

# Study: Parents are investing more in youth sports than ever before

Ohio State University

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Parents, it is not just your imagination – you are spending more time, money and resources on your kids' sports activities than moms and dads from previous generations.

A new nationwide study found that these trends are particularly pronounced for those parents who are highly educated, those immersed in sports cultures and those whose kids are highly committed to sports activities.

“Our findings suggest that recent changes in youth sport and parenting cultures have prompted parents to invest more time and money in their children's athletic activities.”

*Chris Knoester, lead author of the study and professor of sociology, The Ohio State University*

"Since the 1980s, supporting a child's athletic development has appeared to have required levels – or at least felt pressures – of involvement not demanded of parents in previous generations."

Knoester conducted the study with Chris Bjork, professor of education at Vassar College. The research was published online recently in the journal *Leisure/Loisir*.

This study is one of the first to provide evidence of what parents have been talking about with each other for years, Bjork said.

"We've heard these stories about how parents are spending so much time going to their kids' athletic events, spending more money, going all in. But it wasn't clear if these were just stories," Bjork said.

"Now we have some empirical evidence that parents aren't wrong about this. Things have changed."

The study used survey data on 3,993 adults who participated in the National Sports and Society Survey (NSASS), sponsored by Ohio State's Sports and

Society Initiative. Those surveyed volunteered to participate through the American Population Panel, run by Ohio State's Center for Human Resource Research. Participants, who came from all 50 states, answered the survey online between the fall of 2018 and spring of 2019.

Participants were asked questions about how often their parents attended their athletic events (on a scale from "never" to "every day or nearly every day"), how much they supported their sports participation through coaching, providing transportation, etc. (from "never" to "every day or nearly every day") and how much money their parents spent on their sports participation (from "none" to "a lot"), in a typical year, while they were growing up.

Respondents were born beginning in the 1950s through the 1990s, and were 21 years or older when surveyed, so this study essentially covered youth sport experiences from the 1960s through about 2015.

Results showed that participants from nearly every generation who had better-educated parents said their moms and dads attended more sporting events than did those with lower levels of education. But that difference increased over time.

For those born in the 1950s, most participants said their parents attended their sporting events on average a few times a year, in a typical year, while they were growing up.

But for those born in the 1990s, it was closer to an average of once a month for those with lower levels of education up to about once a week for those whose parents had a college degree.

Families who were most immersed in sports culture showed a slight increase in parental sports attendance over generations, but of course they started at a much higher level and didn't have as much room to rise. They were already attending more than once a week for their children born in the 1950s and rose to nearly every day for those children born in the 1990s.

Similar generational trends were found in how much parents supported sports participation and how much they spent on sporting activities.

Most participants throughout the generations said their parents only spent "a little bit" of money for them to play sports in a typical year. But the youngest generations, especially those from families of higher socioeconomic (SES) status, were more likely to say their families spent "some" on sports for them.

Respondents who were highly immersed in sports culture reported that their parents spent "quite a bit," in a typical year.

Many of the changes found in the study seemed to accelerate beginning for children born in the 1980s and continuing through the 1990s, said Bjork, who is co-author of the book *More Than Just a Game: How the Youth Sports Industry Is Changing the Way We Parent and What to Do About It*.

This corresponded with societal shifts in parenting and an emphasis on "intensive parenting."

"There's been this intensification of parenting over the past 50 years or so that has seen a shift of parents from casual supporters to managers of their kids' extracurricular lives," Bjork said.

Parents have done this in part because schools have cut back on how much they spend on sports and higher SES families have put more resources into helping their kids succeed in sports.

"Parents see this as a way to enhance their kids' resumes as they are applying for college or trying to get a job," Knoester said.

"It has been this convergence of an increased emphasis on intensive parenting, reduced public support for sports participation and a stark rise in a mostly privatized youth sports industry. It has all led to higher levels of parents' involvement in their children's sports participation, especially among higher SES families."

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**Source:**

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**Journal reference:**

Knoester, C., & Bjork, C. (2025). Parental involvement in youth sports: historical trends and links to generational, socioeconomic status, sport culture, and youth sport commitment contexts. *Leisure/Loisir*. doi.org/10.1080/14927713.2025.2503183.