Youth Sports: Is It Worth It?

Michael Singletary, NFL coach and former professional football player, was quoted as saying, “Do you know what my favorite part of the game is? The opportunity to play.” Over 44 million kids agree with Singletary about the opportunity to play sports, which is the number of kids that participated in organized sports in 2011 according to the National Council of Youth Sports (Silverman).

In this paper we will present the impacts of sports on America's youth. It has been recently suggested that youth sports have the potential to accomplish three important objectives in a child's development. First, sports programs can provide youth with opportunities to be physically active, which in turn can lead to improved physical health. Second, youth sports programs have long been considered important to youth’s psychosocial development, providing opportunities to learn important life skills such as cooperation, responsibility, discipline, leadership, and self-control. Third, youth sports programs are critical for the learning of motor skills that serve as a foundation for recreational adult sport participants as well as possible future national sport stars.

When youth are involved in sports, they tend to be stronger and healthier. Physical activity facilitates cardiovascular fitness, weight control, muscular strength, muscular endurance,
flexibility, and healthy bone structure. Participating in sports also builds health habits such as eating healthy and taking care of your body. Participation in sports helps keep kids physically active instead of sitting on a couch watching television or playing video games. Physical activity habits developed during childhood and adolescence are associated with physical activity habits in adulthood (Fraser/Thomas). When youth choose a sport for themselves, they are more likely to stick with it and participate in the sport because they enjoy what they are doing.

Participation in organized sports can have psychosocial benefits for youth. When youth play sports they are likely to learn teamwork, cooperation, leadership, sportsmanship, and responsibility. Playing sports can improve the athlete’s overall mental outlook. This is particularly true for club or team sports, which offer greater mental rewards than individual exercises at a gym. Playing sports can also change the way youth see themselves by boosting their self-esteem and self-image. Participants learn to think about what is best for the team as opposed to thinking about themselves. Youth also benefit from encouraging and cheering for their teammates, as well as feeling proud of the accomplishments the team has made as well as their own individual contribution.

Children who participate in sports learn motor skills that stay with them into adulthood. These motor skills can also be transferred for use in other sports as well. For example, gymnasts develop flexibility and balance while learning fundamental gymnastics skills. That same flexibility and balance can be used in other sports such as skiing, ice-skating, and snowboarding. These developed motor skills stay with children into adolescence and adulthood.

Many parents struggle with what age to start their child in a sport. Not only do parents
wonder what sport is best, but how young is too young to start sports? Should participation be recreational or a competitive environment? Is participating in sports the right way to go? How hard should my child be pushed in a sport? These are some of the questions that have been asked and researched.

Throughout much of history, children's play was essentially a time for aimless exploration, but only if time permitted after the pressing demands of survival had been met. Sweeping societal changes in the late 19th century focused attention on what children were doing in their free time and how they were doing it. This scrutiny led adults to believe that it was important for them to organize children's play and to provide structured opportunities and resources (Silverman).

In the early 20th century, physical activity was a more regular part of life for an average child. Sports and games provided an additional outlet for physical activity and were characterized by free play. Participation of sports and games allowed the development of motor skills, social interaction, creativity, and enjoyment for participants. During the later part of the 20th century, “free play” or unstructured games primarily gave way to organized sports. From 1910 to 1930, thousands of school systems established extensive programs of extracurricular activities, particularly in sports and hobbies (Washington).

According to Washington, from the end of World War II to the turn of the 21st century, recreational programs evolved from a small area of government and nonprofit agency responsibility to a large, complex, profit-seeking enterprise. The organized recreational movement faced a serious threat in the 1970s and 1980s, as the cost of government led to tax
protests and funding cutbacks in states and cities across the United States. The demand for
organized recreation programs and services for children did not diminish, however, and it was
addressed in a new way. Replacing earlier publicly subsidized recreation programs was a
growing sector that provided an entrepreneurial, market-oriented approach to organized
recreation. Organized recreation became an industry, and it was made up of a mosaic of
thousands of businesses directly or subtly woven into the American economy (Washington).

Organized recreation has now moved from the public sector to the private, as profit-
making businesses now provide structured opportunities for children's play and recreation. Many
disagree with this shift, arguing that the bottom line is no longer the healthy and safe provision of
play, but rather how much profit can be gleaned from providing recreation too youth
(Washington).

As there are benefits with doing sports, participation does have some risks. One of the
major risks is injury. When selecting a sport to participate in children and parents are also signing
up for the injuries that come from playing the sport. When youth get injured, it often sets them
back in training, which can frustrate youth, their team, and their coaches. One of the most
common injuries in sports is a muscle strain from learning a new skill or overuse. Some injuries
can be the coach’s fault because the coach may not be trained to teach a skill or just push the
athletes too hard. Coaches can attend safety and certification classes, but many are not required
to do so. Pediatricians can also work with coaches on child development, first aid, and injury
prevention (Washington). Athletes may also have injuries from overuse. Without adequate rest,
athletes overuse the muscle, which can lead to an injury. Overuse injuries cause the athlete to
take a longer time off or sometime be taken out for the remainder of a season.

Overly competitive athletes who take their sport too seriously can become stressed if they lose, make a mistake, or cannot perform to a set standard. Often sports bring out a competitive nature in some athletes. It is fine to have the drive to win and to be competitive, but athletes need to learn how to keep things in perspective and to lose gracefully. An athlete may feel pressured by parents, coaches, or peers to win at all costs. In the essay, *Cheating and CHEATING*, Joe Posnanski argues there is an underlying “If you ain’t cheating, you ain’t trying.” vibe in sports (558). Some would say that this pressure can lead athletes to make poor decisions, such as cheating to win at all costs or even the use of performance-enhancing drugs. Some experts debate that performance-enhancing drugs is not cheating; it is just helping a body be the best it can be. While others believe that the use of performance-enhancing drugs is cheating and should not be allowed whatsoever. When the demands and expectations for organized sports exceed the maturation and readiness of the participation, the positive aspects of participation are reduced and in some cases eliminated altogether.

In the article *Let Kids Play*, Ally Bharmal presents how sports impact a child’s development individually and how sports can impact the child’s community. As Bharmal states, “Participation in sports improves the development of peer relationships, establishes the notion of trust and builds teamwork skills.” In other words, involvement in sports helps youth gain many important skills they will need in life. Studies have shown that kids who participate in sports improve their ability to make friends by 87 percent and helped to improve their feelings about themselves by 85 percent (Bharmal). The substance of their argument is that by involvement in
sports, kids develop a sense of belonging and build trust that will carry them through life.

In the article *Pros & Cons of Children in Sports*, Amy Kaminsky states, “The highly competitive world of collegiate and professional sports has carried over into the children’s sports arena.” Some coaches and parents put too much emphasis on winning. The kids get so stressed out and stop having fun with the sport. Kaminsky suggests that when it comes to kids and sports, consider a child’s personality and their ability to handle stress before allowing them to participate on a big-time team or in a competitive environment. In the essay, *Why Sports Matter*, Wilfrid Sheed states, “The real problem, and it keeps coming back like a toothache, is that there is no such thing as moderation or cool judgment once you sign on for a big-time sports program” (495). In other words, Sheed is saying that when youth participate in big-time sports or in a competitive environment, it takes a lot of time, which often stresses them out and can cause a lot of pressure. Both Kaminsky and Sheed concur that participation in big-time sports or competitive environments can cause stress for the child and take the fun out of participation.

In his article, *Pros and Cons of Youth Sports Today*, Jerry Noble, discusses how children can become too competitive. He believes that it is important for kids to learn how to compete. He does not believe that at the end of every game we should hand a trophy to everybody who participated. Noble suggests, “If there is competition, and we are keeping score, then there should be a winner. I see no benefit from not trying to win.” He is saying that competition is necessary since it gives kids the drive to do their best. On the other hand, Noble argues that somebody has to lose and the final score isn't the most important thing. He states, “Also, learning to accept disappointment and how to be a good winner are good life lessons.” Children should
be taught that the points scored in a game do not measure their self-worth, not everyone can be the best player on the team, and not every team in a division can be the champion or winner.

Christina Miller, author of *Pros & Cons of Youth Sports*, weighs the pros and cons of sports and how it impacts kids. Miller claims “Children who play organized sports have a greater chance to increase their physical skills and social skills than their nonathletic peers.” Kids who are active when they are young are more likely to be healthy later in life. Miller makes a valid point by saying “Youth sports also have health and safety rules, methods for selecting children based on their readiness, and methods for a fair team selection.” This can help make playing sports fair for all athletes and reduce many injuries. Miller also touches on the subject of time management; kids should not be practicing more than four days a week for two hours. As the child’s age vary, the hours and days vary, but coaches and parents should know where kids stand emotionally and how much they can take.

Being extremely competitive can also lead to unnecessary bad sportsmanship in youth sports. In the article, *Putting the Sportsmanship Back in Youth Sports*, Rick Coates explains that recently there have been concerns about negative practices in youth sports. In other words, he believes that youth sports are in need of reform. He states “Nationally, there have been stories of parents killing other parents over disagreements about youth sports. ESPN did an undercover story on kids getting paid to play on teams at the age of 10 and parents betting on games.” In making this comment, Coates urges parents to have good sportsmanship in youth sports. He, along with countless others, believes that it makes an enormous impact on the children. Parents can sometimes get out of control at games, which take the fun out of the sport for kids. Children
might even eventually quit because of this experience. Coaches and parents make a huge impact on a child through the examples they set for these young athletes.

Another important topic about youth sports is the benefits and risks it brings to children’s health. Obviously, participation in youth sports has many health-enhancing benefits. Michael Bergeron, author of *Improving Health through Youth Sports: Is Participation Enough*, however states “there is a recognized potential risk of incurring a variety of acute and overuse injuries for the millions of youth who are regularly involved in popular community- and school-based and other organized youth sports programs” (28). Bergeron’s point is that there is possible risk of injury when participating in youth sports. He then claims that most people believe the benefits outnumber the risks when it comes to youth sports. At a younger age, potential injury risk is a lot lower than when you continue on to a high school level.

Sports can also affect how a student does in school. Studies have shown that children’s involvement in sports has helped them succeed at school by 58 percent (Bharmal). However, it is also mentioned that too much involvement in sports can make it hard for youth to do well in school because they are putting so much time and attention into their sport. While these numbers are encouraging, it is all about balance with sports and academics.

One area that needs further inquiry is the pressure that athletes encounter may lead them to cheat to win or take performance-enhancing drugs. For example, the pressure put on athletes by coaches, parents, and peers could lead athletes to resort to cheating to win at all costs. When winning becomes the primary goal for coaches, parents and athletes, the potential to develop character disappears and is replaced by a “win-at-all-costs” mentality. The pressure of having to
be the best often pushes youth to take performance-enhancing drugs. In some cases there might be coaches who encourage athletes to take these drugs. By taking these drugs, all health benefits that come from participation are eliminated and threaten the youth’s physical and mental health.

Another area that needs further inquiry is the rate of participation in youth sports is rising but so is child obesity. Some would think that as the participation in youth sports rises and kids become healthier, the child obesity rate would be reduced. However, other factors may play a role such as the type of diet eaten, type of sport played, intensity of the sport played, and the frequency of training.

Additional research may be needed in the area of negative experiences that come with youth sports. Some children have a positive experience in soccer while other children may have a miserable or negative experience in soccer. If a child has a negative experience, they may not want to try any other sports again. For example, if a child has a negative experience because the coach was demeaning, this will affect the way the child feels about themselves and the sport.

Coaches should be educated about the needs and characteristics of their athletes. Coaches have a major influence on athletes and their lives.

Participation in youth sports plays a major role in the lives of America’s youth. Sports programs can provide youth with opportunities to be physically active, which in turn can lead to improved physical health. Youth sports programs provide opportunities to learn important life skills such as teamwork, cooperation, responsibility, discipline, leadership, and self-control as well as opportunities to learn motor skills that stay with the athlete throughout life. It’s up to parents to decide what is in the best interest of their child, and then monitor the situation closely.
so the child benefits from participation. Coaches and youth leagues/sponsors are also responsible for ensuring a positive experience and reducing the risk of emotional and physical harm to youth participants.
Works Cited


Posnanski, Joe. "Cheating and CHEATING“ “They Say, I Say”: *The Moves That Matters in
