Playing Sports Benefits Children

*Child Athletes*, 2007

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Playing sports is not only fun for children, but also offers benefits that affect other aspects of their lives. For example, when young people participate in sports, they have an opportunity to learn self-discipline, consideration of others, and how to handle disappointments. Also, the stress relief and physical fitness that result from playing sports help combat childhood depression and obesity, which has risen to proportions nationwide. Furthermore, researchers have found that girls who play sports reap particular benefits, such as a healthy body image, increased self-esteem, and a reduced risk of chronic disease. Girl athletes also are less likely to begin smoking or become pregnant as teenagers. Playing sports offers many physical, emotional, and social rewards that are not generally accorded to nonathletes.

Using the Opposing Viewpoints Resource Center, determine how the physical and emotional risks faced by women through their participation in sport compare to those encountered by male athletes. Give particular consideration to the additional risks posed by steroid and performance-enhancing drug use.

When kids are asked why they play sports, here's what they say:

- To have fun
- To improve their skills
- To learn new skills
- To be with their friends
- To make new friends
- To succeed or win
- To become physically fit

Kids usually get the benefits they seek from sports and more. Kids need attention and respect (in that order), but they have few ways to get them. What is unique about sports is that they offer kids an arena where they can earn attention and respect by exerting their natural abilities. Kids are good at sports because sports are essentially about speed, strength, coordination, vision, creativity, and responsiveness—the necessary physical attributes are the attributes of youth.

Given that athletics involves all aspects of the human being, it is not surprising that participants benefit in all of the areas they mention. According to researchers at the Institute for the Study of Youth Sports at Michigan State University, kids who participate in organized sports do better in school, have better interpersonal skills, are more team oriented, and are generally healthier.

Participation in sports provides opportunities for leadership and socialization, as well as the development of skills for handling success and failure.

Moreover, when playing games, children learn how rules work. They see how groups need rules to keep order, that the individual must accept the rules for the good of the group, that rules entail a consideration of the rights of
others. They also learn about competition, but within a restricted and safe system where the consequences of losing are minimized.

Benefits for girls have been of particular interest to researchers. The President's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports reports many developmental benefits of participating in youth sports for girls, including increased self-esteem and self-confidence, healthier body image, significant experiences of competency and success, as well as reduced risk of chronic disease. Furthermore, female athletes "do better academically and have lower school dropout rates than their nonathletic counterparts."

The Women's Sports Foundation lists many ways that sports specifically benefit female athletes. These include their being less likely to become pregnant as teenagers, less likely to begin smoking, more likely to quit smoking, more likely to do well in science, and more likely to graduate from high school and college than female nonathletes. Female athletes also take greater pride in their physical and social selves than their sedentary peers; they are more active physically as they age; they suffer less depression. There is also some evidence that recreational physical activity decreases a woman's chances of developing breast cancer and helps prevent osteoporosis.

I am convinced that sports offer a unique arena in which children can successfully exert their talents. The arena is unique for two reasons. First, sports engage the child as a complete human being: all facets—not just physical, but also social, cognitive, and psychological—are engaged harmoniously in striving toward peak fulfillment. Second, sports involve youths working in an ongoing community composed of their peers as well as their peers' families. Sports, that is, offer children an exhilarating, satisfying, rewarding way to participate in a larger world not generally accessible to nonathletes.

**Physical Benefits**

**Fitness.** Kids who play sports develop general physical fitness in a way that's fun, and they establish lifelong habits for good health. This is particularly important at a time when obesity in the United States has reached epidemic proportions: the incidence of obesity has increased by more than 50 percent among America's children and teens since 1976 and continues to grow at a staggering rate!

**Stress relief.** Sports allow kids to clear their minds of academic and social pressures, to literally run off the tension that's accumulated in their muscles. In the words of one patient, "If you play really hard, you feel better because playing takes your mind off things that bother you, and afterwards you can concentrate better." Most doctors recognize the positive mental effect of physical exertion, even though we're not sure exactly why this is so. I know that my ability to study in college and medical school was greatly enhanced when I ran during the day, and I'm not the only athlete to find this true. Many athletes get better grades in-season (theories posit the discipline and the need to manage time, along with an increased ability to concentrate). During exams, Duke University opens its gyms twenty-four hours a day to provide stress relief for its students.

**Mastery.** Sports give kids a satisfying, enjoyable way to develop their own talents: through personal effort they get good at something they're interested in. Doing something well makes them feel good about themselves, but equally important, it teaches them about the process of how to improve and work more effectively. Learning a skill—dribble left-handed, say, or to execute an effective second serve—entails a recognition that practice is essential and that improvement is incremental. The process of repetition teaches the athlete how to master a move and also how to experiment with different approaches to improve a skill. The feedback in sports is usually
immediate and visible—does the ball go into the basket?—so that the athlete can change or repeat what she's doing and figure out how to get better. Not only that, the whole process of seeing practice lead to improvement gives kids a feeling of control, a feeling all too rare in their lives.

**Healthy habits.** Because sports increase an awareness of one's body and how it responds to different stimuli and circumstances, sports help prevent drug and alcohol abuse. Most athletes value what their bodies can do and want to maintain those abilities. Being an athlete also gives kids an acceptable reason for telling their friends no to drugs, booze, and other high-risk, unhealthy behaviors. (Of course, not all athletes avoid drugs and alcohol.)

### Personal Benefits

**Valuing preparation.** Sports help kids learn to distinguish between effort and ability. Sports increase self-discipline and the awareness of the value of preparation because kids can see the difference in their performance.

Competitive athletes learn the importance of effort, being prepared (mentally and physically), and enlightened risk-taking. They see that raw physical talent is not always sufficient to win the game, but that preparation is essential. This includes mental preparation (staying focused) and physical fitness as well as practicing the plays with their teammates in team sports. They learn to evaluate risk versus reward. Another invaluable lesson is discovering that mistakes are part of learning; they signal that a particular approach is unsuccessful and you must try another. Kids also learn to deal productively with criticism as part of improvement and preparation.

**Resilience.** Sports provide an unparalleled model for dealing with disappointment and misfortune. Young athletes learn to handle adversity, whether it's picking themselves up after losing a big game or not getting as many minutes as they wanted. They find ways to deal with losing and go on, because there's another big game next week or next year. They figure out what to do to get what they want for themselves. They put in extra time on fitness or work on specific weaknesses in their game (long-ball trapping, hitting to the opposite field, looking the ball into their hands)....

**Long-term thinking.** Athletes learn the fundamental lesson of sacrificing immediate gratification for long-term gain. This is the basis for personal success as well as for civilization in general, and no lesson can be more valuable.

### Social Benefits

Sports are a social activity. Team sports are obviously done with other people, but even individual sports are often done as a team (tennis, golf, track). All sports, however, are intended to be performed in front of others, and the social ramifications are many. Here are some of them.

**Relationships with other kids.** Athletes develop relationships with their teammates. For boys, sports are a primary, and unfortunately sometimes the sole, way of socializing with others. In many schools and communities, nonathletic males find it difficult to develop a social network at all. For girls, who according to the feminist theorist Carol Gilligan tend to define themselves through their relationships rather than their achievements, sports offer yet another way to make friends and create an alternate peer group. According to Mike Nerney, a consultant in substance abuse prevention and education, multiple peer groups are always a good idea for teens, who have an intense need for inclusion and belonging, but who can also be volatile, cruel to each other, and foment
destructive behavior as a group. Having a refuge when relations go wrong with one group can alleviate a great deal of stress and offer an alternative for kids who feel uncomfortable or frightened by peers who engage in high-risk activities.

**Teamwork.** On a team, kids learn about cooperation, camaraderie, give-and-take. They learn that while their natural position might be wide receiver, the team needs a cornerback, so they sacrifice their personal desires and play defense. They learn that you don't have to like someone in order to work together toward a common goal. They also discover that you can work for people you don't respect and still be productive, improve your skills, and have fun. A team is a natural environment in which to learn responsibility to others you can't stay out carousing the night before a game; sometimes you need to pass up a party in order to show up and play well.

Kids learn these lessons from their teammates and, most important, a coach who encourages the good of the team over the needs of an individual player. This attitude is sometimes rare in today's sports climate, where what's glorified is to "be the man." I think the earlier the message is instilled about the good of the larger whole, the better for kids in the long run.

**Diversity.** Organized sports sponsored by clubs or youth leagues not affiliated with schools offer players an opportunity to meet a variety of kids from different backgrounds. Students from public, private, and parochial schools come together in a common enterprise, crossing socioeconomic and ethnic lines, so that over time all players broaden their sense of how other people live. The genuinely multicultural environment is of tremendous importance in our polarized society. Kids play on the same team, wear the same uniform, share the same objectives and experiences. Sports are a great equalizer: rich or poor, black, brown, or white, are irrelevant. What counts is talent and heart.

**Relationships with adults.** When coaches, parents, and kids see each other at practice and games week after week, year after year, the adults learn to admire and praise the kids' prowess and progress, even when kids are as young as third graders. This kind of attention helps youngsters learn to balance their own evaluation of their improving skills with the appraisal of others who are not blood relatives; they also begin the lifelong process of figuring out whom to listen to when they hear conflicting advice or assessments. In addition, for young athletes of all ages, attention from interested adults is not only flattering but also helps them overcome shyness and develop poise when talking to relative strangers in social situations. The ability to feel comfortable in a variety of social circumstances will be progressively more valuable in a world of multiple cultures and decreasing numbers of supportive communities.

**Participating in a community.** Sports foster a sense of community: they give both participants and spectators the experience of belonging to something larger than themselves, the need for which seems to be hard-wired into the human brain. This is why kids love playing for their schools, why high school football games in small cities can draw tens of thousands of spectators week after week, and why adults identify with their college teams years after they have graduated. Playing for an institution or a community gives kids a chance to feel that they are making a genuine contribution to a larger group.

When playing for school or club teams, young athletes are afforded the opportunity to see how grownups and children treat one another and how this treatment has long-term consequences. They can see which adults care about kids, are willing to do their fair share and more, and take a stand for what they believe in. They see which parents are cooperative pitching in to help with snacks, driving their kids' teammates to games, serving as team treasurer, volunteering to line the fields on cold, rainy mornings. They hear parents screaming at the officials and recognize which ones know the rules and which don't. They see who supports their own children and others, who bullies their children or the officials. They see parents who teach their children to assume they are always right,
are better than the other players, and that someone else, anyone else, is always at fault if things go wrong. They also see how the kids in these families emulate or reject their parents' behavior. They think about how they will treat their own children and how they will behave with their friends as members of groups.

One hockey father says, "Part of the benefit of sports is that children observe its complex social dynamic among coaches, parents, players, and officials. There's a wide range of ethics, such as the attitude toward authority. Do you try to abide by the spirit of the rules, get away with what you can, accept what an official says, or do you argue and yell at him, or complain about it? Another major element they encounter is the difference between teammates who are good at communicating and sharing versus those who are out to get what they can for themselves. This is a dichotomy adults face throughout life. Kids involved in sports have to consciously or subconsciously figure out where they fit into those various spectrums."

Participating for years on the same team not only improves the play, because the players learn each other's strengths and weaknesses and where they'll be on the field or court, but it gives kids a wider view of the world and the people in it.

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**Further Readings**

**Books**
- Bob Bigelow, Tom Moroney, and Linda Hall *Just Let the Kids Play: How to Stop Other Adults from Ruining Your Child's Fun and Success in Youth Sports*. Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications, 2001.
- Cal Ripken Jr. and Rick Wolff *Parenting Young Athletes the Ripken Way: Ensuring the Best Experience for


Periodicals
- Center for Health and Health Care in Schools "Experts Cite Physical Activity as Key in Preventing Childhood Obesity," Health and Health Care in Schools, vol. 6, no. 9, December 2006. www.healthinschools.org.
- Beverly Creamer "Assault of Coach Rare, but Blatant," Honolulu Advertiser, October 25, 2006.


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