

**Programs That Work**

# Why Children/Youth Drop Out of Sports

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**Executive Summary**

Forty percent of kids played team sports on a regular basis in 2013. Yet, numerous children and youth drop out of sports every year as well. This article explores the reasons why children and youth drop out of sports and offers suggestions for how parents, coaches, and youth development professionals can help to minimize unwarranted and premature dropping out. Three sets of reasons or constraints have been offered for why children and youth drop out of sports. Intrapersonal constraints include lack of enjoyment (not having fun, being bored); low perceptions of physical competence; intrinsic pressures (e.g., stress); and perceptions of negative team dynamics (negative feelings toward team or coach). Interpersonal constraints include parental pressure and loss of feelings of ownership and not having enough time to participate in other age-appropriate activities. Finally, structural constraints include time (for training and travel), injuries, cost, and inadequate facilities.

Suggestions for minimizing dropping out of sports and increasing youth engagement include redefining sports goals away from winning toward having fun, balancing parental involvement, encouraging multiple sport participation, enabling children to have autonomy and ownership over game experiences, encouraging rules that give every child a chance to play, decreasing parental pressure about winning, urging parents to avoid living their sports dreams through their children, and beginning sport participation at an appropriate age.

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## Keywords

*Dropouts, youth sports, youth sport coaching*

“Kids join youth sports programs in droves—and drop out in droves” (Indiana University, 2016)

According to the Sports & Fitness Industry Association (2014), 40% of kids played team sports on a regular basis in 2013, down from 44.5% in 2008. However, according to a variety of sport psychologists, youth development scholars and practitioners, the rate of children dropping out of sports by the time they are 12 or 13, and often earlier is a major concern (Eitzen, 2009; Johnson, 2012). Interestingly, studies of youth sports participation and dropout rates in other countries show similar trends (Carlman, Wagnsson, & Patriksson, 2013). The purpose of this article is to discuss reasons why children drop out of sports and possible ways that parents, coaches and youth development specialists can help enhance and maintain youth sports participation.

## Reasons Children/Youth Drop Out of Sports

Sports psychologists, youth development scholars, and practitioners (e.g., Butcher, Lindner, & Johns, 2002; Carlman, Wagnsson, & Patriksson, 2013; West & Strand, 2016) have presented various reasons why children and youth drop out of sports. Crane and Temple (2015) systematically reviewed factors associated with children and adolescents dropping out of organized sports (the review covered 43 publications from Europe, North America and Australia). The researchers then used a model of recreation and leisure constraints (Crawford, Jackson, & Godbey, 1991; Jackson, 1997) to organize drop out reasons under the three headings in the model: Intrapersonal, interpersonal, and structural constraints. Following their lead, several of the reasons for children and youth dropping out of sports are presented below under the three constraints model headings.

### Intrapersonal Constraints

Several intrapersonal constraints have been identified: lack of enjoyment (not having fun, being bored), anxiety or nervousness due to excessive criticism, and pressure from coaches or not getting along with coaches. Each of these constraints is reviewed below.

**Not having fun.** To have fun has been identified as the primary reason children participate on sports teams (Bengoechea, Streat, & Williams, 2004; Petlichkoff, 1999). According to a study by Kelley and Carchia (2016), 38% of girls and 39% of boys suggest that lack of fun is the biggest reason for dropping out of sports. Dropping out may be due to factors such as inflexible practice routines, and strict rules and guidelines which take away the fun part of participating (West & Strand, 2016).

**Anxiety and nervousness due to excessive criticism.** Children can experience undue criticism and pressure from parents and coaches to perform their best; win every game; compete so they can earn honors and recognition; and perhaps compete for college scholarships. In these situations, children may enjoy the game less and suffer anxiety due to the fear of making mistakes and may feel disrespected in terms of being

appreciated for their abilities, as opposed to the mistakes they make (Rotella, Hanson, & Coop, 1991). In turn, this can lead to feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt (i.e., I'm not good enough) which could carry over to other life situations (Montesano, Tafuri, & Mazzeo, 2017; Thomas, Cote, & Deakin, 2008).

**Pressure from the coaches or not getting along with coaches.** Some coaches have poor communication skills; autocratic or authoritarian styles of interacting with young athletes; and are generally unable to relate to young athletes, which may lead athletes to choose to abandon participation (Fraser-Thomas, Côté, & Deakin, 2008). Coaches may also pressure athletes to concentrate on only one sport, which can cause ill will and create an uncomfortable atmosphere for the athlete (Matz, 2014; Myer et al., 2016).

### **Interpersonal Constraints**

Interpersonal constraints include parental pressure and loss of feelings of ownership, and not having enough time to participate in other age-appropriate activities.

**Parental pressures and loss of ownership.** Many children are introduced to sports by their parents, and often only continue participating because of pressure exerted by their parents (Thomas, Cote, & Deakin, 2008). In some cases, children are pressured to participate because their parents are living out their own fantasies through their children, or the parents gain status or recognition from their children's participation. Often children feel pressured to succeed because they do not want to let their parents down or disappoint them (Fraser-Thomas, Côté, & Deakin, 2008). Excessive parental involvement and guidance can lead children to feeling a lack of ownership of their own motivations or sport participation experiences (Farrey, 2008).

**Not having enough time to participate in other age-appropriate activities.** Deep, structured involvement with one activity may take away from socializing, hanging out, being with friends, interacting with members of the opposite sex. This may be especially critical in the decisions of children once they reach middle school (Carlman, Wagnsson, & Patriksson, 2013). In a similar manner, excessive pressure to be involved in sports may actually take away time from studying, getting good grades, and keeping up with one's academics. Finally, our current sports model may not support older children's desire to play just for the fun of it. Thus, only children who can advance to the elite level of participation will be encouraged to participate and others will be encouraged to find alternative activities (Montesano, Tafuri, & Mazzeo, 2017).

### **Structural Constraints**

Structural constraints include sports-related injuries, overuse/burnout, cost, not being given playing time, feeling that participation is too structured and there is not enough time for free play or just being a kid, and financial constraints.

**Sports-related injuries.** According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, between 2001 and 2009, approximately 2.7 million kids under 20 were treated for sports and recreation injuries (Kelley & Carchia, 2016), including a dramatic increase in head injuries. Football concussions among 10- to 14-year-olds more than doubled from 2000 to 2010. According to Williams (2016), "Each year, more than 3.5 million young athletes experience a sports injury severe enough to warrant medical attention, ...and approximately 66% of these injuries are serious enough to require attention in the emergency department" (para. 5). Some kids recover and return to the sports, but many do not. Kids or parents do not want to take further risks.

**Overuse/Burnout.** Intensive, repetitive use of certain body parts for specific sports has been associated with overuse of muscles or muscle ruptures. West and Strand (2016) noted that many children are asked or pressured through families and coaches to undertake more and more practice—a factor that can lead to burnout and eventual dropout.

**Not being given playing time.** Some coaching practices and game decisions focus on giving the best players maximum playing time, with the focus being on winning. These decisions, however, may drive some players with lesser abilities off teams or out of sports entirely (Fraser-Thomas, Côté, & Deakins, 2008).

**Feeling that participation is too structured and there is not enough time for free play or just being a kid.** When sports revolve around rigorous schedules, other directed involvement, and strict adherence to rules, children may feel a loss of autonomy and spontaneity. They may miss the simple pleasures of playing a pickup game in the park with friends without adult structured pressure and adherence to rules and procedures not endorsed by the children themselves (Martens, 2012).

**Financial constraints.** Many sports require a considerable financial investment for on-going participation. Costs alone may lead children from poor communities to not participate initially or cease participation if costs cannot be covered. Year-round training, equipment costs, coaching fees, camps, tournament, and travel related costs can eat into a family's budget and be a determining factor in whether some children can start or continue.

Despite findings such as lack of fun element, sports injury, burnout and other factors causing sports dropouts, Kelley and Carchia (2016) also thought of dropouts as a temporary phenomenon. They found in other studies that 33% of kids had restarted a sport they had quit, which gives options for reattracting kids to sports by minimizing such obstacles or offering multiple sports options. This finding was also supported by Carlman, Wagnsson, and Patriksson (2013), who found that that many school athletes who dropped out of sports will reenter the same or different sports/clubs later on.

## Suggestions to Minimize Sports Drop Outs and Increase Youth Engagement

Based on past and current research and practices, various suggestions to minimize sports attrition have been offered. These include redefining sports goals away from winning towards having fun, balancing parental involvement, encouraging multiple sport participation, enabling children and youth to have more ownership over their sports experiences, decreasing the emphasis on winning, encouraging rules that enable every child to play, and beginning sport involvement at an appropriate age.

**Redefine sports goal away from winning towards having fun.** Parents and coaches should redefine success in terms of keeping participation as fun as possible, with attention to enabling participants to develop lifetime skills as opposed to a win-at-all-costs philosophy (Visek, Achrati, Manning, McDonnell, Harris, & DiPietro, 2015). Further, less emphasis should be placed on sports participation as a means for winning college scholarships since the number of young participants who will actually earn their way to college through an athletic scholarship is very low. Emphasis should be put on enabling participants to have a sense of fun and trying their best, while being

treated respectfully by coaches, parents and teammates, and getting playing time (West & Strand, 2016).

**Balance parental involvement.** Parental support and involvement is crucial for kids' sports success in terms of providing leadership, support and investment. However, overinvolvement such as instructing players from the sidelines, arguing with coaches and referees, and criticizing kids for mistakes has taken away the joy of sports. Children should have ownership of the game and the game experience (Vissek et al., 2015). Parents should be encouraged to offer encouragement to all players, and to assess whether their own behavior is contributing to a respectful sports atmosphere for their children, including being quiet on the ride home, cheering positively, and not yelling at the referees (West & Strand, 2016).

**Encourage multiple sport participation.** Parents should encourage children to play multiple sports before the age of 12 and give children a strong voice about the sports they choose to participate in (West & Strand, 2016).

**Enable children to have autonomy and ownership over game experiences.** Parents should enable children to make choices about their level of participation, (e.g., recreational vs. competitive and encourage children to have a voice and decision making power over their use of time and the activities in which they chose to participate; Martens, 2012). Parents should also encourage time for children to just be children, by promoting involvement in impromptu pick-up games or just playing in the park with friends.

**Encourage rules that give every child a chance to play.** Coaches should provide playing opportunities for all children and opportunities that can help maximize each child's on-the-field potential (Samuels, 2016). For most younger players, no youth trophy is worth sitting on the bench.

**Decrease parental pressure about winning.** Emphasis should be placed on developing a child-friendly atmosphere and achievable expectations, with an emphasis on fundamental skills development and enjoyment instead of competition or winning. Children's fear that they have to be the best, or they have failed, should be replaced by the reality that failure is a necessary part of the development process (Martens, 2012; Thomas, Cote, & Deakin, 2008).

**Parents should avoid living their sports dreams through their children.** Many parents play out their own fantasies about sports through their children's activities (Thomas, Coates, & Deakin, 2008). Children become commodities to be managed and promoted as opposed to promoting the full development of the child, with respect for the child's feelings, goals, and wishes. As noted by Miner (2016), "...until we dismantle the parenting culture that emphasizes achievement and success over healthy, happy kids, we don't stand a chance of solving [the youth sports problem]" (para. 15).

**Sport participation should begin at an appropriate age.** Parents should avoid pushing their children into specializing in a single sport, being on traveling teams, or having their lives dominated by sports, especially before the age of 12. Parents need to lessen their own fear that their children will fall behind if they are not part of early sport specialization (Hecimovich, 2004; Thomas, Cote, & Deakin, 2008). Excessive play and practice should also be avoided to decrease injuries due to overuse, burnout, and long-term physical consequences (West & Strand, 2016).

## Conclusions and Recommendations

Youth sports participation holds positive potential for enabling the physical, psychological, and social development of children and youth. However, there has been a growing emphasis among parents, coaches, and youth participants on commodifying sport as an arena for winning, status, and living out parental and coaches' rather than players' dreams (Jones, Bocarro, & Edwards, 2018). In many situations, parents and coaches need to rethink their motivations and their goals and become more youth-development focused as they pursue sport involvements for children and youth (Thomas, Cote, & Deakin, 2008). For example, Wallace (2016) notes that in some instances, "Kids are telling us this is not for me. It might be for you, but it's really not meeting our needs" (para. 8). Luckily, there is a lot of current attention to these issues and many useful suggestions are available for parents and coaches to follow. Careful guidance and actions from parents and coaches are critical to the evaluation of benefits and downsides of early sports involvement and ways to decrease instances of children dropping out, burning out, or suffering injuries.

However, overcoming the identified constraints and decreasing dropout rates is complex. Côté and Hancock (2016) offered a Developmental Model of Sport Participation (DMSP), which emphasizes balancing performance, participation, and personal development in youth sports involvements. Their recommendations are particularly suitable for children under the age of 13 and include the following:

- Regulating the length of season to 3 or 4 months, with a maximum of 6 months
- Limiting lengthy travel to organized competitions
- Introducing "grassroots" sport programs that focus on trying different sports
- Not implementing a selection process of more "talented" children until the specialization years
- Providing healthy competitive opportunities, but do not overemphasize winning and long-term outcomes such as championships
- Discouraging early specialization in one sport
- Allowing children to play all positions in a given sport
- Promoting deliberate play within and beyond organized sport
- Designing play and practice activities that focus on fun and short-term rewards
- Understanding children's needs and not "overcoaching"

The DMSP also proposed three stages of sport development:

- Sampling years (age 6-12 when athletes participate in variety of sports)
- Specializing years (age 13-15 with decreasing number of sports)
- Investment years (age 16+) (Fraser-Thomas, Côté, & Deakin 2008, p. 646)

Several innovative approaches to changing the atmosphere within youth sports have been proposed. For example, a group of researchers at the University of Utah sought to find ways to modify both adults' and children's prosocial and sportsmanship behaviors by carefully designing experiences to achieve desired benefits (Ellis, Henderson, Paisley, Silverberg, & Wells, 2004; Wells, Arthur-Banning, Paisley, Ellis, Roark, & Fisher, 2008). Through these efforts, the research team sought to facilitate

participants having more fun and thus maintaining higher levels of participation in the future.

Heinzmann (2016) has stressed the importance of parental orientation meetings as a prerequisite for youth involvement in youth sport programs. The purpose of these meetings is to a) acquaint parents with the coaches and administrators, b) educate parents about the objectives of youth sports and clarify the goals of the program, c) inform parents about the specifics of the program and what is expected of the children and parents, d) get parents to understand and reinforce the coaching philosophy that will be used, e) inform parents about their youth sport obligations and commitments, f) establish clear lines of communication, and g) help coaches and administrators understand the concerns of parents.

Various organizations such as the Association for Applied Sport Psychology (AASP), Positive Coaching Alliance (PCA), and Parents Association for Youth Sports (PAYS) provide education and training opportunities for youth sports parents. These trainings can be immensely helpful to parents, practitioners, schools, colleges, and other sports institutions. For example, the Parents Association for Youth Sports (2016) offers several education and training programs for parents. It provides video-based training to make youth sports parents aware of their roles and responsibilities. PAYS (2016) also has a 40-minute online orientation course for parents. Parents also are asked to sign the “PAYS Code of Ethics pledge.”

The Association for Applied Sport Psychology (2016) also provides educational resources for parents that deal with both the parents as coaches and spectators. These resources include *Dos and Don'ts for Parents of Young Athletes* and *Should I Coach my Child?* Finally, the Positive Coaching Alliance (2016) has a goal of developing “Better Athletes, Better People through resources for youth and high school sports coaches, parents, administrators, and student-athletes” (para. 1). PCA resources include 10 Tips for First-Time Sports Parents; Tips for a Positive Parent/Coach Partnership; and Learn How You Can Become a Second-Goal Parent.

Careful structuring of youth sport experiences can occur in almost every setting, providing that parents, coaches, and youth are involved in a conscious process to think about what they wish to achieve from youth sport participation and then designing everything from practice and game situations to achieve the desired benefits. However, increased efforts to use youth sports as a platform for identifying the best players, promoting pathways to college scholarships, or aggrandizing parent or coaches standing in the community will promote dropouts as participants feel the pressure to perform and the diminution of fun at the expense of an overemphasis on winning.

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