



A Sporting Chance

By
Ann Muder

Kids get active, make friends—and learn skills to last a lifetime—through YMCA programs

As summer approaches, many parents think about signing up their kids for sports. They know it's a great way for kids to get active, meet new friends and just have fun. But the benefits go beyond just one season. Kids in sports learn values and skills that will last a lifetime.

By participating in sports, children can gain social and psychological benefits such as self-confidence, ability to manage stress, cooperation, good sportsmanship and motivation to achieve—not to mention the physical benefits—says Rainer Martens, Ph.D., sport psychologist and founder of the American Sport

Education Program (ASEP), which provides educational courses and resources to coaches, officials, sport administrators and parents.

"One of the potentially big benefits of sport is that it provides an opportunity for children to commit themselves to excellence, to learn to set long-term goals and work hard to achieve success when success is not easily attained," he says.

However, experts say a large number of kids drop out of organized sports by the age of 13, attributing part of the problem to the enormous pressure put on kids by adults (see "Shedding Light on Dropout Rates" on page 13).

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"When parents and coaches put the short-term objective of winning ahead of the long-term objective of helping children become better adults through sport participation, they fail the children and they fail our society," says Martens.

Kids need time to master basic skills before being placed in a competitive environment.

So how can parents help support kids in sports without causing too much pressure? Joining programs that teach skills in a positive environment, such as those offered by YMCAs, can help kids learn to enjoy sports—and develop a good attitude about physical activity that lasts through adulthood.

Building Skills for Life

At YMCAs, children learn the skills needed to succeed in sports in an atmosphere that emphasizes having fun and achieving personal goals over winning at all costs. And that's exactly the kind of program kids need, says Martens.

"When children first enter organized youth sports, parents should look for programs that emphasize instruction rather than competition," he says.

"Children need some time to master sports skills and learn the tactics of the game before they are placed in competitive situations where their performance is judged as a success or failure."

"The YMCA spends more time focusing on values," says Kevin Collins, youth and adult sports program director at the Bob Sierra Family YMCA in Tampa, Fla. The Y's philosophy is to ask, "Did you do the best that you could? If yes, that's more important than winning," he says.

Setting the Foundation

Youth sports programs at YMCAs are typically divided into three groups based on age and skill level: rookies, winners and champions. "Rookies," a program for kids ages 4 to 7, allows players to develop basic skills in a noncompetitive environment. "Winners" is a values-based program for kids ages 8 to 16 that helps players learn the rules of the game and introduces them to competition between

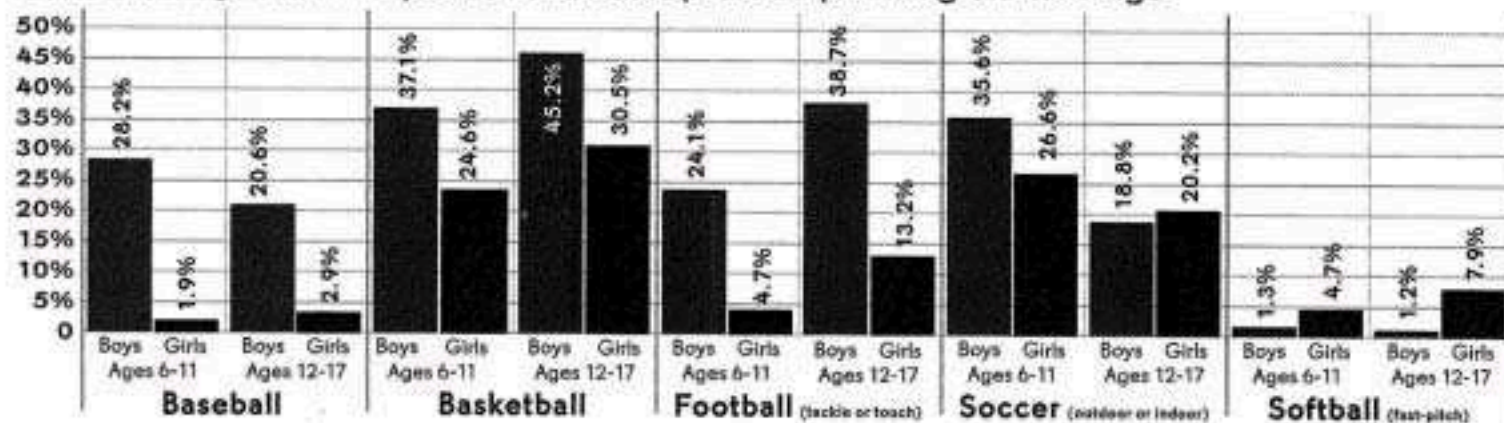
teams. "Champions," also for kids ages 8 to 16, helps players set personal goals and allows them to learn more about not only physical skills but also character values such as honesty, teamwork and respect.

The three levels of play help kids have fun while setting and reaching their goals, whether that's making 2 passes or 10 baskets. This approach, says Collins, helps participants gain confidence and self-esteem, because the emphasis is on setting and achieving goals instead of winning.



Which sports are kids playing?

Girls and boys seem to prefer different sports depending on their age



The Fun Factor

When kids have fun in sports, they're more likely to stay involved. At YMCAs, even practices are structured to make sure the "play" aspect is still part of the game, says Sean Schicker, director of sports development at the YMCA of Florida's First Coast in Jacksonville.

"When I was younger, I used to hate drills because they were so boring," he says. "Here we give the coaches tips for how to turn the drills into a game and involve as many kids as possible."

The YMCA's philosophy is that all kids play in every game, regardless of experience and proficiency level, and Schicker says that's essential.

"Lots of kids start out without the physical ability or aptitude for sports," he says. "They might be apprehensive about playing. But because of the right coach and supportive parents, it's really helped these kids to come out of their shell."

Providing Support

Many kids drop out of sports because adults put too much pressure on them. Experts provide tips on how parents can positively support their kids:

Cheer during—and after—games.

Parents can help their kids have fun during games by cheering them on from the stands and after the games as the kids leave the playing field. For example, at the end of the 5-year-olds' games in Tampa, parents form two lines and make a tunnel for the kids to run through.

"To see those kids' faces is just amazing," says Collins. "Maybe they didn't even touch the ball that day, but once they run through the tunnel, it just makes their day."

Focus on the positive. If your child makes a good play and puts forth a good effort, compliment him. If he makes an error or fails to achieve a personal goal, ask him how he feels. After your child responds, discuss the situation constructively. "Don't heap praise on a child who has not played well," says Martens. "You'll lose credibility quickly, and then when praise is deserved, your comments will be valued less."

Encourage fun and exploration.

Often, when parents see that their kids are good at a sport, they push them to succeed in that area. However, kids may need to try more than one sport to see what they enjoy the most.

"Michael Jordan not only has high aptitude, but he truly loves the sport," says Schicker. "If kids don't enjoy the sport—it doesn't matter

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Shedding Light on Dropout Rates

Professor says numbers are overestimated by media

Stories in the media tell the same disheartening tale: 70 percent of young athletes drop out of sports teams by their 13th birthday. This number may set off alarm bells in many minds, but some experts are not so quick to panic.

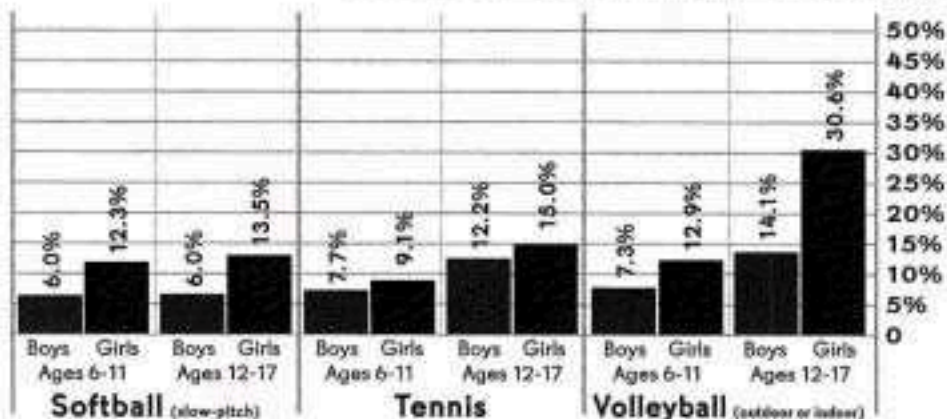
Richard Stratton, Ph.D., associate professor of education at Virginia Tech and editor of *Coaching Youth Sports*, an online newsletter, says the problem has been overblown by the national media. According to his research, the number of sports dropouts is probably much lower. For instance, the 70 percent number doesn't take into account that many players drop out of one sport only to join another. An additional factor that should be considered is that many kids simply branch out to other activities such as art or music.

"Most of these kids have given sports a chance and may have just found out that it's not for them," Stratton says.

According to Stratton, dropout rates reflect the organization of athletics in America, not some underlying problem with America's youth. He says in many towns, there are fewer opportunities for kids to play as they get older. For example, though a town might have eight Little League teams, that number could go down to two or four for middle school. By the time students reach high school, there might be only one team on which they can participate.

"Kids aren't dropping out," Stratton says. "There just isn't anywhere for them to play." —Elizabeth Watson

Source: 2004 Super Study of Sports Participation, American Sports Data, Inc.



Everyone Wins in YMCA Youth Sports

Kids can learn valuable social, emotional and athletic skills while having a great time

Kids have enjoyed the benefits of YMCA youth sports for decades. The programs emphasize good sportsmanship, teamwork, character and camaraderie with others, all the while teaching basic athletic skills and increasing participants' physical fitness.

But the main reason to play a YMCA youth sport is much more obvious: fun!

YMCAs' longtime youth sports philosophy is that every member of the team gets to play at least half the game, and without the pressure to win at all costs, participants are able to relax and enjoy the sport. Volunteer coaches and officials create an atmosphere in which healthy competition takes the place of bitter rivalry, and team building and individual development are the main goals. The rules of the games are sometimes modified to fit the specific needs of the players.



Youth sports introduce kids to new activities.

Team building and individual development are the main goals.

YMCA youth sports are an activity for the whole family, and parents are encouraged to support their players from the audience or even coach their child's team. Moms and dads are enthusiastic fans and an integral part of their child's experience.

YMCAs offer a variety of programs ranging from flag football to tennis to swimming, so there is something to interest every young athlete. Many of these go above and beyond basic athletic training. For instance, junior golf at the YMCA of Greater Kansas City, Mo., is taught by PGA-certified staff and includes history and etiquette of the game.

Sports vary among locations, and each Y has something special to offer. The Northwest YMCA in Houston offers ballet and creative dance, and the East Pasco Family YMCA in Tampa has Tae Kwon Do. ▼ —Elizabeth Watson

For more information on local YMCA youth sports or to register for programs, contact your local Y.

What have your kids learned by participating in YMCA sports? What have you learned by supporting your child's involvement? Write editor@yflifemagazine.com or go to yflifemagazine.com and click on Contact Us.

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how good they are—they won't be successful."

Volunteer to coach. "Coaching is a great opportunity," says Schicker. "Especially with the younger age groups, you don't have to have a wealth of knowledge about the sport. Knowing how to interact with the kids is the most important thing."

In fact, Schicker says, many YMCAs provide training for coaches to help them succeed. "It's hard to retain coaches if we don't give them the tools to do their job," he says. "Ninety percent of our coaches are parents wanting to spend time with their kids and give back to the community."

Parents can also receive training through national organizations such as ASEP, which has educated more than 1 million coaches, officials, sport administrators and parents over the past 25 years. ASEP provides "Coaching Youth Sport" courses online or in person for baseball, basketball, cricket, football, ice hockey, lacrosse, soccer, softball, tennis, volleyball and wrestling.

Parents who don't have time to be a coach can and should simply be role models.

"Walk the walk," says Schicker. "Kids are looking to adults—parents and coaches. We can talk about character development, but if [adults] don't show it during practices and games, kids may mimic that." ▼

For more information on youth sports or to register for a program, contact your YMCA.

For more information on how you can support your child athlete, go to yflifemagazine.com and search by article ID 141.

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