

CHAPTER 11

YOUTH SPORT¹

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After reading this chapter, you should be able to:

1. Characterize the size and breadth of the youth sport industry in the United States.
2. Summarize socialization and the role of socialization agents in youth sport.
3. Outline the positive and negative effects of sport on youth.
4. Distinguish between instrumental and emotional support.
5. Identify both individual and family outcomes related to participation in youth sport.

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, we examine the issue of youth sport in the United States. We begin by placing youth sport within its social and historical context, demonstrating that youth sport is important not only in itself but as part of the sport and social systems in the United States. We then examine the process of sport entry, which is focused largely on socialization, or how children learn the values and behaviors of sport. Next, we outline the benefits of sport, exploring the supposed benefits alongside the negative outcomes associated with participation. Finally, we explore the distinct relationship of sport and the family and how each sphere influences the other.

THE SIZE AND SCOPE OF YOUTH SPORT

In this section we outline a brief history of youth sport in the United States to help establish the context in which today's youth sport system operates.

Early North American Sport

While it may be difficult to imagine, sport was not always as popular in the United States as it is today. Early European-Americans discarded most leisurely activities for “carving out a living” in this newfound territory. The Native Americans, however, had already established a sense of survival, and therefore dedicated part of their time for play, competition, and rituals for rites of passage (Dixon, & Bruening, 2011). In Canada and the United States, one such early sport was lacrosse, which was played as early as 1683 (Robidoux, 2002). And to the south in Mexico, the Mayans celebrated their own version of basketball known as “pok ta pok” (Miller & Houston, 1987). While the rules were basically a combination of basketball and soccer, the losing team not only had to experience the agony of defeat but often lost their lives as well.

The US University and Intercollegiate Sport

Even before the US became a nation, it was important that the future statespersons were educated and molded to become the leaders of the new colonies. In 1636, Harvard was given its charter, and became the first of many new colleges and universities that would educate and shape this nation into what it is today. The early universities were designed to teach the liberal arts curriculum of early European institutions; oratory, philosophy, Greek, and Latin, as well as build character through what would become known as “the collegiate way” (Rudolph, 1990). The collegiate way was an environment where the students worshiped together, dined together, shared dormitories, and attended classes together. This campus lifestyle was

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essential in developing an atmosphere of family, unity, and camaraderie. Eventually the collegiate way would come to include extracurricular activities as well (e.g., rowing, football, baseball; Rudolph, 1990).

By the early 19th century, students were competing on campus similar to fraternal and club teams. In 1852, the first intercollegiate competition was held in the form of a boat race, between Harvard and Yale on Lake Winnepesaukee, New Hampshire (Rudolph, 1990). Many other intercollegiate competitions would soon follow:

- 1859: 1st baseball game was held between Amhurst and Williams colleges in Pittsfield, Massachusetts.
- 1869: 1st football game was held between Rutgers and Princeton in New Brunswick, New Jersey.
- 1896: 1st basketball game was held between Wesleyan University and Yale in New Haven, Connecticut.

These early competitions led to increased interest in sport throughout the country, both in the educational setting, and the general community as well. It was not long before strides were made to implement organizations and clubs designed to address this new interest held by America's youth.

US Interscholastic and Community Sport

In the late 1800's and early 1900's, there was much economic difficulty, and paying jobs were difficult to find. Many city-dwelling young men were engaging in criminal activity with the large amount of free time they had on their hands. It would be 1918 before all states had compulsory school attendance laws, so up to that time many young men did not attend school. Thus, community programs were developed to give youth someplace to expend their energy that was currently being utilized to cause harm. Between 1844 and 1939, no fewer than six major programs would be developed in American communities to involve young men in constructive play and competition: the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) in 1844; the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) in 1888; Federated Boys Club, later named Boys and Girls Club of America in 1906; Police Athletic League (PAL) in 1914; Pop Warner Football in 1929; and Little League Baseball in 1939.

For those attending public education, sport was made available through the National Federation of High Schools (NFHS) in 1920. Today the NFHS represents over 18,500 schools and 11 million students involved in sport and activities (Fellmeth, 2010). The strength of these programs, both community and interscholastic, can be seen in their longevity and track record, as most of them survive and thrive over 100 years in existence.

Youth Sport Today

In 2019, according to the National Council of Youth Sports (NCYS), approximately 60 million children aged 5-18 participated in organized sports. Based on the 2014 US Census, 46.6% of boys and 36.4% of girls living in the US participated in youth sports. Of that population, 7.6 million students play sports in US high schools (Fellmeth, 2010).

State and district funding can limit interscholastic sports. Depending on the location and wealth of the district, many programs offered to the general public (e.g., swimming, tennis, water polo), may not be offered in the local schools. These types of sports may be offered, instead, through private organizations or clubs. Such club sport offerings and academies are a growing trend in the US as supplemental to or in replacement of interscholastic sport, reflecting a growing trend of privatization of sport in the US (Coakley, 2017).

The trend toward privatization mirrors the increasing trend toward early specialization in sport. Sport specialization advocates believe the sooner one starts specializing in a particular sport, the better the chances are for future success. According to Ericsson, it takes 10,000 hours of specialized training to become an

elite athlete (Ericsson et al., 1993). This amount of training for young children can only be accomplished through private organizations where there is less regulation on allowed training and competition hours. This trend toward specialization, though, has become troubling to many child development experts, who contend that early specialization is detrimental to physical, emotional, and psychological development (e.g., Côté, 1999). Such tensions are important from a sociological perspective because they highlight the underlying values of society and a general shift in sport's place as leisure vs. labor.

Exhibit 11.1 offers additional information on specialization and sport sampling.

Exhibit 11.1. Sport sampling

Since its launch in 2013, The Aspen Institute's Project Play has addressed this trend of early specialization that can place undue pressure on children and unsustainable costs on families. In order to get and keep kids active through sports, the organization has shared the benefits of multi-sport play and encouraged sport sampling. In 2015, more than 40 organizations, including national governing bodies, professional leagues, and non-profit organizations, have endorsed multi-sport play through a minimum of age 12 (Aspen Institute, 2019).

US Sport beyond Community and Interscholastic Programs

In the United States, there is no national sport policy, *per se*, as there are in other countries throughout the world. With the exception of the United States Olympic Committee (USOC), federal government funding is almost non-existent when it comes to amateur sport (Chalip et al., 1996). Private national governing bodies (NGBs) oversee the elite programs of amateur sport, and if requiring any funding from the USOC must submit participation numbers and program initiatives.

In the past 20 years, participation in and popularity of club sports in the US has dramatically increased (Gregory, 2017; Moore, 2017). In fact, club sport has grown by an estimated 55% since 2010 facilitating a \$17 billion youth sports industry (WinterGreen Research, 2018). Though these other opportunities exist (e.g., private clubs, AAU, professional developmental leagues), primarily for the major sports in the US, most paths beyond community and interscholastic team sports run through the US intercollegiate programs and their scholarships. The probability that young male athletes participating in interscholastic sports will get a scholarship to a participating National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) institution is less than 5%. Less than 0.5% of male athletes competing in interscholastic sport will be drafted by a professional team (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2011). With the enactment of 1972's Title IX, female athlete scholarship probabilities are higher, but only slightly. Thus, for most athletes in the United States, the end of community and interscholastic sports is also the end of their participation in organized sport programs.

This structure is different than that of other countries, particularly in Europe and Canada, where youth are more likely to continue participation well into adulthood through community-based sport clubs (Lim et al., 2011). Thus, the structure of youth sport impacts who plays, what they play, how long they play, and the values they learn in sport.

The structure of youth sport in the US has several implications for sociologists. First, researchers must continue to explore the social values associated with sport and how sport has changed over time with societal values. Is sport a reflection of social values, and if so, what and whose values does it reflect, particularly in the most prominent sport programs and models? What and whose values does sport not reflect? How and why does sport change? How do non-dominant values and voices find a place or expression in and through sport?

In the remainder of this chapter, we explore how children become involved in sport, the benefits they (and their parents) perceive and actually derive from sport, and some of the challenges or problems with youth

sport. We conclude with an investigation of the wider issue of sport and the family. Throughout this chapter, consider both how sport shapes society and society shapes sport through the cultural institution and expression of youth sport.

HOW DO CHILDREN BECOME INVOLVED IN SPORT?

A number of scholars have examined the ways that people enter sport, the people who influence their decisions to participate, and the messages and meanings that sport organizations utilize to help recruit new participants. Green (2005), in her model of sport development, asserted that most new participation is accomplished through sponsored recruitment, where another person introduces the sport and may even walk through the initial sport experience with the new participant. For children, parents and peers typically serve as sponsors in this recruitment process.

Entry into sport is most heavily influenced by parents' decisions (Dixon et al., 2008; Kay, 2000). Parents examine available opportunities and make decisions regarding which sports, which seasons, which leagues, what cost level, and what commitment level is appropriate for their child. In many cases, parents may seek a sport at which they enjoyed or excelled, or they may be influenced by other likeminded parents who are enrolling their children in a sport (Green, 1997). In addition to sport entry, parents are integrally involved in the sport retention process. Parents not only pay for sport, but also provide transportation, equipment, food, laundry, and other daily necessities (Dixon et al., 2008; Fredericks & Eccles, 2002). Thus, children are highly dependent on parental decisions for their sport involvement.

As children grow older, peers also become important in the sport entry and retention process whereby children choose sport based on the opportunity for social interaction with peers (which is particularly important for girls), and sometimes for social status among peer groups (Rees & Miracle, 2000). For example, high school football in Texas carries tremendous social status, and many children and families go to great lengths for the opportunity to play and be part of an elite peer circle (Bissinger, 1990).

Socialization into Sport

Children are not born knowing what sports to choose and how to behave in sport contexts. Watching young children in sport is often humorous or frustrating because they break the rules that more seasoned participants already know. For example, ask a child to take the ball "to the hole" or "to the rack" or to "post up," and chances are the child will have no idea. Ask an experienced basketball player, and she or he will most likely know exactly what to do. Similarly, the value of sport is not fixed, but malleable and related to other social and cultural norms, patterns, and expectations. Socialization is the process by which people learn the values and norms associated with a particular social sphere and activity. These may include how to act in church, how to behave and respond in school, or how to act in a sport. Socialization is an interactive social process whereby individuals are exposed to important forms of information regarding expectations and norms within a particular social setting or role; consequently, they learn to behave in accordance with these expectations and norms (Bandura, 1977; Greendorfer, 1993; Greendorfer & Bruce, 1991; Nixon, 1990; Weiss & Glenn, 1992). Socialization does not just involve exposure to social situations, but it also involves learning and internalization of roles and expectations. It is a two-way interactive process. Children do not just accept all that is taught them; instead they filter experiences and come to form their own identity, values, and behaviors.

Parents, teachers, peers, and coaches all can help in the process of socialization, with parents being the primary influence when children are young, and peers and coaches as children age (e.g., Anderssen et al., 2006; Bhalla & Weiss, 2010; Fredericks & Eccles, 2004; Greendorfer, 1977; Greendorfer & Lewko, 1978; Weiss & Barber, 1995). In this capacity, they are referred to as agents of socialization (Chao, 2012). They teach the norms and values associated with a social sphere. The values and expectations learned, especially through parental influence, have both immediate and long-term impact on a child's sport participation (Dixon et al., 2008). Through the socialization process, socializing agents convey both the value of sport

to the social circle (e.g., the family), appropriate sports and sport roles based on gender, and the norms of the sport sub-culture.

The Value of Sport

By enrolling children in sport, parents communicate that sport is a valued activity in their family and social sphere. As described earlier, this value has changed tremendously over the past 50 years. Early on, sport was viewed as a leisure activity reserved for after work was completed, or for families with means for leisure activities. Prior to World War II, sport was viewed as a valuable way to teach boys their role in society and to train them for toughness and following direction. After World War II, however, as youth were moved out of the labor force, sport was utilized as a place for keeping children (particularly boys) occupied and out of trouble after school and in the summer. Good parents, in this era, enrolled their boys in sport and provided resources for them to participate. During the 1970's and 80's, sport was seen as a valuable leisure activity that filled non-working space, and soon became valuable for both boys and girls, especially after the passage of Title IX in 1972.

Interestingly, although sport has become an accepted and even desired activity for girls, much research continues to uncover gender differences in how girls and boys are socialized into sport, the acceptability of different sports for boys and girls, and the impact of sport norms (e.g., competition) on boys' and girls' sport experiences (Brustad, 1988, 1993, 1996; Coakley & White, 1999; Dixon et al., 2008; Fredricks & Eccles, 2004; Greendorfer, 1977, 1993; Greendorfer & Lewko, 1978; McElroy, 1983; Sage, 1980; Warner & Dixon, 2011; Weiss & Glenn, 1992). While many researchers point to fun or enjoyment as the lynchpin of sport participation (Bengoechea, Streat, & Williams, 2004; Crocker, Hoar, McDonough, Kowalski, & Niefer, 2004), girls and boys also may have different drivers and experiences of fun.

Since the late 1990's participation in sport has become almost an expected part of growing up in most industrialized nations, especially among middle to upper classes. In fact, some would argue that sport has now become children's labor—not a leisure experience that they can choose to do, but something that is expected of them, and as something that is more outcome than process oriented (Brustad, 1993). In some cases, sport is also labor in the sense that it is a means to a college scholarship or a form of family income (Ryan, 1995). Parents have poured massive resources into their children's training in sport, and the children are expected to produce accordingly. This view of sport has implications not only for its inherent value within society, but also for the social, psychological, and emotional well-being of the children who participate under that premise. There is still much work to be done in this area, where social scientists need to examine the effects of sport as leisure vs. sport as labor on children, families, society, and sport systems.

Sport Sub-Culture

Socialization into the sport culture is also an important process, especially from a sport development perspective. For children to advance in their sport commitment, both they and their guardians must learn the social roles and expectations associated with their sport (Green, 2005). These are the elements of a sport subculture that “everyone knows” and can be as simple as what clothing to wear or what terms to use, or as complex as where to live and work in order to be successful in a sport. For example, “everyone knows” how a “soccer mom” is supposed to act. “Everyone knows” that Longhorns wear burnt orange while Aggies wear maroon. Terms like “freestyling” or “jibbing” come from the snowboarding subculture, whereas skateboarders utilize terms such as “grinding,” “sick,” or “carving.” People who are immersed in the subculture use these terms, wear the right clothing, and perform behaviors appropriate to the subculture. The longer they are in the subculture, the more natural they become. Learning these social norms helps immerse and identify a person in a sub-culture and demonstrates commitment to it.

From a sociological perspective, subcultural elements provide powerful cues as to how committed athletes (and their parents) behave in sport. One can understand the power of the social norms by questioning how they came to be or what happens when a person does not follow them. For example, the popular movie *A*

League of their Own examined what happens when women enter a sport space dominated by men (e.g., “There’s no crying in baseball!”). These norms are important to understand for a variety of reasons.

Sport managers often take a functionalist perspective (see Chapter 2) on such norms, using them to increase participant buy-in and commitment to sport. For example, sport marketers use sub-cultural norms to convince participants to buy particular brands of clothing or equipment because they are the right brands for that sport. Within a sport club, committed parents may socialize new parents into the norms of the sport club, thereby reproducing more committed parents (Green & Chalip, 1997).

From a critical perspective, however, it is important to examine the norms of sport, as they can lead to changes in sport patterns as well as problems and abuses. For example, Jennifer Sey’s (1995) *Chalked Up* examines the social norms of girls’ elite gymnastics. It provides a picture of girls who are undernourished and over trained so that they can show commitment to the sport at the highest level in pursuit of fulfilling Olympic dreams. Similarly, a number of scholars have examined the subcultures of girls’ fitness sports, such as diving, figure skating, and distance running. These studies reveal subcultures where eating disorders and unsafe dieting are common practice. Norms in power sports can give rise to such behaviors as performance enhancing drugs, playing injured, and verbal and emotional abuse. Consider the subculture of professional cycling: if doping becomes accepted practice (i.e., a social norm), can athletes who choose not to dope compete at the highest level?

Interestingly, rejection of social norms within a sport or sport community often gives rise to alternative sports. The rise of skateboarding, snowboarding, BMX and other extreme sports can partially be attributed to a rejection of the strict authoritarian subcultures of mainstream sports such as football, basketball, and baseball (Coakley, 2017). Athletes in these sports searched for a means to find more creativity and autonomy in their sport experience. Although some of these sports have now also become more mainstream, one can still find the bulk of athletes at an open park, un-coached, working on their craft in their own time, space, and with their own choice of people. While this is not to suggest that these sports are better than mainstream, they simply reflect how sport norms are not fixed, and how new sports and sport experiences can arise from a critical reflection, and sometimes rejection, of dominant sport values and norms.

BENEFITS OF SPORT PARTICIPATION

If so many children participate in sport, it must provide some benefits to participants. The benefits attributed to sport are numerous. In fact, reading some youth sport brochures makes one think that sport is the magic wand for all personal and social needs. In this section, we outline some of the benefits associated with youth sport participation and the empirical evidence associated therewith.

As previously suggested, sport can be a place to keep children occupied and safe. In fact, many sport and physical activity programs have been derived with this benefit in mind, and sport programs have generally been effective in achieving this goal, as they provide a supervised, structured activity in which children can participate. It is important to note, however, that while sport programs can provide a safe place for children to play, the programs themselves must be delivered in such a way as to prevent such unsafe behaviors, such as bullying, sexual harassment, emotional, physical, and psychological injury. This depends on both the design and delivery of the sport program, including training for the coaches and supervisors (Chalip, 2006; Green et al., 2008).

Sport can also provide social connections and create new social opportunities for children and their parents (Green, 2005; Green & Chalip, 1997). In fact, many parents cite this reason as one of the driving forces in their choice to initially enroll their children in sport (Green, 2005). When designed and managed well, sport can be a source of social opportunity and a significant place for building community both among participants and parents (Dixon et al., 2008; Green & Chalip, 1997; Warner & Dixon, 2011; see also Chapter 10). Some caution must be taken, however, when sport becomes a central community element for parents, as some studies have shown that parental pressure for their children to continue sport when their children

want to quit, comes from parents desire to remain a part of the social community (Lally & Kerr, 2008; Dorsch et al., 2009).

Sport participation can also be a means for learning valuable social and life skills, such as teamwork, cooperation, competitiveness, and perseverance. These skills are seen as valuable for navigating a successful educational and career experience. Again, the experience of these benefits is dependent on the design and delivery of sport programs and the evidence for learning these skills is mixed. For example, there is evidence that high school athletes, as a group, demonstrate more positive attitudes toward school and maintain higher grade point averages than do their non-athlete peers (Rees & Miracle, 2000). However, others have suggested that this relationship likely existed prior to becoming athletes, and that students who are already engaged and high performing are more likely to join a high school athletics team (Spreitzer, 1995). Clearly, more longitudinal work is needed in this area before we understand when, where, and what about sport leads to such benefits.

Sport potentially represents a means toward physical fitness and increased physical activity (Chalip, 2006). Many parents hope their children participate in sport when they are young so they will gain a lifelong love for participation, thereby enabling them to stay active throughout their lives. Based on expectancy-valence theory (Fredericks & Eccles, 2002), numerous studies have demonstrated the importance of parental and coach interpretation of the sport experience for children. Too much parental feedback and pressure causes undue stress in young athletes, and may lead to early burnout. However, appropriate amounts of encouragement and support can increase enjoyment and longevity of the athletes' involvement (Brustad, 1993; Davison et al., 2006; Morgan & Giacobbi, 2006). For example, both Dixon and colleagues (2008) and Morgan and Giacobbi's (2006) studies of American college athletes found that ongoing parental social support was important to helping them overcome obstacles and remain involved in sport.

In summary, sport can indeed provide many benefits for children and their parents; however, these benefits are not automatic, nor are they exclusive to sport. It is essential that sociologists continue to explore the ways sport is designed and implemented such that the benefits are maximized and maintained.

PROBLEMS WITH YOUTH SPORT

In addition to the rewarding benefits one might attain through youth sport participation, there are problems within youth sports, as well. The physical and mental demands that youth sport can place on a child can be overwhelming, and those pressures are exacerbated when adolescents enter the sport specialization and elite realm of youth sport (Hyman, 2012).

According to Smith and Smoll (1990), during the adolescent stage of child development, coaches and peers join parents as the most influential relationships (agents) in a young athlete's life. Therefore, the psychological, psychosocial, behavioral, and moral traits displayed by these agents within an athlete's environment can have a dramatic effect on what becomes the norm within that child's life. In addition to the psychological and psychosocial aspects of the environment of youth sport participation, there exists a physiological element. What was once play becomes work for many. Children are pushing themselves harder, and more often, than ever before. They are bigger and stronger, play more often, and often pursue the same sport over the course of the entire year. With so much emphasis put on competition and winning, it is not unusual that reasonable limits are often exceeded in the quest for socially desirable rewards. In this section, we examine some of the negative aspects of youth sport participation and their effects on children, as well as corrective measures currently in place, and being discussed, to address these issues.

Physical Injury

Sport participation involves physical exertion. As with any physical activity, the possibility of overuse or injury is not surprising. And while injury is expected, or at least considered, the rate and severity of injury in youth sports is becoming quite alarming.

As previously noted, the NCYS approximates that 60,000,000 children aged 5-18 participate in organized sports. In 2013, 1.24 million children – 1 child every 25 seconds – were seen in emergency rooms for injuries related to 14 commonly played sports (Safe Kids, 2015). An estimated 395,274 high school athletes sustained concussions from 2005-2008 (Safe Kids, 2015). While one would think the majority of injuries can be attributed to what are considered contact sports (e.g., football, hockey, basketball), this is an incorrect assumption. Most childhood injuries come from bicycling, followed by basketball, football, soccer, baseball, softball, and roller sports. Here are some more statistics from the Safe Kids (2015) report:

- More than 2.6 million children ages 19 and under are seen in emergency departments for injuries related to sports and recreation each year.
- Most sport-related injuries (62%) happen during practice.
- Girls sustain a higher rate of concussions than boys in high school sports played by both boys and girls.
- One in three children who play a team sport is injured seriously enough to miss practice or games.

While there has been much recent focus on major acute injuries such as concussions or ACL tears, an increasing amount of injuries occur from overuse. Children are often playing sport year-round, and particularly specializing in a sport that requires repetitive motion (e.g., pitching in baseball). This repeated patterning, in particular, can lead to inflammation and/or injury. In fact, approximately 50% of injuries in pediatric sport medicine can be attributed to overuse (Brenner, 2007).

Cheating

In 2001, Danny Almonte pitched a perfect game during the Little League World Series and led his Bronx, New York, team to the semi-finals. Almonte had 46 strike-outs and only allowed 3 hits—feats that are quite remarkable for a 12-year-old. The only problem was, Almonte was 14 not 12. His father had given the league officials a false birth certificate so he could dominate in a younger age group. Ten years later, with a 90 mph fastball, his coach felt the incident 10 years earlier is the only thing keeping him out of the professional ranks (King-White, 2010).

Cheating is nothing new, regardless of the level of play. It can take place in many ways: altering scores, results, or grades; enhancing one's body or equipment; or deceiving regulators and official, among others. While many advocate that sport is valuable for teaching life lessons, such as teamwork and cooperation, others have suggested that the performance ethic in today's youth sport programs just as likely leads to deviance and cheating in an effort to receive social rewards (Coakley, 2017).

In the increasingly competitive atmosphere of youth sports, gaining an advantage on an opponent is critical for winning. Athletes can gain such an advantage through better training, better diet, watching more film, or increased deliberate practice. In many cases, however, these techniques are not as effective or efficient as parents, athletes, or coaches deem them to be. Thus, additional steps are taken which may cross ethical or legal boundaries. For example, middle and high school athletes, particularly boys, may utilize illegal steroids to gain a competitive advantage. Interestingly, after usage rates peaked in the early 2000's, due to educational campaigns and stricter testing policies, steroid use among youth has declined considerably. In 2018, annual prevalence rates were 0.6%, 0.8%, and 1.4% for boys in grades 8, 10, and 12, compared with 0.6%, 0.5%, and 0.5% for girls (down by about two thirds among 8th and 10th graders, and about six tenths among 12th graders; Johnston et al., 2018).

Within ethical and socially accepted norms, cheating may be blatant and easily recognized. Other times it is not so easy to distinguish, as norms and values change both within and between sport experiences. When does strategy, and technique in coaching, cross the line to become cheating?

From a sociological perspective, one must examine the social norms within society that have led to deviant behavior within sport. What are the contingencies and social rewards within American society that have

led to this behavior? One must also examine the sub-cultures within a particular sport to understand the unique reward structures and patterns that shape social values and behaviors within that context. What may be viewed as deviant in mainstream society (e.g., doping) may be accepted practice within a sport culture. Thus, in understanding and controlling cheating, one must first understand the underlying values associated with sport that rewards or condemns such behavior.

Deviant Behavior

What constitutes bad behavior and abuse? Deviant behavior is difficult to define and govern because it is relative – deviance to one person is acceptable to another. This difficulty in defining deviance is exemplified in the obscenity case of *Jacobellis v. Ohio*. In this case, Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart wrote, “I shall not today attempt further to define [obscenity]; and perhaps I could never succeed in intelligibly doing so. But I know it when I see it...” (NetSafekids, 2003). Such is the case with deviant behaviors experienced within youth sport throughout the world: we know it when we see it. Within sport it is important to understand agreed upon norms that help establish acceptable and unacceptable behavior (see also Chapter 9).

Deviant behavior in sport extends from athletes to parents and coaches who are being fined, arrested, and barred from future attendance. In fact, referees and umpires in some states are now required to carry health insurance because of the risk they are exposed to at youth games. Athletes can also be exposed to abuses from coaches and training staff. Beginning in 2016, the sexual abuse investigation into USA Gymnastics revealed hundreds of female athletes who were sexually assaulted over the past two decades by gym owners, coaches, and staff working for gymnastics programs across the country. Particularly, longtime USA Gymnastics national team doctor Larry Nassar’s trial became one of the biggest sexual abuse scandals in sports history.

Parents, in particular, have become a major source of problems at youth sport activities. Parents have assaulted opposing players, other players, coaches, officials, and even their own child. One incident ended up with a father of a youth hockey player being arrested, charged, and convicted of murder of another player’s father (Rimer, 2002). In another incident, one mother hired an assassin to kill the mother of another cheerleader that had beaten-out her daughter for the opportunity to be on the cheerleading squad (Swartz & Lindem, 1991). Such incidents, and many more minor ones, cause one to question the premier place of youth sport in children’s lives and the social status associated with sport, particularly within many American schools.

While deviant behavior is not limited to parents, it is important to recognize the role of parents (and coaches) in the socialization process. Sport may be utilized to teach many lessons about values and behavior. Understanding the social rewards and sanctions tied to sport participation, especially from a parent’s perspective, can help uncover both problems and solutions for deviance in youth sports.

Adolescent Dropout and Burnout

Children frequently note they play sports to have fun. In 2014, 9 of 10 children said “fun” was the main reason they participate (Visek et al., 2015). Likewise, when asked why they left sport participation, most respondents will answer “it’s not fun anymore.” As they age into adolescence, the reasons for remaining in sport become “improve my skills,” “competition,” “associate with friends,” while the reasons for withdrawal are “had other things to do,” “didn’t like the coach,” and “not enough playing time” (Butcher et al., 2002). Depending on the level of sport children soon become aware of the level of expectations and pressures at their particular level. Accepting or rejecting those expectations and pressures can help determine whether an athlete stays in competitive sport or withdraws (Brustad, 1993; Davison et al., 2006; Dixon et al., 2008; Morgan & Giacobbi, 2006).

Researchers have determined and explained that there is a distinct difference between dropout and burnout. First, dropout is usually associated with casual team or individual sport participation. Burnout on the other hand, is always associated with elite-level athletics and upper level participation. “Dropout occurs when

fairly high outcomes are exceeded by still higher alternatives” (Schmidt & Stein, 1991, p. 256), while burn-out “results from an increase in stress-induced costs” (Smith, 1986, p. 39). Many have suggested that burn-out is becoming increasingly common in youth sport, and at younger and younger ages, prompting examination of the policies within sport organization and sport governance.

SPORT AND THE FAMILY

As outlined in this chapter, youth sport is tied inexorably to children’s families. Thus, we conclude with examination of the relationship between sport and the family, with the goal of examining how two important social spheres shape and impact each other within the broader society.

The relationship between youth sport and the family is a reciprocal one. Families and their type and level of support impact the youth sport experience and variables related to the youth sport experience impact the family. Families support youth sport through a variety of resources, and play a vital role in participant commitment to sport. Likewise, the structure and implementation of the youth sport programs are very influential in terms of how the youth sport experience impacts the family.

Family Support

Families support youth sport participants in a variety of ways. Some examples include providing financial resources or playing an emotionally supportive role (Newhouse-Bailey, Dixon, & Warner, 2015). Without proper family support, athletes are less likely to be engaged and more likely to have a negative youth sport experience (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2008).

Instrumental Support

One way that families support youth sport is to provide the time and money to play—this is called instrumental support (Dixon et al., 2008; Kay, 2000; Wiersma & Fifer, 2008). The financial requirements vary depending on what type of youth sport league the child is enrolled in, but in a qualitative study with 20 families, Kay (2000) found that the number one cause of ending a sport experience was financial demands. When children begin to specialize in one sport and begin to focus on skill development, the costs of the sport increases dramatically (Côté, 1999). These costs may include league fees, equipment, private lessons, clinics, travel expenses and many others (Côté, 1999).

In addition to the instrumental support of financial means that families provide, they also must make logistical arrangements to accommodate the demands of the league or organization. This includes transportation, scheduling, and arrangements within the family as to who provides transportation, attends practices, attends games, and what role each family member plays in getting the participant ready for his or her activity. The time demand placed on the family has also been referred to as an alteration of family activity patterns (Kay, 2000). Families change work schedules, vacations, and other plans in order to provide enough time to allow the child to participate (Kay, 2000). One of the biggest demands for time that youth sport places on the family is that of deliberate practice. In order for children to reach an elite level for the sport in which she or he is enrolled, families must provide transportation to and from practice, which is often held three or four nights a week (Thompson, 1999; Ericsson et al., 1993).

Emotional Support

In addition to providing instrumental support in the form of time and money, families also provide emotional support to participants (Wiersma & Fifer, 2008). These resources contribute to the athlete’s well-being and affect her or his level of engagement with the team (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2008). Emotional support can appear in many forms, from post- or pre-game talks, cheering from the sideline or simply allowing an athlete to have time alone following a loss. Research has shown that, in order for the athlete to have a positive experience, perceived emotional support by the athlete is critical (Wiersma & Fifer, 2008). Kay (2000) also linked emotional support with talent development, as elite athletes cited emotional support from the family as a key factor helping them stay motivated to attend practices and maintain a positive outlook toward sport.

Individual and Family Outcomes

As the sport experience will differ for each participant and families vary in how they are structured and the resources available, it is important to understand the impact of youth sport on individual members of the family and the family unit as a whole.

Individual

Individual sport-related outcomes for family members may be positive or negative depending on the family and sport variables present. Participants may see an increase in self-esteem, the development of persistence, and gain social skills (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2005). On the other side, participants who have a negative youth sport experience may see increased levels of stress and may see a decrease in self-esteem (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2008; Kay, 2000). In one study, the authors found a direct link between athletic performance and emotions of the participants (Kay, 2000). Those who experienced high levels of athletic performance reached levels of emotional highs, and those who had low levels of athletic performance experienced emotional lows. Beyond sport variables that impact individual outcomes, some athletes are subject to high levels of stress in the form of parental and coach pressure (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2008). Oftentimes when athletes perceive high levels of pressure, they suffer from burnout and are more likely to cease participation. Some athletes participate at levels that are not safe for their age, and as many as 21.5 % of athletes have been asked to participate while injured (Engh, 1999).

Given the large amount of family resources that are needed to facilitate participation, family members who do not participate are also impacted by sport. Some positive benefits include an increased sense of pride for the participant's experience or the addition of more instances of socialization with other individuals (Kay, 2000). Some potential negative impacts include resentment or jealousy on behalf of a sibling (Côté, 1999). In addition, due to lack of time and financial means, some families are not able to partake in additional extracurricular activities (Côté, 1999).

Family

While little research has examined the family outcomes from participation in youth sport, it is fair to assume that families may also experience positive or negative outcomes. Potential positive outcomes may include increased closeness or improved family communication (Zabriskie & McCormick, 2001).

Potential negative family impacts include depletion of resources and a conflict of family values with the values of the sport league (Côté, 1999). A study that examined the impact on mothers of elite tennis players found that they felt the entire family suffered burnout like symptoms from the time demands placed on the family (Kay, 1999). Parents have also been shown to have lower levels of physical activity as a result of their children's participation (Dixon, 2009; Thompson, 1999).

In sum, while having a child participate in youth sport may have many positive benefits on the family and the participant, there are also opportunities in which negative outcomes may occur. Yet, despite the negative outcomes for the family, families are still making a series of trade-offs to enroll in youth sport for the benefit of their child's skill development (Newhouse-Bailey et al., 2015). It is important that families seek out youth sport opportunities that are within their financial means and that are a good fit with family values.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

In this chapter, we examined youth sport issues in the US. We began by placing youth sport within its social and historical context, illustrating its status in broader society. We also examined socialization, or how children learn the values and behaviors of sport, followed by a discussion of sport outcomes, including the benefits and shortcomings associated with participation. Finally, we examined the distinct relationship of sport and the family and how each sphere influences the other.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What can be done to create, and maintain, a friendly and inviting atmosphere for youth sports?
2. Take into consideration the behaviors of coaches, spectators, parents, and participants. What can be done to prevent negative behaviors and encourage positive ones?
3. Previous researchers have stated that, up to 70% of youth sport participants drop out of participation before their thirteenth birthday. What changes, or accommodations, would you make to help retain these children in sports?
4. How do you feel about the suggestion that score should not be kept in youth sports?
5. Is sponsorship of youth (specifically interscholastic) sport a good thing, especially in light of the economic woes being faced by many public school systems?

RECOMMENDED READINGS

- Sey, J. (2008). *Chalked up: Inside elite gymnastics' merciless coaching, overzealous parents, eating disorders, and elusive Olympic dreams*. New York: Harper Collins. (An excellent biographical examination of the lives and social worlds of gymnasts from the 1986 national gymnastics champion and seven-time U.S. National team member. In particular, Sey examines the parental, coach, and social pressures placed on girls at such a young age and the choices the girls make in the quest for Olympic and World status.)
- Côté, J. (1999). The influence of the family on the development of sport. *The Sport Psychologist*, 13, 395-417. (Cote focuses on the influence that the family has on the development of sport and the different roles the family plays in the different stages of the youth sport continuum, from the early or sampling years, all the way to the high school athlete in the specialization years.)

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