quality coaching education for youth sport coaches and recommend that youth sport organizations follow AAHPERD's *National Standards for Sport Coaches* (NASPE, 2006).

The most relevant and important findings from the current research are summarized here:

Research Findings on Possible Health and Physical Benefits of Youth Sport

- With regular participation in a variety of sports, children can develop and become more proficient at various sports skills (including jumping, kicking, running, throwing, etc.) if the focus is on skill mastery and development. Young people participating in sport also develop agility, coordination, endurance, flexibility, speed and strength. More specifically, young athletes develop:
 - Enhanced functioning and health of cardiorespiratory and muscular systems.
 - Improved flexibility, mobility and coordination.
 - Increased stamina and strength.
 - Increased likelihood of maintaining weight (American Academy of Pediatrics [AAP] Committee on Sports Medicine and Fitness [COSMF], 2001; Beets & Pitetti, 2005; Brown, Clark, Ewing & Malina, 1998).
- Sport provides an arena for young people to be physically active and to reduce the time spent in sedentary pursuits, such as watching TV and playing video games (AAP COSMF, 2001; Brown, et al., 1998).
- Youth sport participation can lead to lifetime participation in sports and physical activities (Beets & Pitetti, 2005; Brady, 2004; Brown, et al., 1998; Healthy People, 2010).
- Regular participation in sport and physical activity lowers the risk of diabetes, heart disease, obesity and other related diseases. Young people also tend to be more nutrition-conscious in their food choices when participating in sport (Beets & Pitetti, 2005; Brady, 2004; Brown, et al., 1998; Kawabe, Murata, Shibata, Hirose, Tsujiola & Saito, 2000).
- Girls involved in sport are less likely to become pregnant or begin smoking and have a decreased risk of developing breast cancer (Leone, Lariviere & Comtois, 2002).
- Young athletes have shown lower total cholesterol and other favorable profiles in serum lipid parameters associated with cardiovascular disease (Beets & Pitetti, 2005; Brady, 2004; Brown, et al., 1998).
- Favorable changes in and maintenance of body composition (i.e., higher percentage of fat-free mass and lower percentage of body fat) are associated with participation in youth sport (e.g., basketball, distance running, field hockey, lacrosse, gymnastics, soccer, tennis), and training activities are associated with enhanced bone mineral and

density (Bencke, Damsgaard, Saekmose, Jorgensen, Jorgensen & Klausen, 2002; COSMF, 2000; Faigenbaum, Kraemer, Blimkie, Jeffreys, Micheli, Nitka & Rowland, 2009; Ginty, Rennie, Mills, Stear Jones, & Prentice, 2005; Laing, Massoni, Nichols-Richardson, Modlesky, O'Connor & Lewis, 2002; Laing, Wilson, Modlesky, O'Connor, Hall & Lewis, 2005; Radelet, Lephart, Rubinstein & Myers, 2002; Van Langendonck, Lefevre, Claessens, Thomis, Philippaerts & Delvaux, 2003).

Research Summary: Health and Physical Benefits of Youth Sport

Participating in many sports and physical activities maximizes physiological development among young people. Growing bodies are predisposed physiologically to non-specialized physical activities; therefore, physical development and success in sport are enhanced by participating in multiple sports on a schedule that allows for periods of active rest and recuperation throughout the year. Participating in multiple sports and physical activities is more likely to enhance balanced physical development, expand skill-development opportunities and encourage sport participation that maximizes lifelong fitness and well-being. However, young people do not necessarily acquire the health and health-related fitness benefits that many assume are achieved through participating in youth sport without deliberate efforts to ensure that the amount of moderate or vigorous exercise is sufficiently maintained for each young person. Better education about what is reasonable from a health perspective also is needed. (See, for example, American Academy of Pediatrics Committee on Sports Medicine and Fitness, 2000; 2001; National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases (NIAMS, 2009: http://www.niams.nih.gov/hi/topics/childsports/child_sports.html).

Research Findings on Possible Psychological/Affective Benefits of Youth Sports

- When young people experience enjoyment and intrinsic motivation while participating in sport, they can realize gains in self-esteem (Fox, 2000); specifically, physical self-concept (Blackman, Hunet, Hilyer & Harrison, 1988).
- Through sport, young people are presented with opportunities to develop social skills, learn about teamwork and develop leadership skills (Light, 2010). Young people must learn to work together to achieve a shared goal. Leadership often is a byproduct of teamwork, but most often occurs when the adults involved in the activity foster it intentionally.
- Sport teams offer young people regular access to peers, thus providing opportunities to cultivate friendships and learn about peers from different backgrounds (Jones, Dunn, Holt, Sullivan & Bloom, 2011). Research indicates that young athletes are more likely to display pro-social values, including caring, empathy and compassion (Bailey, 2005). Young athletes also tend to endorse values surrounding positive social interactions with others, including friends and families (Jones, et al., 2011).

Maximizing the Benefits of Youth Sport (Cont.)

- Sports that require high levels of performance can provide context where young people experience strong emotions, such as anger and anxiety. Some youths report gaining insight into how to manage these emotions (Hansen, et al., 2003; Light, 2010).
- Sport provides avenues for young people to take initiative (Larson, 2000; Larson, Hanson & Moneta, 2006). Initiative has been defined as the ability to commit energy to a goal over time. When young people are intrinsically motivated and challenged by sport, they can develop important skills for working toward their goals. These skills can include the ability to develop plans, organize time and solve problems.
- Youth sport can offer a positive context for the development of identity, since youths can try out different activities in the process of establishing a sense of self (Hansen, et al., 2003; Light, 2010). Involving oneself in a sport provides opportunities to reflect on one's strengths and weaknesses and to gain a better understanding of who one is.

Research Summary: Psychological/Affective Benefits of Youth Sport

Research indicates that participating in youth sport offers a unique variety of psychological and affective benefits. When a positive environment is created, children can receive psychological and emotional benefits; however, these benefits tend to be less tangible than potential benefits in other categories.

Research Findings on Possible Intellectual/Academic Benefits of Youth Sport

- Physical activity participation is positively linked to better cognitive functioning (attention and working memory) in children (Bailey, 2006; Castelli, Hillman, Buck & Erwin, 2007); grades, test scores, school engagement and education aspirations (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Marsh & Kleitman, 2002); reduced school dropout rates (Mahoney & Cairns, 1997); and a higher likelihood of college attendance (Barber, Eccles & Stone, 2001).
- Students in athletics have been shown to perform better academically than their non-athletic peers, with specific increases in academic self-concept, locus of control, school attendance, education aspirations and time spent on homework (Fejgin, 1994; Marsh, 1992).
- Sport participation in school does not worsen academic results despite taking time away from class (Sallis, McKenzie, Kolody, Lewis, Marshall & Rosengard, 1999).
- Sport and physical activity participation carries greater benefits for high-risk youths (Mahoney, 2000; Mahoney & Cairns, 1997) and youths from low-income families (Marsh & Kleitman, 2002). Students at the highest risk of school dropout benefit the most from extracurricular activities.

- Participating in youth sport supports academic achievement in that it offers a structured schedule to assist with task completion, engenders strong perceptions of school belonging to increase motivation, and is associated with a pro-social peer group (Fredericks & Eccles, 2005). Also, increased mental alertness from the physical activity that youth sport offers helps cognitive functioning, increases blood flow to the brain and enhances one's mood (Bailey, 2006).
- The leading-crowd hypothesis — in which associating with non-deviant peers and positive academic role models motivates young people to succeed academically — also might enhance academic achievement in those who participate in youth sport, as might the use of sports to justify grades and studying because of eligibility requirements to maintain social status; therefore, avoiding being labeled a “nerd” (Broh, 2002).
- The Social Capital Model also might explain the academic benefits of sport in which athletes enjoy greater social capital and interactions with positive adult role models, as well as greater ties with peers, teachers and parents, which creates greater social control, transmission of information and resources, and more encouragement (Broh, 2002).
- Participating in multiple activities can have beneficial effects, but over-involvement can exert a negative impact on academics. Fredricks (2012) reported that being involved in two activities seems to be the threshold for positive effects of activity participation on academics.

Research Summary: Intellectual/Academic Benefits of Youth Sport

Involvement in extracurricular activities — specifically, sport — has been related to better cognitive functioning in children (attention and working memory) and greater outcomes academically, including higher grades, test scores, engagement in school, satisfaction with school, aspirations and rates for attending college, as well as lower absenteeism and dropout rates. Demonstrated in interscholastic sports mostly, the research is not causal, the mechanisms for how sport participation influences academics are not proven and few studies have accounted for self-selection bias and have not looked at the effects by developmental activity (Fredricks & Eccles, 2005).

Research Findings on Social Benefits of Youth Sport

- Playing informal, player-controlled sports provides young people with opportunities to organize group activities, resolve interpersonal conflicts, solve problems and sustain the consensus and cooperative relationships required to play competitive games (Martinek & Hellison, 1997).

Maximizing the Benefits of Youth Sport (Cont.)

- Playing organized, adult-controlled sports provides young people with opportunities to participate in relationships with adult authority figures and engage in rule-governed teamwork in the pursuit of a shared goal.
- Youth sports expand a young person's social network when they are organized to facilitate meaningful interaction with teammates and opponents.
- Young people are less likely to engage in violence off the field when they participate in sport programs that teach a philosophy of nonviolence, respect for self and others, the importance of fitness and self-control, confidence in physical skills and a sense of responsibility to self and others.
- When young people participate in local, community-sponsored youth sport, they are more likely to become engaged in civic activities as adults.
- Youth sport provides opportunities to meet adults who may become helpful mentors and advocates in a young person's life.
- Youth sport increases social awareness and sensitivity when young people have opportunities to play with peers from different social and cultural backgrounds and different levels of physical ability.

Research Summary: Social Benefits of Youth Sport

The social benefits that come with participating in youth sport depend on how youth sport experiences are organized and the kinds of relationships that are established during participation. When playing a sport expands a young person's experiences and relationships, social benefits increase. When it limits new experiences and relationships by constricting free time and relationships with peers, social benefits decrease.

For more information on effective resources for youth sport programs, please visit [AAHPERD'S Coaches Toolbox](#).

Position Statement Task Force

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