

“It’s Our Turn to Speak!” Parents Share Joys, Concerns, and Perspectives of Youth Sport

by Lenny Wiersma Co-Director, CARYS

If you pick up the paper enough times, you may sometimes think that parents are the root of all sports evil. Screaming on the sidelines, berating officials, putting excess pressure on children, forcing children to play on travel teams—these are all behaviors that are often cited in popular news media. Most parents, though, understand the importance of providing healthy and positive experiences for their children. Parents have a vested interest in the organization of youth sports programs; while some volunteer as coaches, others invest a significant amount of time and energy in providing transportation, club fees, emotional support, and early Saturday mornings spent at the soccer field for their children’s involvement. We recently met with 55 youth sports parents and discussed with them their positive and negative experiences in youth sports, and they provided many insightful discussions about the role of youth sports for families.



One of the most common joys for parents included watching their children learn and grow. One soccer parent praised the hard work of coaches in teaching children the game: “When you watch the kids for a number of years, all of a sudden, they get it. They’re not playing amoeba soccer anymore. They’re passing the ball and everything. It’s so great to see that happen.” Another positive aspect was the sense of community that youth sports provide, for their children and for themselves. With the busy lives of the participants and the large communities in which they live, parents indicated that with an activity such as youth sport, they established friendships with people with whom they would have not otherwise met.

We were constantly reminded about the big picture of youth sports from our interviews. Parents put into perspective the fact that, no matter what bad calls may be made during a game, or how close a team came to making the playoffs, or whether one’s child is the

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Road Races For Kids by Angela Fifer

“On your mark, get set, GO!”

More and more people around the world are taking their recreational running to the competitive level. Many runners also have kids who come to watch and wish they could run along with their parents. So what should these parents do? Allow

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their kids to run potentially harmful distances and intensities or suggest they do not partake in recreational exercise.

Events such as this one encourage parents to let their kids train and race competitively, but what are the guidelines

that parents should follow to avoid over-training and injury? According to RunnersWorld, parents should allow kids to run at their own pace, take frequent walking breaks, and encourage them to start out slowly. One method of monitoring their speed is to talk with them during the run. The ability to carry out a conversation while running is generally thought of as a comfortable, moderate running pace. Also frequently ask your child how they are feeling, how their legs feel, and how the pace is for them. Finally, teaching your child to save some energy for the finish helps them to feel like they ran fast and provides excitement crossing the finish line.

By following suggested training advice, taking it slow, and only allowing your child to participate in short distances, you can promote running and living a healthy lifestyle for your child. Running with your children helps you to

spend more time together and have something to talk about. And maybe someday they will be running the marathon and you will be cheering them on.

References:

www.KidsRunning.com

www.RunnersWorld.com





“It seems as if we have reached a critical mass in regards to the atmosphere... of youth sport. People are ready for action and change.”



At Justplay, Sportsmanship Supersedes Winning or Losing By: Elaine Raakman, President, Justplay

Around the world, 70% of youth sport is managed and administrated by volunteers. Most of these volunteers do not have sport management, behavior management, or business management expertise, let alone the time or financial resources required to be as effective as they would like. Justplay, a newly established program in Canada, bridges the gap between research and application.

Justplay allows youth sport administrators to make data-driven decisions. It helps to reduce the administrative burden of dealing with incidents regarding problem behavior that are generally anecdotal in nature. The Justplay program can even predict the potential for high-risk

situations, allowing associations to be pre-emptive in dealing with inappropriate youth sports behavior.

The Justplay program allows for a continuous, real-time monitoring of team sport environments. By providing data regarding the behavior of coaches, players and spectators on a game-by-game basis, local associations and sport governing bodies have better insight into, and control over, the environment for which they are accountable.

Justplay uses the referee or official to provide the data. The official is the only participant (group) that has no stake in the outcome of the game. Their presence is to ensure that the game is played as fairly as possible.

At the conclusion of every game, each participating official independently fills out a short questionnaire, or "Justplay Conduct Report." The conduct report includes game information, and uses a five point scale (with 1 being very good and 5 being very poor) for the official to rate the behavior of the coaches, players, and spectators of each team. The official also rates his/her own satisfaction/comfort level within the context of the game using the same scale. All of this information is entered via the web, by each official. It takes only moments for officials to provide the data.

The database is used to analyze the ratings and produce a library of brief reports. Cont. on p.3

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“The minute the score and the competition outweighs the enjoyment of the game, which happens with some regularity, I begin to question what we’re trying to do with competitive sports... I think as parents, we stress about that. Young athletes have the challenge of putting that perspective of what mom and dad want, what the trainer or the coach wants, and still have plenty of fun and enjoy it.”

best or not, we are dealing with children. And it is a game. Children often grow up playing on the same teams over a number of years, so valuable friendships are built along the way. Parents also shared that they were appreciative of life skills that were developed through sports, such as working as a team, learning to focus, and learning to follow directions.

Parents had an opportunity to share some of the difficulties with being a youth sport parent. A very common difficulty was in providing transportation to practices and games, especially if multiple children were participating in

multiple activities. Weekends and evenings are often spent en route from one activity to another, limiting dinner to drive thru or on-the go meals. But most parents believe that youth sports are worth the time: “Both my husband and I work full-time, and trying to keep up with the schedule has been tough, but we think it’s worth it, and we want to continue. We think it’s important that our children be involved in sports.” Another major concern was with the over-reliance of just a few volunteers to do the work of the entire league; like other volunteer-based organizations, parents estimated that

90% of the work is done by 10% of the people. Parents also often felt unprepared with providing emotional support to children especially in highly competitive leagues, even after parents realized that “the most important part of the game is the ride home.” Because youth sports are sometimes over-competitive, and pressures on children to perform well can be intense, parents sometimes struggled with providing a healthy balance between competition and fun, and knowing how to push their children to commit to practices while also encouraging their kids to “be kids”

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during after-school free time. One father offered, “I was walking in the parking lot after one of my kid’s games, and there was a guy talking to an official about a call. You know, I thought, what a ri-

diculous thing to do over a youth sport game.” While youth sports serve an important function in our society, parents were quick to point out that we should not overlook the fact that what is al-

ways more important than the score is how children feel about sports after playing the game.

For more information about this study, please contact CARYS at (714) 278-3806.



“Like other parents, we drive a long way to get here. But it’s the coaching and the character building-aspect of youth sports that we like. Our children will be in high school soon, and that’s sometimes tough. But I hope this experience makes better citizens of them.”

At Justplay, Sportsmanship Supersedes Winning or Losing (cont. from p. 2)

Access to the reports is available via the Internet on a password-privileged basis for member associations. The reports are used to provide early warning signals of problems being experienced by specific officials and to provide a means of measuring the effectiveness of any methods to improve the situation. Each association is also provided with a unique monthly newsletter/report that summarizes positive and/or negative trends in behavior within its game environment. This report informs the association of regional and/or national trends within their sport and identifies their position relative to these larger trends. The monthly report also includes strategies to address concerns that are identified.

Although there are too many observations and trends to note here, it is possible to point out some very interesting and relevant general trends that have been identified. For example, by tracking critical incidents (any poor or very poor rating) in hockey, youth football and soccer, coaches have been identified as the most problematic, in some organizations as much as a problem 45% of

resources currently being dedicated to modifying parent behavior in the participating sport associations. Interestingly, at the Rep level (travel teams), players become the problem approximately 45% percent of the time, followed by coaches at 33%, and parents remain the same at about 22%. In some Rep divisions, the problems are split 50/50 between players and coaches. Interestingly, the majority of problem behavior occurs during regular

to the atmosphere of violence, harassment and abuse that permeates youth sport. People are ready for action and change. The original goals of organized youth sport were based on virtues of sportsmanship, fun, and friendship. Even Baron de Coubertin, the father of the modern Olympics, emphasized participation and good citizenship. To re-establish these principles and develop generations of youth devoted to the benefits of sport, we must revolutionize the way we administer and manage youth sports. In order to do this effectively we have to establish environments of accountability, education and reform. Our mission states that there are *no excuses* for poor behavior, Justplay!



the time, followed by players at 33% and finally spectators at 22%. This is a noteworthy trend, given the amount of

season games, not during play-offs. It seems as if we may have reached a critical mass in regards to the atmosphere of violence,

For more information on how your organization can utilize Justplay!, please <http://www.wejustplay.com>.

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Burnout in Youth Sport: Signs and Symptoms by Joe Appel

CARYS Mission

Serving primarily Orange County, CARYS has as its mission the promotion of positive and developmentally appropriate sport and physical activity programs for youth populations. The goals of CARYS are based on the understanding that parents, leaders, coaches, and professionals have a responsibility to provide a safe, enjoyable, and developmentally appropriate experience for children and adolescents involved in organized youth sports. The structure of leagues, the training of coaches, and the behavior of adults and spectators ought to be consistent with this responsibility. As such, the mission and goals of CARYS reflect the needs of a community increasingly reliant on sport and physical activity as an important educational tool for healthy children and adolescents.

Burnout is a psychological phenomenon that happens when the demands of a sport outweigh the perceived enjoyment or value of the experience. This decision usually occurs around the ages of 12 to 15, and while it is most common on elite athletic teams, where intense competition and pressure to win can bury the fun of playing, it can affect any athlete of any ability level.

Young athletes can become emotionally drained from trying to meet the demands of mom, dad and coach and physically exhausted from the constant competition and practice schedules. Sometimes kids play so many games that it becomes repetitive and chore-like. Other times they simply develop other interests that supplant sports as the top priority. The end result, however, is the same: the athlete may stop playing. The sport has lost its appeal and the child no longer enjoys playing.

In light of all this, it is good to know that burnout can be avoided. Identifying the athletes who are most likely to be susceptible to burnout is the first step. Some personal characteristics that may indicate a predisposition to burnout are perfectionism, a need to please others, non-assertiveness, and intense focus on one particular sport. Training coaches and parents to understand and identify these warning signs is essential to effectively protect young athletes from burnout.

Once identified, there are several strategies that can help prevent burnout. One is to let young athletes choose their own level of commitment. This will give them more control of their training and game schedules. Outside pressure from parents and coaches will be decreased as well. Kids who are involved in multiple activities are also less likely to become victims of burnout. The time commitments required for several activities reduce the likelihood of burnout in any single one. Moreover, the child develops a more well-rounded self-concept.

Coaches, too, can be influential in preventing burnout among athletes. Re-organizing practices and introducing new drills is one way to keep things fresh and interesting. In addition, coaches can reduce stress by sending clear messages to athletes, giving consistent feedback, and emphasizing involvement in non-sport activities. These approaches can be used for any age, gender or sport.

Burnout can have harmful emotional and physical consequences and should to be addressed as a serious risk of youth sport participation at any level. Training coaches and parents to identify the warning signs and employing the strategies noted above can result in young athletes fully enjoying their athletic experience.



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website at [http://
hdcs.fullerton.edu/knes/
carys/home.htm](http://hdcs.fullerton.edu/knes/carys/home.htm) for past
newsletters, youth sports
resources, and more infor-
mation about the center.**