

# Youth sport programs: an avenue to foster positive youth development

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Concern about the growth in adolescent problem behaviours (e.g. delinquency, drug use) has led to increased interest in positive youth development, and a surge in funding for 'after school programs.' We evaluate the potential of youth sport programs to foster positive development, while decreasing the risk of problem behaviours. Literature on the positive and negative outcomes of youth sport is presented. We propose that youth sport programs actively work to assure positive outcomes through developmentally appropriate designs and supportive child–adult (parent/coach) relationships. We also highlight the importance of sport programs built on developmental assets (Benson, 1997) and appropriate setting features (National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2002) in bringing about the five 'C's of positive development (competence, confidence, character, connections, and compassion/caring; Lerner *et al.*, 2000). An applied sport-programming model, which highlights the important roles of policy-makers, sport organizations, coaches and parents in fostering positive youth development is presented as a starting point for further applied and theoretical research.

*Keywords: Program design; Developmental assets; Sport participation; Sport dropout; Coaches; Parents; Sport outcomes*

There is growing concern about the future of today's youth. Concerns stem from an increase in adolescent problem behaviours (delinquency, drug use), coupled with changing social forces (both parents working, single parent homes, increases in youth unsupervised time at home alone). Over the past two decades, researchers and practitioners have taken a 'deficit reduction' approach to youth behaviour problems (Benson, 1997). Most often, a problem has been identified (e.g. obesity), and funding has been provided so that researchers could examine strategies and develop interventions to reduce or eliminate the problem. Unfortunately, this approach is costly, and intervention programs have only demonstrated moderate success (Benson, 1997). Further, Pittman (1991) has pointed out that problem-free

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youth are not necessarily fully prepared: youth free of drugs, alcohol use and crime are not necessarily prepared to productively engage in society. Recent theoretical and applied research proposes that an ‘asset building paradigm’ hold equal weight to a ‘deficit reduction paradigm’; that focus be placed on promoting positive youth development as well as reducing problem behaviours in youth (Benson, 1997). Accompanying this paradigm shift is a vision of fully able children, eager to explore, gain competence, and make a difference in society (Damon, 2004). It has been suggested that youths’ potential needs only to be fostered appropriately for optimal development to occur (Peterson, 2004).

However, this vision may initially appear idealistic. One does not need to look far to see the inequities in today’s society. Socio-economic status, race, gender, and environmental factors can all limit youths’ opportunities. For example, youth sport programs are becoming increasingly expensive, competitive and elitist. As De Knop *et al.* (1996) suggest, cultures around the world are experiencing the institutionalization of youth sports, which is leading programs to become increasingly inaccessible to many families. While Hellison and Cutforth (1997) emphasize the vital role youth programming can play in facilitating the healthy development of youth at risk, they suggest that organizations serving inner-city children and youth are overburdened and underfunded.

In this paper, we examine the youth sport and positive youth development bodies of literature, and propose an applied sport-programming model of positive youth development. The model emphasizes the vital role of policy-makers in assuring the accessibility of youth sport programs to all youths, regardless of socio-economic status, race, culture, ethnicity, or gender. The model also highlights the role of sport organizations in designing programs that develop better people, rather than simply skilled individuals. Finally, the model proposes the critical role of coaches in implementing programs on a day-to-day basis, and of parents in supporting their child throughout their involvement in sport programs. At both the sport programming and implementation levels the model highlights pedagogical issues in the areas of general subject matter, specific learning settings, and instructional methods.

### **Positive youth development**

Numerous definitions of optimal youth development have emerged among researchers. Hamilton *et al.* (2004) suggest that optimal development in youth ‘enables individuals to lead a healthy, satisfying, and productive life as youth, and later as adults, because they gain the competence to earn a living, to engage in civic activities, to nurture others, and to participate in social relations and cultural activities’ (p. 3). It has been suggested that through optimal development, ‘good youth’ emerge. ‘Good youth’ are said to experience more positive than negative affect, to be satisfied with their life as it has been lived, to recognize what they do well and use their strengths to fulfill pursuits, and to be contributing members of society (Peterson, 2004). The question of exactly how youths’ potential is fostered through positive development, and how resulting ‘good youth’ emerge in society is only beginning to be addressed.

The National Research Council and Institute of Medicine (NRCIM, 2002) has outlined four main areas of youth development: physical, intellectual, psychological/emotional, and social. For each development area, several corresponding assets are suggested, that facilitate positive youth development. For example, good health habits and good health risk management skills are assets facilitating positive physical development. Knowledge of essential life skills, vocational skills, decision-making skills, and critical reasoning skills contribute to positive intellectual development. Numerous assets contribute to youths' psychological and emotional development including mental health, positive self-regard, coping skills, conflict resolution skills, mastery motivation, a sense of autonomy, moral character, and confidence. Finally, assets facilitating youths' social development include connectedness with parents, peers, and other adults, a sense of a social place, an ability to navigate in diverse contexts, and an attachment to pro-social or conventional institutions. The NRCIM (2002) outlines eight features of settings that are most likely to foster these positive developmental assets (Table 1). Hellison and Cutforth's (1997) eleven key criteria of 'state-of-the-art' extended day programs are strikingly similar; however, they also highlight the importance of keeping program numbers small, focusing on the whole person, respecting individuality, empowering youth, encouraging courageous and persistent leadership, treating youth as resources to be developed, and helping youth envision their futures.

Benson and colleagues (Benson, 1997; Benson, Leffert, Scales, & Blyth, 1998; Leffert *et al.*, 1998; Scales & Leffert, 1999; Scales *et al.*, 2000) have also developed a list of developmental outcomes based on scientific literature and practitioners' wisdom. The Search Institute's 40 assets are divided into two broad categories (external and internal assets), and further divided into eight sub-categories (Table 2). Despite youths' differing needs, interests, and environments, Benson and colleagues have found a trend towards asset depletion in all American youth (Benson, 1997). Race, ethnicity, and family income do not appear to influence asset development, while gender and family composition appear to have only a slight influence on asset development (assets are fewer in boys and in single parent families). Benson and colleagues' research has consistently demonstrated three powerful roles of developmental assets: protection, enhancement, and resiliency. For example, developmental assets play a protective role because the more assets

**Table 1.** Features of positive development settings (NRCIM, 2002)

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1. Physical and psychological safety
  2. Appropriate structure
  3. Supportive relationships
  4. Opportunities to belong
  5. Positive social norms
  6. Support for efficacy and mattering
  7. Opportunities for skill building
  8. Integration of family, school, and community efforts
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**Table 2.** 40 Developmental assets (Benson, 1997)

External Assets	Support (1–6)	1. Family support 2. Positive family communication 3. Other adult relationships 4. Caring neighbourhood 5. Caring school climate 6. Parent involvement in schooling	
	Empowerment (7–10)	7. Community values youth 8. Youth as resources 9. Service to others 10. Safety	
	Boundaries & Expectations (11–16)	11. Family boundaries 12. School boundaries 13. Neighbourhood boundaries 14. Adult role models 15. Positive peer influence 16. High expectations	
	Constructive Use of Time (17–20)	17. Creative activities 18. Youth programs 19. Religious community 20. Time at home	
	Internal Assets	Commitment to Learning (21–25)	21. Achievement motivation 22. School engagement 23. Homework 24. Bonding to school 25. Reading for pleasure
		Positive Values (26–31)	26. Caring 27. Equality and social justice 28. Integrity 29. Honesty 30. Responsibility 31. Restraint
		Social Competencies (32–36)	32. Planning and decision making 33. Interpersonal competence 34. Cultural competence 35. Resistance skills 36. Peaceful conflict resolution
		Positive Identity (37–40)	37. Personal power 38. Self-esteem 39. Sense of purpose 40. Positive view of personal future

youth have, the less likely they are to engage in high-risk behaviours such as alcohol, tobacco, and drug use. Youth high in developmental assets are also less likely to be depressed or suicidal, and less likely to demonstrate antisocial behaviours, violence, and school problems. Second, developmental assets play an enhancement role, as youth who demonstrate more developmental assets are also more likely to ‘thrive’, meaning they are more likely to be successful in school, show leadership, volunteer

to help others, show care and concern for others, and show optimism regarding their future happiness and success. Third, youth high in developmental assets demonstrate more resilience in difficult situations.

Another framework of positive youth development is reflected in Lerner *et al.*'s (2000) five desired outcomes of youth development, or five 'C's of positive youth development: competence, character, connection, confidence, and caring and compassion. Lerner *et al.*'s Model of National Youth Policy (2000) suggests that policies must be developed to allow families and programs to foster and promote positive development. If this occurs, youth will in turn demonstrate the five 'C's of positive youth development. Collectively, these processes will lead to the sixth 'C' of positive youth development: contribution. As physically, socially, psychologically, emotionally, and intellectually healthy youth develop into adults, they will choose to contribute or 'give back' to civil society, and in doing so, be promoting the positive development of the next generation of youth.

### **Positive youth experiences and outcomes through sport**

While the benefits of youth sport participation have been of interest to sport researchers for some time, no research to date has examined the benefits of sport within the framework of positive youth development. However, youth clearly experience many positive developmental outcomes through their sport involvement. In this section, research on the benefits of youth sport participation is reviewed, within the context of youth development. Specifically, benefits are examined using physical, social, psychological/emotional, and intellectual development (NRCIM, 2002) as a framework.

#### *Physical development*

With obesity and associated disease on the rise among today's children and youth (Tremblay *et al.*, 2002), the importance of physical activity as a means of fostering positive youth development has gained considerable attention among researchers. Physical activity is essential for youths' optimal development, as it facilitates normal growth and development in children and adolescents (Bar-Or, 1983). While cardiovascular fitness and weight control are among the most evident health benefits of physical activity (Health Canada, 2003; Taylor *et al.*, 1985), skill development, improved muscular strength, muscular endurance, flexibility, and bone structure are additional benefits (Wankel & Berger, 1990; Côté & Hay, 2002). In addition, adolescents involved in regular physical activity are less likely to smoke than adolescents not involved in regular physical activity (Aaron *et al.*, 1995). Finally, given that physical activity habits developed during youth are associated with physical activity habits in adulthood (Dishman *et al.*, 1985; Baronowski *et al.*, 1992; Curtis *et al.*, 1999; Robertson-Wilson *et al.*, 2003), active youth are less likely to develop numerous diseases later in life including heart disease, obesity,

diabetes, osteoporosis, stroke, depression, and cancer (Taylor *et al.*, 1985; Paffenbarger *et al.*, 1986; Powell *et al.*, 1987; Berger & Owen, 1988; Health Canada, 2003).

### *Psychological/emotional development*

Sport and physical activity offer youth opportunities to experience challenge, fun, and enjoyment, while increasing their self-esteem and decreasing their stress (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; Long, 1985; Health Canada, 2003). Further, researchers have argued that activities such as sports, music, and the arts foster positive psychological and emotional development. For example, Gilman (2001) found that participation in structured extracurricular activities was associated with higher life satisfaction among youth, and that the more structured activities youth participated in, the higher their life satisfaction. Given that subjective well-being or happiness has long been considered a central component to optimal development and a good life (Park, 2004), these findings highlight the additional role of sport involvement in youths' positive development.

Most recently, the authors (Fraser-Thomas & Côté, 2004) conducted a study with 11 grade five students, randomly selected from a small elementary school in a mid-size Canadian city. Youth recorded all the activities of their waking day for two days, and rated their enjoyment for these activities in the form of 'no fun', 'some fun', or 'lots of fun.' While youth involved in organized sport activities over the two days ( $N = 5$ ) rated 45% of their day as being 'lots of fun', youth not involved in any organized sport activities over the two days ( $N = 6$ ) rated only 8% of their day as being 'lots of fun'. Given that all participants spent almost half their day in school, it is clear that those involved in sports experienced significantly more happiness or subjective well-being in their day-to-day living.

### *Social development*

Research also indicates that sport experiences foster citizenship, social success, positive peer relationships, and leadership skills (Evans & Roberts, 1987; James, 1995; Manjone, 1998; Elley & Kirk, 2002; Wright & Côté, 2003). Further, youth sport and physical activity participation has been positively correlated with adult career achievement (Larson & Verma, 1999) and negatively correlated with school dropout and delinquent behaviour (Segrave, 1983; Sheilds & Bredemeier, 1995; Eccles & Barber, 1999; McMillan & Reed, 1994). Wankel and Berger (1990) highlight that through sport, youth have opportunities to experience positive inter-group relations, community integration, social status, and social mobility, while Côté (2002) suggests that sport provides an arena for the development of social skills such as cooperation, assertion, responsibility, empathy, and self-control. Youth involved in sport often demonstrate discipline and commitment (Scanlan *et al.*, 1993; Shogan, 1999); preliminary evidence suggests that these traits carry over into other domains of life such as school and community (Marsh, 1993; Carpenter, 2001).

While many researchers (e.g. Gilman, 2001) have made the case that youths' involvement in structured activities such as sports, music, and the arts fosters positive psychological and emotional development, Larson (2000) proposes that *initiative*, a key component to youths' positive social development, can also be developed through these structured activities. Given today's job demands and basic lifestyle requirements, Larson (2000) argues that youth need to take charge of their lives through the development of initiative. However, using random sampling moments, Larson and Richards (1991) found that American youth are bored 27% of the time. Larson believes that initiative is constructed of three key elements (intrinsic motivation, concerted engagement, and temporal effort directed towards a goal) and suggests that structured voluntary activities such as sports, arts, music, hobbies, and organizations offer the best contexts for initiative development, as they are voluntary (require youth to be intrinsically motivated), require attention (elements of challenge), and require effort over time. He distinguishes how structured leisure activities such as sport (which requires attention and effort over time, and is voluntary), differs from school (which requires attention and effort over time, but is not voluntary), and television viewing (which is voluntary, but does not require attention or effort over time).

#### *Intellectual development*

Finally, youths' involvement in physical activity has been positively correlated with academic performance in numerous studies (Dwyer *et al.*, 2001; California Department of Education, 2002), while participation in high school sport has been positively linked to school grades, school attendance, choice for demanding courses, time spent on homework, educational aspirations during and after high school, and college attendance (Snyder & Spreitzer, 1990; Marsh, 1993; Eccles & Barber, 1999; Whitley, 1999). Further, it has been suggested that physical activity and sport can play an important role in fostering cognitive development in youth (Mize, 1991; Stevens, 1994).

### **Negative youth experiences and outcomes in sport**

While most often youth experience positive outcomes through sport, research suggests that experiences are sometimes less positive. In this section we discuss negative outcomes of youth sport.

#### *Physical development*

Youth sport involvement has been linked to some negative physical outcomes such as sport-related injuries and eating disorders (Reel & Gill, 1996; Steiner *et al.*, 2000; Anshel, 2004). In a study comparing two national rhythmic gymnastics teams, Beamer and Côté (2003) found that the higher ranked team (2nd vs. 17th in the world) had done significantly more training, but rated their overall health significantly

lower than the lower ranked team. While many sport injuries are caused by training volume (Hollander *et al.*, 1995) others are caused by risk-taking (Steiner *et al.*, 2000), and the nature of the sport. Eating disorders are also a prevalent health problem in sport settings (Beals & Manore, 1994). Numerous studies have highlighted how environmental, psychological, social, and physical factors such as the aesthetic orientation of the sport, coach pressure, and personality traits (e.g. perfectionism) can lead to eating disorders in athletes (e.g. Reel & Gill, 1996; Anshel, 2004). Recent literature suggests that youth athletes, particularly girls, are becoming concerned about their body image at increasingly early ages (Davison *et al.*, 2002).

#### *Emotional/psychological development*

The negative emotional and psychological outcomes of youth sport have earned considerable attention in youth sport literature in recent years. Wankel and Mummery (1990) highlighted that youth often feel excessive pressure to win, perceive themselves as having poor abilities, feel unattached to their teams, and feel vulnerable in the presence of team mates. Experiences such as these have led youth to experience low self-confidence and low self-esteem (Wankel & Kreisel, 1985; Martens, 1993). Athletic burnout is another psychological concern that has gained attention in recent youth sport literature (Smith, 1986; Coakley, 1992). As a relatively new area of research, there is some disagreement on the nature of athletic burnout. Smith (1986) defined burnout as a 'psychological, emotional, and at times physical withdrawal from a formerly pursued and enjoyed activity' (p. 37), while Coakley (1992) argues that social organizations of high performance sport, rather than individual stress-based problems are responsible for athlete burnout.

#### *Social development*

The increasing competitiveness in youth sport settings, coupled with the physical nature of sports, has led youth sport involvement to be linked to numerous negative social outcomes. In particular, acts of violence and aggression have become common in youth sport settings (Colburn, 1986). In a recent study of perceived sport aggression, Gardner and Janelle (2002) found that these behaviours were considered acceptable and legitimate within the sport environment. Poor sportsmanship has also been linked to youth sport involvement, while morality reasoning within the sports context has been found to decrease with age (Bredemeier & Shields, 1987; Bredemeier, 1995; Lemyre *et al.*, 2002).

### **What factors contribute to positive and negative experiences and outcomes in youth sport?**

Unfortunately, this literature highlights the fact that many sport programs designed to foster positive youth development are in fact doing just the opposite. This raises the



question of how policy-makers, sport organizations, coaches, and parents can assure positive youth development through sport. To answer this question, we first examine the factors contributing to positive and negative experiences and outcomes in youth sport. Bronfenbrenner's (1999) operational model of development provides a framework to facilitate understanding of youths' activities and the contexts within which their activities take place. His propositions suggest that for effective development to occur, a) a person must engage in activities, b) activities must take place 'on a fairly regular basis, over an extended period of time,' c) activities must take place over a long enough period of time to become 'increasingly more complex,' and d) activities must involve long-term reciprocal relationships (pp. 5–6). Thus, the Bioecological Model emphasizes the importance of the nature and context of youths' activities (such as sport) in youths' development. In examining past literature, two contextual factors have consistently surfaced as contributing to positive and negative outcomes and experiences in youth sport: program design (e.g. early diversification versus specialization) and adult influence (parents and coaches).

### *Program design*

While a limited body of literature has examined youth sport program designs, recent literature has begun to look at programs' promotion of early specialization or early diversification. Specialization has been defined as the 'limiting of participation to one sport that is practiced, trained for, and competed in on a year-round basis' (Hill & Hansen, 1988, p. 76). Recently, *early specialization* has become popular, as children are starting their sport participation at earlier ages (Ewing & Seefeldt, 1996), and the availability of sports camps, instructional clinics, and other off-season programs is increasing (Hill & Simons, 1989). For these same reasons, *early diversification* (more diverse early sport experiences) is becoming less common among youth.

Côté and colleagues' (Côté, 1999; Gilbert *et al.*, 2002; Baker *et al.*, 2003; Beamer & Côté, 2003; Soberlak & Côté, 2003; Baker *et al.*, in press) research with elite athletes in a variety of sports (rowing, tennis, baseball, basketball, netball, triathlons, and hockey) has led the way in research on early diversification. Expert athletes in Côté and colleagues' studies generally passed through three stages of development: the sampling years (age 6–12), the specializing years (age 13–15), and the investment years (age 16+). Primary factors that distinguished each stage of development were the number of activities the child participated in, and the structure and design of children's practices and training. These elite athletes generally participated in a variety of sports during the sampling years (age 6–12), a decreasing number of activities during the specializing years (age 13–15), and committed to only one activity during the investment years (age 16+), while their practice structure changed from a focus on deliberate play (Côté & Hay, 2002) during the sampling years to a focus on deliberate practice (Ericsson *et al.*, 1993) during the investment years.

Orlick (1973, 1974) was among the first to highlight sport program design as a factor contributing to negative youth sport outcomes and experiences. Orlick

collected questionnaire and interview data on 60 youths (age 7–19) formerly involved in youth sport, and found that 50% of study participants indicated that programs were too serious, focused only on winning, and lacked enjoyment. More recently, Côté has focused on the role of early specialization leading to negative outcomes in youth. Côté (2004) suggests that if specialization occurs at a developmentally inappropriate age, benefits (e.g. improved skills) are outweighed by physical, psychological, and social disadvantages (e.g. overtraining, injury, failure to develop transferable skills, decreased enjoyment, burnout, depression, decreased self-esteem, increased sensitivity to stress, fear of competition, sense of failure, missed social opportunities etc.: Hill, 1988; Hill & Hansen, 1988; Raglin, 1993; Hollander *et al.*, 1995; Boyd & Yin, 1996; Seppa, 1996; Beamer & Côté, 2003).

Not surprisingly, early specialization has also been linked to early withdrawal from sport. Wall & Côté (2004) studied dropout in high-level youth hockey players (Bantam AAA). They found that dropout athletes participated in a higher quantity of off-ice training and began off-ice training at a younger age than hockey players who stayed involved. Barynina and Vaitsekhovskii (1992) also found that Russian national team swimmers who specialized earlier took more time to reach international status, did not stay on the national team as long, and retired younger than late specialists.

This literature confirms that the context (design) of youths' sport programs can play a significant role in youths' sport experiences and outcomes. More specifically, the literature highlights the benefits of early diversification versus early specialization, in the promotion of positive youth development through sport.

### *Adult influences*

Bronfenbrenner's (1999) model also suggests that in order for effective development to occur, youth must experience long-term reciprocal relationships with others, such as parents, coaches, and peers. It is therefore not surprising that a second factor consistently associated with youths' positive and negative outcomes through sport is the role that adults play in youths' sport experiences.

*Parental influences.* Clearly, parent behaviors and parenting styles can have both positive and negative influence on children's sport experiences. Numerous studies have found that children who perceive more positive interactions, support, and encouragement, and less pressure from parents, experience more sport enjoyment, show more preference for challenge, and display more intrinsic motivation than other children (Scanlan & Lewthwaite, 1986; Brustad & Weigand, 1989, as cited by Brustad, 1992). In addition, positive parental influence has been associated with greater attraction to sport and physical activity, and higher levels of sport involvement (Weitzer, 1989; Brustad, 1993, 1996).

Research examining the parent behaviors of outstanding athletes also sheds light on what can be assumed to be a positive path of development through sport. For example, Csikszentmihalyi *et al.* (1993) examined the influence of family structure

on the development of talented American high school students ( $N = 58$ ) in a variety of fields including athletics. Teenagers from families that were stable and supportive, and promoted challenge and opportunities, were happier, more cheerful, more alert, and showed more excitement towards their home and work experiences than teens from other families. In addition, these teenagers felt more often that they were living up to their own and others' expectations, and that they were doing something that had personal and long-term importance. Côté's (1999) study with elite athletes also highlights how parents play important roles throughout development. Côté suggests that parents progress from a leadership role during early childhood to a following and supporting role during later adolescence.

Most research linking parents to negative sport experiences and outcomes originates in the dropout and burnout literature. Robinson and Carron (1982) found that football players who dropped out perceived themselves to receive less father support than other players. Others (Gould *et al.*, 1996a, 1996b; Weirsmas, 2000; Baker & Robertson-Wilson, 2003) have linked parents' criticisms and high expectations to burnout in youth athletes. Many (Coakley, 1992; Raedeke & Smith, 2001) suggest that youth often feel obligated to continue training and competing in order to fulfill parent or coach expectations. While this feeling of 'entrapment' has been associated with burnout, specific parent behaviours that lead youth to experience this feeling are not entirely understood. Finally, it has been suggested that parents often play a role in children's paths to early specialization (associated with less positive sport outcomes and experiences) by funding their involvement in camps, clinics, and lessons, and by providing sport-specific facilities in the home (Hill & Hansen, 1988).

*Coach influence.* Numerous studies have highlighted the role the coach can play in positively or negatively influencing youths' sport experience. Smith, Smoll, and Curtis (1978) were among the first to examine youth coaches' behaviours. They found that the best liked coaches were those who demonstrated more technical instructional, reinforcement, and mistake contingent reinforcement behaviours. In a more recent intervention study, Smoll *et al.* (1993) found that coaches who were trained to increase reinforcement and technical instruction behaviours, and to decrease non-reinforcement, punishment, and control behaviours were better liked, created an atmosphere that athletes perceived as more fun, and created more team unity than untrained coaches. Other studies (Salminen & Liukkonen; 1996; Martin *et al.*, 1999) have found that youth prefer coaches who demonstrate child-involved democratic coaching styles.

As Peterson (2004) points out, youth development programs such as sports have the potential to 'build a better kid', but the personal characteristics of group leaders are critical for the success of all youth development programs. Several authors (Hill & Hansen, 1988; Siegenthaler & Gonzalez, 1997; Gilbert *et al.*, 2001a, 2001b) have suggested that coaches who place primary emphasis on winning often exploit their athletes rather than considering their athletes' developmental stages and advancing their athletes' psychological and social best interests.

Dropout and burnout studies have shed light on the role coaches can play in contributing to negative youth sport experiences and outcomes. For example, studies with dropout swimmers and football players (Robinson & Carron, 1982; Pelletier *et al.*, 2001) found that dropouts perceived their coaches as less encouraging and supportive, and more controlling and autocratic than non-dropouts.

In sum, Bronfenbrenner's (1999) Bioecological Model highlights that effective development occurs through children's involvement in activities that are regular and enduring, and increase in complexity over time. Sport can provide this optimal setting, but contextual shortcomings such as poor program design and negative adult influences can hinder rather than enhance positive youth development.

### **Towards a model of positive youth development through sport**

The challenge for policy-makers, sport organizations, coaches, and parents is to assure that youths' experiences and outcomes are positive rather than negative. Youth participation in an activity does not automatically assure the acquisition particular habits and dispositions, but rather, programs need to be explicitly designed to teach these habits and critical life skills (NRCIM, 2002), and coaches need to play an active role in appropriate implementation. In this section we highlight how the NRCIM's (2002) features of settings that promote positive youth development, Benson's (1997) Developmental Assets, and Côté's Developmental Model of Sport Participation (DMSP: Côté, 1999; Côté & Hay, 2002; Côté *et al.*, 2003) can be integrated into an applied sport-programming model that can be used to promote positive youth development.

#### *Features of settings and developmental assets*

The NRCIM (2002) have outlined eight features of settings that are most likely to foster positive assets in youth, all of which should be considered by policy-makers, sport organizations, parents, and coaches when designing and implementing youth sport programs (see Table 1). First, the NRCIM suggest that essential to any setting aimed at promoting positive youth development is physical and psychological safety and security. While children's physical safety is often a concern in sport settings, children's psychological and emotional sense of safety and security must not be overlooked. If programs are implemented inappropriately, sport environments can often be intimidating or even frightening to youth. Second, settings must provide clear and consistent (age-appropriate) structure, and appropriate adult supervision. All too often in youth sport settings, coaches are volunteers with insufficient knowledge of youths' developmental capabilities. Supportive adult relationships (with parents and coaches) and opportunities to belong comprise the third and fourth setting features. Again, these relationships and opportunities must be worked towards rather than assumed to occur. While one would assume youth sport programs would facilitate positive social norms (the fifth setting feature), much research continues to indicate that many programs promote masculinity, aggression, and competition

(Eder & Parker, 1987). Sixth, the NRCIM suggest that settings support youths' efficacy and sense of mattering. More specifically, youth sport programs must be child-centred, and promote empowerment, autonomy, and opportunities to experience challenge. Sport is often recognized for providing skill-building opportunities (the seventh setting feature), but again, this occurs only through developmentally appropriate program designs and coaching. Finally, programs that integrate family, school, and community create optimal environments for positive youth development, as this integration creates opportunities for meaningful communication between different settings in youths' lives.

Programs fostering Benson's (1997) 40 developmental assets have also been found to lead to positive youth development. While sport programs cannot be expected to foster all 40 assets, we believe that programs have the potential to foster several of them (see Table 2). For example, involvement in sport programs can foster external assets in the areas of constructive use of time, emotional support from family, empowerment, positive intergenerational relationships, positive role models, and high expectations. Past research also indicates that youth sport programs have the potential to foster numerous internal assets such as achievement motivation, school engagement, caring, responsibility, social competencies, empathy, cultural competence, resistance skills, conflict resolution skills, and a sense of positive identity.

#### *Developmental model of sport participation*

No model to date has embraced the notion that positive youth development through sport must be deliberately worked towards by coaches, parents, sport organizations, and policy makers. Only Côté's DMSP (Côté, 1999; Côté & Hay, 2002; Côté *et al.*, 2003) begins to acknowledge the necessity of designing sport programs that consider youths' physical, psychological, social, and intellectual development, and are thus conscientiously designed to foster developmentally appropriate training patterns and social influences.

The DMSP is built on Côté and colleagues' (Côté, 1999; Gilbert *et al.*, 2002; Baker *et al.*, 2003; Beamer & Côté, 2003; Soberlak & Côté, 2003; Baker *et al.*, in press) research with expert athletes, and integrates many of the concepts suggested by the NRCIM (2002) and Benson (1997) to be necessary to foster positive youth development. For example, the model outlines specific stages of sport participation (sampling, ages 6–12; specializing, ages 13–15; investing, ages 16+) according to positive physical, psychological, and social development patterns. In suggesting involvement in a diverse number of activities during early childhood, and by suggesting a shift from deliberate play to deliberate practice from childhood to adolescence, the model is in line with the NRCIM's (2002) setting features that suggest the importance of clear and consistent program structure, opportunities to develop efficacy, and opportunities to improve skills. From a psychosocial perspective, the model also makes suggestions for appropriate coach and parent behaviors during young athletes' development, which are consistent with the NRCIM's (2002) setting features of physical and psychological safety and security, appropriate adult supervision, and

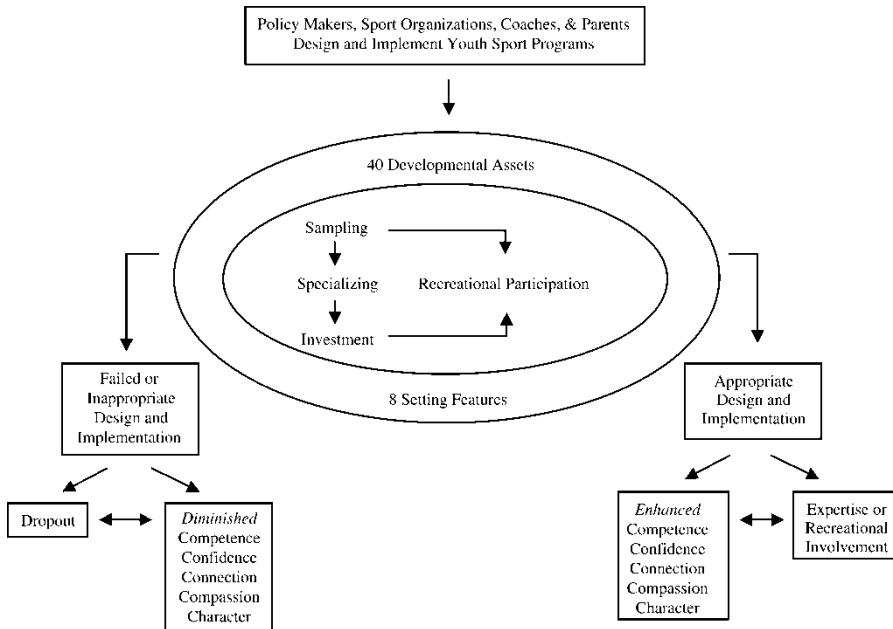
supportive adult relationships. Psychosocial dimensions of Côté’s model are also consistent with numerous of Benson’s (1997) developmental assets in the areas of support, empowerment, and boundaries and expectations.

*Towards an integrated model*

In Figure 1 we present an applied sport-programming model of positive youth development, which incorporates Côté’s DMSPP into the larger framework of positive youth development. Through the model, we suggest that successful youth sport programs: a) consider youths’ physical, psychological, social, and intellectual stages of development (Côté, 1999; Côté & Hay, 2002; Côté *et al.*, 2003), b) are conducted in appropriate settings (NRCIM, 2002) and c) foster developmental assets in youth (Benson, 1997). Further, we propose that the successful design and implementation of these programs depends on the efforts of policy-makers, sport organizations, coaches, and parents.

First, we suggest that given increasing elitism, institutionalization, and competition in youth sport, policy-makers must assure the accessibility of youth sport programs to all youth, regardless of socio-economic status, race, culture, ethnicity, or gender. Hellison and colleagues’ (Hellison, 1993; Hellison & Cutforth, 1997; Hellison *et al.*, 2000) work in underserved communities highlights the critical role of after school programs in promoting the positive development of all youth, particularly youth exposed to a wide range of negative influences.

Second, once funding is provided, we propose that sport organizations have a responsibility to design programs that develop better people rather than simply



**Figure 1.** An applied sport-programming model of positive youth development

skilled individuals. Programming must be driven by theoretical and applied research in the areas of youth sport and positive youth development, and give particular consideration to general subject matter, specific learning settings, and methods of instruction. Programs should include more extensive coach training opportunities; through training, education, and experience, coaches can learn to teach and model the life skills and developmental assets that programs are aiming to foster in youth.

Third, we suggest that coaches and parents play a critical role in determining the quality of youths' experiences and subsequent outcomes in sport. Hellison (2003) provides a framework for teaching personal and social responsibility through physical activity, which can begin to guide positive youth development coaching. He highlights the roles of integration, transfer, empowerment, and coach-athlete relationships in leading youth from irresponsibility, to respect, participation, self-direction, and caring. He also provides preliminary teaching strategies including counselling time, awareness talks, group meetings, and reflection time.

In sum, the applied sport-programming model of positive youth development proposes that if policy-makers, sport organizations, coaches, and parents are successful in developing and implementing youth sport programs that consider youths' stages of development, are conducted in appropriate settings, and foster developmental assets, youth will subsequently have positive sport experiences, and emerge as competent, confident, connected, compassionate, character-rich members of society. Most likely, these youth will also follow a path to sport expertise or recreational sport involvement. However, the model suggests that if policy-makers, sport organizations, coaches, and parents are unsuccessful, or only partially successful in developing and implementing youth sport programs that consider youths' stages of development, are conducted in appropriate settings, and foster developmental assets, youth will experience less positive experiences in sport, and will emerge as less competent, confident, connected, compassionate, character-rich members of society. In addition, these youth will likely dropout or burnout of sport.

#### *Future research*

In addition to providing a framework to guide youth sport programming, the applied model serves to highlight areas for future research. First, future research should explore the different paths to positive youth development through sport. While the applied model assumes two positive developmental paths (the path to sport expertise and the path to recreational sport involvement), and one negative developmental path (the path to sport dropout), most research using the DMSP as a framework has studied the path to sport expertise (Côté, 1999; Gilbert *et al.*, 2002; Beamer & Côté, 2003; Baker *et al.*, 2003; Soberlak & Côté, 2003; Baker *et al.*, in press). While a path through the sampling, specializing, and investment years can lead to expertise, more understanding of the training and psychosocial factors that lead to recreational sport participation and complete drop out from sport is required.

Second, future research should examine how sport-specific settings can foster positive youth development most effectively. In particular, research should examine

which setting features (NRCIM, 2002), which developmental assets (Benson, 1997), and which developmental paths (Côté, 1999; Côté & Hay, 2002; Côté *et al.*, 2003) are most consistently associated with successful sport programs that foster the 5 ‘C’s of positive youth development (Lerner *et al.*, 2000), and how successful sport programs integrate these specific features and assets.

Third, future research should expand on the role of adults throughout youths’ sport development. While the model provides some guidelines for coach behaviours through development, no research to date has examined specific pedagogical issues (e.g. learning settings, general subject matter, and methods of instruction) within the framework of positive youth development through sport. Exploratory research is necessary to understand exactly how coaches can most effectively teach life skills and foster positive development in youth. Further, the model provides only general guidelines on parent behaviours, which are based primarily on qualitative retrospective research (e.g. Bloom, 1985; Côté, 1999). Additional research using quantitative prospective methodologies could offer additional insight into specific parent behaviours that could contribute to positive development through sport.

Finally, this model should be used to guide future research in special populations. While some research (e.g. Hellison & Cutforth, 1997) has highlighted the critical role youth sport programs can play in promoting the healthy development of ‘good youth’ in underprivileged communities, more extensive studies framed in the asset building paradigm must examine the unique challenges and requirements of program development and implementation in underserved communities.

## **Conclusion**

Given concern about the growth in adolescent problem behaviours in youth, the purpose of this paper was to highlight the benefits of organized youth sport, and the role that organized sports can play in contributing to the positive development in youth. We presented literature demonstrating how youth involved in organized sport can benefit from a better quality of life and develop numerous social skills; however, we also outlined some of the negative outcomes of youth sport. We used Bronfenbrenner’s (1999) Bioecological Model to highlight how shortcomings in children’s activity contexts, such as poor sport program designs (early specialization) and negative adult influences (parents and coaches), can hinder rather than enhance positive youth development.

Throughout the paper, we emphasized that organized sport programs need to be consciously designed to assure that youth have positive rather than negative experiences, resulting in positive rather than negative outcomes. We outlined setting features (NRCIM, 2002) and developmental assets (Benson, 1997) said to foster positive youth development, and presented an applied sport-programming model of positive youth development as a starting point for further theoretical and applied research. The model highlights the important role of policy-makers, sport organizations, coaches, and parents in creating sport programs that embrace particular setting features and developmental assets, so to in turn create competent, confident,



connected, compassionate, character-rich members of society. Lerner and colleagues' (2000) Model of National Youth Policy suggests that these processes will in turn lead to 'contribution', the sixth 'C' of positive youth development, so that youth will 'give back' to civil society, and promote the positive development of the next generation of youth.

As researchers continue to gain understanding of the factors contributing to positive and negative outcomes in youth sport settings, and as more comprehensive models of positive youth development through sport evolve, we urge that policy-makers, sport organizations, coaches, and parents stay abreast of current research, and apply findings to youth sport programs. While organized sport has the potential to play a significant role in contributing to youths' positive development, it is necessary to recognize that positive youth development through sport is not automatic, but to the contrary, is dependent upon a multitude of factors that must be considered when planning and designing youth sport programs.

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