

The Benefits of Youth Sports in Youth Ages 6 to 18

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Youth sports play a major role in youth development, especially in areas of physical, social, academic, and emotional development. As stated by Nery et al. (2023) “The exploration of the surrounding environment by children requires movement, which is a key element in child development.” This exploration is key to learning how to function in today's complex and confusing world. Participating in sports at a young age helps one develop the life skills necessary to navigate the world, and maintain one's own health. An article by the National Council of Youth Sports (2019) states that “when children head out to the field for organized sports, they are not just promoting physical fitness and ‘letting off steam.’ They are laying the groundwork for lifelong fitness habits.” This emphasizes that participation in youth sports at young ages can create helpful and meaningful habits for one's future and ensure positive health. I argue that, while there are risks and dangers in youth sports, especially in terms of burnout, stress, and overuse injuries, the overall effect is beneficial. In this paper, I intend to show that these benefits outweigh the risks by looking at the physical, emotional, social, and academic aspects as well as possible risks that sports have as the youth grow up.

Background

In the United States, 53.8% of youth participate in some form of organized sport (USA Facts, 2024). Youth sports includes a large variety of sports, however, in the United States, the most common sports for ages 6-18 are basketball, baseball, soccer, and tennis (*U.S. regular sport participation numbers 2024*). These sports can be categorized into organized and competitive sports, or recreational and club sports. Organized sports are focused around improvement, competition, and success, and are usually more intensive and require more time,

while recreational sports are focused around enjoyment and physical activity. In this paper, I will focus on organized sports.

Physical Benefits

Youth sports offer many physical benefits, including lowered risk for cancer and obesity, and increased strength. The University of San Diego (2024) lists many benefits of youth sports, some being “Lower risk of future illness, including heart disease, cancer, stroke, and diabetes,” and “Better development of bones, muscles, ligaments, and tendons.” All of these benefits can help throughout life, keeping youth healthy and able to continue playing the sport they love.

Keeping Fit

One of the most obvious benefits of youth sports is fitness. In the United States, there is an obesity epidemic occurring, with a 19.7% obesity rate among children. By contrast, in the year 1999, the children's obesity rate was 14.7%, and 5% in 1970. (University of San Diego, 2024; Tsoi et al., 2022; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021) This high obesity rate emphasizes the need for parents to get involved and help youth be more active in today's world of technology. Youth sports help provide a fun and enriching outlet to burn calories and help against this epidemic. Along with this, youth sports help keep children working hard and moving throughout the day, instead of staying dormant at home. After continued participation in organized sports, athletes build strength and improve endurance, allowing for prolonged activity, and better movement as they grow up (Porter, 2024).

Reducing Illness

More than just keeping fit, sports from a young age help to build and grow the immune system. In 2010, the Center for Disease Control released a research study that found a positive

correlation between exercise and “decreased risk of heart disease and diabetes, improved weight control, and less psychologic dysfunction” (Merkel, 2013). Regular activity helps the cardiovascular system and strengthens it during this critical time for development in youth. Along with this, the CDC states the improved psychological dysfunction, which suggests that activity reduces stress, anxiety, and depression. The National Council of Youth Sports (2019) emphasizes this when they state that “physical activity releases naturally uplifting endorphins, reduces the stress hormone cortisol, and stimulates norepinephrine, which improves mood.”

Long-lasting Habits

While keeping fit helps at the moment, involving youth in sports at young ages can help them develop positive habits of exercise and activity that will last with them throughout their entire life. A study done by a group of researchers for Pediatric Health Science states that “children who participated in youth sports between the ages of nine to 18 were five to six times more likely to be physically active as adults” (Telama et al., 2006). Having these habits started and settled in at a young age helps to maintain activity levels until adulthood and further, creating lifelong habits that will help youth keep fit and healthy all their life.

Negative Effects

While youth sports are primarily physically beneficial for youth, it is important to acknowledge the risks associated as well. Some of the major risks of youth sports are burnout and overuse injury. Burnout is a term that describes chronic stress from a sport that results in stopping participation in the sport when it was previously enjoyable. Overuse injury is repeatedly pushing one’s body to its limits without allowing it to recover between each session. This occurs often in organized sports, as the times to practice and compete are more concrete than they are in

recreational sports. Research shows that those that specialized in a sport as a youth “withdrew from their sport either due to injury or burnout” (DiFiori, 2014). This suggests that those that enroll their children in a youth sport that they enjoy, or hope to use as a career, are more likely to withdraw from the sport due to burnout or overuse injury. Overuse injuries are particularly dangerous, as some sports report as high as a 68% injury rate.

Prevention and Mitigation

Although these risks are valid concerns, there are actions that can be taken by coaches and parents to mitigate the effects and chances that they occur. The American Academy of Pediatrics (Brenner et al. 2024) suggests many methods to prevent the effects of burnout and overuse injury. Some of these interventions include “autonomy and intrinsic motivation” in the sport, and “focusing on wellness and teaching athletes to listen to their bodies.” This suggests that, even though these concerns are there and are important to note, given the right precautions, we are able to mitigate and remove their concern, presenting only the benefits that come with youth sports.

Mental and Emotional Health

Beyond the physical benefits that youth sports provide, they also provide many benefits for mental and emotional health, including reducing stress, improving self-esteem, better self-perception, and stabilizing mood. According to the Aspen Institute (n.d.), “children...who are physically active reported more excitement, happiness and motivation, and those who are inactive reported greater nervousness, anxiety, worry and depression.” This stark contrast in mood between those that are active and those that are not displays this importance of positive

coping mechanisms. By engaging in sports, youth gain and learn important outlets for emotions, which help them keep calm, happy, and resilient.

Chemical Releases

Sports help alleviate stress through the release of endorphins and serotonin during physical activity. An article by the National Council of Youth Sports (2019) explains that “physical activity releases naturally uplifting endorphins, reduces the stress hormone cortisol, and stimulates norepinephrine, which improves mood.” As participation in sports stimulates the release of norepinephrine, a hormone that controls attentiveness, and reduces cortisol levels, the stress hormone, youth are able to keep better control on a hormonal balance, which results in better well-being and focus.

The stimulus of norepinephrine is also important. Norepinephrine is a chemical that controls alertness and attention, which helps with cognitive function. This is especially important for youth that struggle with attention. The boost offered by norepinephrine can help a youth’s capability and control both during the sport and outside of the sport, such as in academics and social aspects. When children feel in control and capable, they are more likely to approach the problems they face with confidence and persistence.

This attention and control is especially beneficial for those that struggle from mental illnesses that affect attention, such as ADHD, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder. Pagani et al. (2020) explains how this exercise helps those with ADHD by stating that “exercise promotes beneficial changes in neurotransmitter levels, neurogenesis, cerebral capillary growth, and increases in tissue volume...promot[ing] a propensity for improved emotional and attentional regulation in children with ADHD.” People with ADHD have a lower neurotrophic level, a

molecule that controls the growth and development of the brain. This means that the accelerated development offered by exercise and sports is critical for developing youth with ADHD.

Emotional Stressors and Risks

It is critical to note the mental and emotional stressors that also come with competitive sports. As organized and competitive sports are focused around competition, improvement, and success, there is a lot of pressure put on the youth. At a young age, this pressure can cause some youth to develop mental illnesses such as depression and anxiety, which they can take with them through their entire life. Difiori et al. (2014) expresses this in his research article about overuse and burnout risks with youth sports, stating that “Unrealistic expectations that cause children and adolescents to feel as if they are not making progress in their sport... may lose self-esteem and withdraw from the sport.” This goes to show that these expectations and pressures put on children can cause issues, even within the sport itself, which results in a vicious cycle of self-hatred and burnout.

However, these stressors are not isolated or directly connected to youth sports. These unrealistic expectations come from all aspects of life. Moreover, in youth sport, action can be taken to remove the stress that comes with it. A first-hand interview with a head coach from the California Youth Soccer Association (Dewazien, 2018) explains how coaches can help make soccer more enjoyable and less stressful for youth by focusing more on the enjoyment of the sport rather than the competitive aspects. He states that “Don’t take anything too serious but the most important thing would be to make sure the kids are happy and having fun...It’s our job to bring out that potential in them through practice, hard work, and dedication.” This goes to show

that, especially in youth sports, a good coach is able to encourage their players to have fun and promote the benefits of sports, rather than making it a stressful environment.

Relationships and Social Life

Similarly, as sports help an individual's mental health, youth sports are also great opportunities for one to develop meaningful relationships with others. Sports allow them to work together, build trust, and understand ways to communicate effectively. The University of San Diego (2024) states this well, explaining how “team sports require cooperation with others in order to achieve a mutual goal. This helps... learn the type of bonding and team-building skills that will be necessary throughout their whole lives.” As youth learn to work together, they build skills to help them throughout life, especially in careers where they work together as teams.

These are the types of skills that employers look for in potential candidates, and will help today's youth enter the working force when they grow up. This is especially prevalent in today's organizations when we look at the background of the people that developed them. An article by Jonathan Rhodes (2024) explains that “80 percent of Fortune 500 executives and 94 percent of C-suite women were collegiate athletes.” This staggering percent of student athletes that became executives shows how the skills developed through the sport that they played helped them keep focus and stay resilient as they pursued their goals.

Youth sports not only help develop the critical skills that youth need in the future, but also give the youth an environment to share and connect with others of similar interests and hobbies. The United Nations expresses the importance of this environment through stating how “sport[s] often provide safe environments at the grassroots and community levels, at which participants are brought together in the pursuit of common goals and interests” (Aspen Institute,

n.d.). This suggests that sports can help bring people together and mend the gaps that might form between youth of different backgrounds.

These communities also foster an environment that can provide life lessons, including respectfulness, positive communication, kindness, and helpfulness. It can also offer various coping skills, discipline, and the ability to work with a team, which will carry over beyond the sport itself, and into all aspects of life (Merkel, 2013). This thought process of including others in one's considerations and being kind is fostered from the sense of community and working together that is created through youth sports.

However, it is important to note the level of inclusivity that sports offer. With the availability and competitiveness of youth sports, division also occurs, and creates social factions, or groups, that are exclusionary to those outside the sport. Kroshus et al. (2021) explains this well when they talk about how “in communities characterized by low-income residents, there tend to be fewer options for sport participation as compared to higher resource communities, and the built environment is often less conducive to outdoor exercise or free-play.” This suggests that different youth from different socioeconomic classes may feel excluded from sports. This exclusion can lead to feelings of loneliness and isolation, causing long-term impacts such as lowered self-esteem and feelings of hatred and resentment.

These socioeconomic class disparities create issues in both individual and societal levels. On individual levels, this disparity creates differences between youth, and can create conflict on a day-to-day basis. On a societal level, advanced sports can lead to scholarships to education, where, when a youth cannot afford or support the participation within a sport, they do not have the same opportunity. This is highlighted by Kroshus et al., as “lower income parents were the

most likely to view keeping their child out of trouble, and the potential for a college athletics scholarship, as benefits of sport.” This study emphasizes lower income families are less likely to have the opportunity of receiving these scholarships, which further hinders them as it makes higher education more of a difficulty to attain.

Academics and Cognitive development

Youth sports provide a positive influence on a youths academic performance and cognitive activity. The University of San Diego (2024) suggests that “participation in athletics during one’s school years leads to greater success in academics and beyond.” This shows that a youths enthusiasm and participation in a sport is connected with their academic performance. When youth participate in sports, they keep their brains active as they have to think about the game at hand. Jeff Porter (2024) at Eventpipe explains the connection between sports and activity to academic and cognitive improvement when he states that “regular physical activity has been associated with improved memory, attention and problem-solving skills.” This association helps them attain, recall, and apply the concepts and information they learn in school.

The relationship between academic success and sports participation is not only positive, showing that participation improves academic success, but is also dose-dependent. Specifically, this means that the odds that one's academic performance increases with sports is increased with each team or sport that the youth participates in. A study done by Frontiers in Public Health (Chen et al. 2021) explains that “compared with study participants with no participation in any sports teams, participating in one, two, three or more teams were more likely to self report better academic performance (1 teams: odds ratio [OR] = 1.48; two teams: OR = 2.34; three or more =

2.72)." The clear positive connection between youth sports and academic performance emphasizes the benefits of participation in sports, especially in multiple sports.

In contrast, youth that participated in no sports were not only no more likely to excel in academics, but also missed all of the cognitive development that is presented through youth sports. Team sports are valuable in providing lessons in time-management, prioritizing, and discipline, which are all fundamental skills needed to excel in academics. A column in the Ithaca Times paper (Lawrence, 2017) expresses first-hand experience of these benefits when the author states, "I have interviewed many kids whose grade-point averages are actually higher during their sports season, as they have learned to lock in, stay focused and be very efficient with their time." This observation emphasizes how participation in youth sports forces youth to develop these skills. This absence of participation removes that opportunity for the youth to develop those skills, increasing the chances that they are never developed, and greatly hindering future performance in academics.

Although sports help increase the productivity and attentiveness of youth in school, grades are often used as a minimum for sports, which creates extra pressure on any youth participating in school-supported sports. Chen et al. (2021), explore these issues when they state that "maintaining sport participation by adolescents is a challenging matter and this could be a barrier for adolescents to gain more physical, mental and social benefits." This explains how the stresses put on adolescents is a barrier and a pressure that actively pushes them to avoid and to drop sports. This also explains why these pressures can sometimes cause more mental illnesses to develop such as panic disorder and generalized anxiety disorder.

Overall, youth sports offer an undeniable benefit to the youth of this generation. While it is necessary to acknowledge the risks, such as burnout and overuse injury, the benefits far outweigh the potential drawbacks and risks involved with youth participation. Along with this, all of these risks are able to be mitigated by the right action on behalf of the parents or the coaches of the youth. Good coaching views and strategies can help reinforce the enjoyment of the sport as a whole, and furthermore increase benefits of participation in a youth sport. These benefits include increased academic ability and cognitive development, and the opportunity for youth to develop an environment and community in which they can socialize, connect, and share interests with one another. Along with this, enrollment will encourage and benefit youths mental health, decreasing the risk of mental illness and steadyng emotions while increasing serotonin and endorphins, and will help promote physical fitness and health, while fighting against common physical illnesses and chronic diseases that can be triggered at older ages. By allowing and enrolling in youth sports, our youth can experience a wonderful and transformative opportunity, allowing them to grow and thrive in the modern world, promoting self-control, productivity, community, and mental health.

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