Fact Sheet

Organized Youth Sports: How Do They Affect Children and Adolescents?

Introduction

Millions of children and adolescents are involved in organized youth sports today. Children are participating in everything from Little League Baseball, Pop Warner Football, and youth hockey leagues to organized swim, soccer and T-ball teams. Parents and their children have invested a lot of money, time, and effort in these sports activities. Research has shown that adolescents in the United States participate an average of 4-6 hours per week in an organized sport, and that rate does not include summertime activity.¹

“Only the family, the school, and television, have more contact time than sports with children who are participants.”² This makes sports programs an important community phenomenon to study and be aware of because of its potential to affect children’s and adolescent’s development and socialization. Sports programs have the potential to enhance positive youth development and to serve as a vehicle for prevention interventions, some researchers say.

History³

Organized youth sports in the U.S. can be traced back to the “emergence of boy’s work groups as preventive intervention of the social welfare system”⁴ in the 1880s. The idea was to provide these youth with leisure activities (sports and other recreational activities) that would keep them out of trouble.

During the 1920s, sports became increasingly popular, and more voluntary organizations got involved in providing these kinds of activities. By the late 1930s, this involvement increased even more because educators were against providing highly competitive sports for children in schools. Organizations like the YMCA, Boy Scouts, and Boy’s Clubs also provided supervised recreation.

The first Little League baseball organization began in 1939 as a community project involving about 200 players. By 1977, Little League had 2.26 million participants. Today youth sports are common in most communities.

Pros and Cons of Organized Youth Sports

Proponents of youth sports argue that through participation “children develop desirable traits, such as cooperativeness, assertiveness, enhanced self-esteem, a sense of competence, and leadership, that they learn coping skills, develop motor coordination, and acquire healthy attitudes towards physical activity which help promoted physical fitness, besides being involved in leisure time pursuits which ‘keep them out of trouble.’”⁵ Others say that organized youth sports give children a chance to participate in peer interactions, to become part of a group outside of their family, and foster a positive sense of self.⁶

Critics, on the other hand, claim that “there is an unhealthy emphasis on winning; young children are faced with excessive physical and psychological demands; adult control and supervision of games reduce opportunities for children to make their own decisions and assume leadership roles, and the high degree of structure dampens children’s creative and spontaneous behavior and takes away the ‘fun.’”⁷ Others say that placing children in prescribed, rigid, and predetermined roles may discourage them from engaging in spontaneous play, which many
psychologists say is vital for positive psychosocial development.⁸

There are lots of opinions but limited scientific research to support the pros and cons. “Thus, how participation in organized youth sports impacts the moral, social, physical, and psychological development of the child warrants empirical examination.”⁹

**What Does Research Tells Us?**

Although some research has been done that supports the claim that structured youth activities (such as sports, hobbies, art, music, etc.) promote positive developmental outcomes, more rigorous and more extensive research needs to be done in this area, especially long-term studies that can control for a number of variables such as grade point average, socio-economic status, and academic ability.

An example of some research in the field of organized youth sports is a 1993 study of 252 nine-year-old boys who were assessed before and after participating in a season of organized soccer or baseball. The researchers found that the “children’s perceptions of their athletic and scholastic competence, physical appearance, and global self-worth increased from pre- to post-season.”¹⁰ This held true for both the boys who participated in competitive, tryout leagues and those who were involved in recreational leagues. “Although there were no differential changes by group, the results suggest that these activities at best promoted children’s psychological development, and at worst, did not decrease their self-perceptions.”¹¹

Further research will help to explore the potential benefits that youth can derive from participating in organized sports and other voluntary, structured activities. For example, research on coaching shows the “impressive payoffs that can result from a research-based, applied discipline of positive development.”¹² A 1990 study “found favorable psychological outcomes to be greater for boys in Little League Baseball whose coaches engaged in high levels of positive reinforcement for both desirable performance and effort, who responded to mistakes with encouragement and technical instructions, and who emphasized the importance of fun and personal improvement over winning.”¹³

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, researchers say that youth activities such as organized sports, hobbies, art, and music are “an invaluable laboratory for the study of processes of positive development, one that deserves much more scientific attention.”¹⁴

Future research is needed to identify the components of organized youth sports that affect youth’s perceptions of themselves. “This knowledge could then be utilized to create and ensure youth sports experiences that have the potential for promoting healthy adjustment and positive self-esteem.”¹⁵

**Endnotes**


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