Chapter 4: Youth Sports

# 4.1. Youth sports: What we know

Since the late 1970s, researcher Jay Coakley and his students have talked with many children about their sport experiences and watched children play sports in different settings. Here’s what they’ve learned:

## General Conclusions:

* Individual children define and interpret personal experiences in many different ways.
* Experiences among children differ depending on whether sports are informally organized and controlled by the players themselves or whether they are formally organized and controlled by adults
* Informal, player-controlled sports are primarily action-centered, while formal, adult-controlled sports are primarily rule-centered. Each experience makes different contributions to the lives of children, and both have problems; however, people traditionally overrate the contributions of participation in organized sports, and underrate the contributions of participation in informal sports.

## Player Controlled Informal Games:

* When children get together and make up their activities and games, they emphasize movement and excitement
* When children get together and play on their own, they are interested in four things:
  + Action, especially action leading to scoring
  + Personal involvement in the action
  + A challenging or exciting experience (close scores/chances to display competence)
  + Opportunities to reaffirm friendships during games
* Skill differences and friendship patterns were the criteria used to choose teams in informal, player-controlled games
* Initiating and maintaining informal games is a complex operation; success depends on managing interpersonal relationships and making effective decisions.
* Informal games contain many modifications to maximize action, scoring, and personal involvement while keeping the scores close at the same time.
* Maintaining order in informal games depends on the extent to which players are committed to maintaining action.
* Players with the greatest skills also have the most freedom to use creative styles and moves in informal games
* Prestige and social status among players are important because it determines who becomes involved in decision-making processes during games; older players or those with the greatest skills usually have the highest status.
* Arguments, when they occur in informal games, are usually handled in creative ways, and don’t often destroy the games.
* When children play together often, they become more skilled at solving conflicts in informal games.
* Problems in informal games do occur: bigger and stronger children may exploit smaller and weaker children, girls may be patronized or dismissed when they try to play with groups of boys, and those children excluded from games often feel rejected by their peers.
* Playing informal sports involves the use of interpersonal and decision-making skills; children must be creative to organize games and keep them going.
* Informal sports provide experiences involving cooperation, planning, organizing, negotiating, problem-solving, flexibility, and improvisation.

## Adult-Controlled Organized Sports:

* Young people in formally organized, adult-controlled sports are likely to be serious and concerned with performance quality and game outcomes.
* Most apparent in formal, adult-controlled sports is that action and personal involvement is strictly regulated by formal rules; adults including coaches, managers, umpires, referees, scorekeepers, timekeepers, and other game officials enforce these rules.
* When children play sports that are organized and controlled by adults, the adults emphasize learning and following rules so that games and game outcomes can be considered “official” within the larger structure of a league or tournament.
* The children in formally organized, adult-controlled sports often are concerned with the positions they play, and often refer to themselves as “defensive halfbacks” or “offensive ends,” as “centers” or “left-wingers,” as “catchers” or “right fielders.”
* The importance of positions in formally organized, adult-controlled sports is emphasized by coaches and spectators, who often encouraged players to “stay in position” during games.
* Adult-controlled schedules govern the duration and play of organized sports.
* Individual playing time during games in formally organized, adult-controlled sports vary by players’ skill levels.
* In formally organized, adult-controlled sports there is a virtual absence of arguments and overt displays of hostility between players from opposing teams.
* Rules and rule enforcement in formally organized, adult-controlled sports regularly cause breaks in the action, but players don’t appear to resent these breaks.
* Rule enforcement (social control) in formally organized, adult-controlled sports is based on the self-control and obedience of players, but it ultimately rests in the hands of adults: coaches, referees, and game officials.

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***Adult-controlled youth sports involve very different experiences than children have when they play informal sports that they create for themselves***

* Children in organized sports are generally serious about their games--they want to win, although usually, they’re not obsessed with winning.
* Physical skills and approval from coaches are the basis of status and autonomy among the players in formal, adult-controlled sports, and approval from coaches comes most often when players followed team rules.
* Games in organized sports are extremely stable--they don’t end until the rules say they are over, regardless of the quality of play or the satisfaction of the players.
* Playing organized sports demand that children be able to manage their relationships with adult authority figures.
* Children in formally organized, adult-controlled sports also learn the rules and strategies used in activities that are highly visible and important within the culture, and through their participation, they often gain social status that carries over to the rest of their lives.
* When children play organized sports, they see bureaucracy and hierarchy in action, and they become acquainted with forms of rule-governed teamwork and adult models of work and achievement.

# 4.2. Youth advocacy guidelines: Do we need them in sports?

“Good things happen when young people play organized sports.” This statement is so widely believed in the U.S. that little attention has been given to the issue of child abuse in youth sports or to the need for identifying explicitly the responsibilities of adults who work with young athletes.

As more children play organized sports it is important to pay close attention to the quality of their experiences. Coaches have unique physical, technical, and social control over young athletes, and many young athletes learn that they should not question the authority or behavior of coaches. The hierarchical organization of many sports teams and the power wielded by most coaches in youth sports makes it especially important for us to establish guidelines for assessing the quality of the relationships between adult coaches and child athletes.

At a time when the rights of children and the responsibilities of adults who work with children have been explicitly identified in many organizations, these issues must be addressed in sports. At a time when the status or incomes of an increasing number of adults depends on the sports performances of child athletes, it is especially important to have clear guidelines for what children need and what adults should do to help children develop in positive ways.

Many people see sports as special contests when it comes to issues of control, discipline, and punishment. For example, the use of fear or corporeal punishment to control children and teach them lessons is accepted more often on playing fields than in classrooms. Theories supporting the notion adults should not hit or verbally demean children to motivate them are widely accepted in schools but are not as widely accepted in sports. The notion that sports build character, and that character is forged out of hardship and sacrifice, encourages forms of control, discipline, and punishment on playing fields that would not be accepted in other settings.

When organizations make clear the rights of children and the responsibilities of the adults who work with them, it creates a context that encourages those adults who give priority to child development and discourages those motivated by other interests.

For all these reasons, we need explicit guidelines for adults who work with child athletes. Insurance companies increasingly demand that organizations have such guidelines coupled with training programs to teach those guidelines to those responsible for children. In the case of youth sports programs, coaches must know how to be safe and supportive as they work with children. Realistic guidelines create a context in which coaches know what is expected of them. Furthermore, they enable coaches to interact with children without wondering how others might judge their actions in terms of subjective and arbitrary assessment criteria. Positive experiences for children and peace of mind for coaches—these are two good reasons for developing Youth Advocacy Guidelines.

A summary list of reasons for developing Youth Advocacy Guidelines now:

* Human rights gradually have been expanded to include the rights of children.
* We in the U.S. generally have ignored the issue of abuse in the context of sports and coach-athlete’s relationships.
* Many people define sports as settings in which rules and constraints applicable in other settings don’t apply. For example, some people readily disapprove of a 6th-grade teacher who grabs a child’s hair and pulled him to the ground in a submissive position. But they do not disapprove of a football coach who grabs a young man’s helmet face mask, forces him to his knees, and expresses anger about a mistake made on the last play.
* Many people feel sports are appropriately organized along hierarchical lines so that child athletes have no real power to control the conditions of their own sports participation, and that adults have power over child athletes by definition.
* There is an increasing number of situations where the material livelihood and professional reputations of adults depend on the sports performances of children.
* The role of athlete has traditionally been defined in terms of obedience to a coach, conformity to the wishes and expectations of a coach, following the absolute rules of coaches, and accepting punishments given by coaches when rules are not followed or expectations are not met.
* There is a growing awareness that fear-based approaches to controlling children are not appropriate.
* There is a general cultural acceptance of corporal punishment as a means of exercising control or teaching lessons.
* We do not have widespread coaching education programs through which coaches can be trained to know the limits of their authority and the limits of their behavior.
* There are traditions of abuse in certain sports.
* There is a high likelihood for children to develop dependency relationships with adult coaches. Kids seek adult approval and they may accept abusive relationships in their quest for acceptance.
* Research shows that pedophiles avoid contexts where there are clear and widely enforced rules governing adult-child relationships and the behavior of adults towards children.
* Insurance companies often demand explicit guidelines and training sessions related to following those guidelines for adults working with children.
* Coaches are increasingly aware of the need for guidelines so they can deal with children safely and constructively.

As we think about what might be included in a set of Youth Advocacy Guidelines that could be used in sport settings, it is useful to consider a scale of inappropriate/abusive behaviors by coaches. Such a scale might include the following behaviors ranked from the least objectionable to the most objectionable:

* Insulted or swore at an athlete
* Sulked or refused to talk to an athlete when expectations were not met
* Stomped out of the gym or off the field in response to actions of an athlete(s)
* Took actions to spite a child athlete
* Threatened to hit or throw something at child athlete
* Threw, smashed, hit, or kicked something in response to a child’s actions, attitudes, etc.
* Threw something at a child athlete
* Pushed, grabbed, or shoved a child athlete
* Slapped a child athlete
* Kicked or hit a child athlete with a fist
* Hit or tried to hit a child athlete with an object

Note: This list was inspired by material in Murray Strauss’s book *Beating the devil out of them: corporal punishment in American families* (New York: Lexington Books, 1994).

Coakley also constructed another list from the perspective of child athletes. This list is based on his ideas and the material from Richard Tolman’s article, “The validation of the Psychological Maltreatment of Women Inventory” (1999, *Violence and Victims* 4(3), pp. 25-37). This list could be used when gathering information from child athletes. The children could be asked questions about the behavior of their coaches. The following list could be used as a basis for questions:

My coach…

* *Put down my physical appearance or criticized my body*
* *Insulted me or shamed in front of others*
* *Treated me like I was stupid*
* *Told me I was nothing without him/her.*
* *Called me names*
* *Swore at me*
* *Yelled and screamed at me*
* *Made me run until I was sick to my stomach (vomited)*
* *Grabbed and pulled me by my clothing or equipment because he/she was mad at me*
* *Grabbed a part of my body and held it until it hurt because he/she was mad at me*
* *Pushed me because he/she was mad at me*
* *Hit me because he/she was mad at me*

The issue is whether organized youth sports programs should have such a scale or list so that everyone will have a concrete set of identifiable behaviors that are “out of bounds.” Such a list would be helpful for coaches, parents, and children.

# 4.3. George H. Mead’s Theory on the development of the self: Implications for organized youth sports programs

George Herbert Mead was a noted social psychologist who taught at the University of Chicago in the 1930s. He is famous for his theory of the self in which he used the game of baseball to illustrate the complexity of the relationship between the individual and the social environment. In his theory, he explained that the social and conceptual abilities required to fully comprehend relationships between different positions in a complex game were similar to the abilities required in the role taking processes that underlie all social relationships and, ultimately, serve as the basis for all social order in society.

Mead’s theory has been used to; (1) understand the process through which sport participation affects the behavior and development of young people, and (2) describe and set the limits of what can be expected from the children in organized youth sports programs.

## Interaction, the self, role-taking, and participation in organized team sports

Mead states that people or *selves*, as he chooses to call them, are the products of social interaction. "The self,” he said, “is essentially a social structure, and it arises in social experiences (1934: 140). He also explained that the development of the self occurs as people interact with others and learn to give meaning to their experiences.

In the case of youth sports participation, this means that children are influenced by the social relationships associated with playing sports more than the actions of fielding fly balls, shooting baskets, or hitting a ball over a net. Relationships with others including coaches, parents, friends, teammates, opponents, and peers provide the contexts in which sports experiences are defined, interpreted, and given meaning in a person’s life.

Mead explained that a prerequisite for full participation in complex social interaction was the ability to appreciate the roles of everyone else involved in a situation—that is, to see the situation through their eyes and understand their points of view. It was in developing this idea that Mead used a child's participation in an organized game as an example. Mead explained that to fully understand a game, children must be ready and able to view the game through their eyes. In a sociological sense, this means that playing a game or participating in any complex social activity ultimately requires an ability to cognitively grasp the concept of a social system or an interrelated set of positions or roles existing apart from self.

But children are not born with this ability. This is illustrated by a mother's efforts to teach her five-year-old son to understand that his grandmother is also her mother and that his uncle is also her brother. The five-year-old thinks only in terms of social connections that involve him directly and personally. Within his developmental limits, he understands his relationship to his mother, his relationship to his grandmother, and his relationship to his uncle. However, he cannot conceptually separate himself from these personal relationships to specific other people and grasp the notion of a kinship system in which *positions* are related to *one another* apart from himself. He knows that he is a nephew to his uncle but the notion that his uncle is his mother's brother is too complex for him to handle. And the notion that his uncle is his grandmother's son is an idea that he will not fully grasp until later in his childhood. According to Mead, the reason these conceptualizations are too complex for a young child to handle at this point is that they are in what he described as the ***play stage of self- development***.

The play stage is characterized by an ability to put oneself in the role of only one other person at a time. Thus, the boy in the example can use his mother's perspective to view and evaluate himself, as well as to view and evaluate the rest of the world. He has an idea of what his mother thinks of him because he can put himself in the role of his mother and view himself as an object from her vantage point. He is also able to use his grandmother's perspective in the same manner, and his uncle's. But he is not yet able to use his grandmother's perspective to view and evaluate his mother or his uncle. Such a perspective would require him to take more than one role at a time and look at the relationships between his mother, grandmother, and uncle apart from his relationships with any of these people.

It is not until children can take more than one role at a time that they enter what Mead referred to as *the* ***game stage of self-development***. It is in this stage that children first begin to understand relationships that do not involve themselves directly. This understanding enables them to begin viewing themselves in a manner that is not directly linked to specific other people in their lives.

Mead never pinpointed the age at which the child moves from being able to take only one role at a time (the *play stage*) to being able to take multiple roles simultaneously (the *game stage*). However, research does suggest that the role-taking abilities of children become increasingly sophisticated as they move through a series of developmental changes.

During the ages of 4-6, children are in an egocentric stage; they can differentiate themselves from others and the rest of the social environment, but they are not yet able to take the point of view of another person.

From 6-8 years of age, children start to be able to understand the point of view held by another person but they perceive their point of view as the correct one. During this time, interdependence may exist in social relationships but it only occurs incidentally. The actions of children involve little reciprocity (give and take, back and forth). Instead, they are based on internal conceptions of what should be rather than on what can be created through interpersonal relationships. For example, watch a group of 3-7-year-olds play “house” to confirm this point about reciprocity: each child follows his or her own "script" based on an ability to take one role at a time.

It is not until children are 8-10-years old that they begin to develop role-taking abilities enabling them to understand and accept another person's point of view. Then, between 10 and 12 years old they begin to develop the ability to distinguish more than a single point of view and to be able to assess the differences between these perspectives in a reasonably objective manner. This enables them to take what could be called a “third-party perspective” that is not simply limited to their view or the view of one other person.

Finally, after age 12, the ability to engage in formal reasoning operations combined with increasingly diversified social experiences adds another dimension to the role-taking process. During early adolescence, it becomes possible for young people to put themselves simultaneously into the roles of many others and form or a “*generalized other*” that takes into account and summarizes the perspectives of multiple others all at once. This signifies that the person is now able to fully engage in complex human interaction.

In the case of competitive youth sports, it is important to have a general idea of the ages during which these transitions are made. During the *play stage*, which seems to persist through at least age 8, children do not have the conceptual tools required to understand the complex interaction involved in many sports, especially team sports. Even children between ages 8 and 12-years old are only beginning to develop those conceptual tools.

Since a team is a collection of interrelated positions much like a social system is a collection of interrelated roles, participation in team sports requires relatively sophisticated role-taking abilities. Unless each of the relationships between all the positions on the team can be understood, the only way a child can be taught to play a position on a team is through a combination of imitation and behavioral conditioning.

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***Before age 12 children don’t have all the abilities to understand team strategies***

***and positions on the field. These girls play “beehive soccer” because they are***

***taking one role at a time—that is, trying to kick the ball toward one end of the field.***

However, it is nearly impossible to condition young players to respond appropriately to every set of contingencies encountered in games like baseball, football, basketball, hockey, and soccer. Similarly, most young players have not watched any single sport for a long enough time to be able to identify with and imitate the actions of players in specific positions across a variety of game situations.

The fact that various proportions of children under 12-years-old have not fully entered the game stage of self-development explains several phenomena that have perplexed many youth coaches and parents of young athletes in a team sport. One such phenomenon is what might be called "bee-hive soccer." Anyone who has watched a group of 8-year-olds play soccer has seen the following:

1. 20 pairs of feet, each within 10 yards of the ball, and each motivated by a basic understanding that they are supposed to kick the ball toward one goal or another;
2. Goaltenders each motivated by the basic understanding that if they wander more than 15 feet from their nets, they will incur the wrath of every adult cheering for their team; and
3. Vocal adults, some sitting, some standing, and most repeatedly yelling to one or more players: 'stay in your position" or "get back where you belong" or weren’t you told not to cross that line?”

But the players seldom stay in their positions. At their age, they are capable of taking only one role at a time and it involves kicking the ball in the direction of their opponents' goal. *Staying in position* requires the ability to conceptualize all the positions on both teams and all the relationships between those positions. Players must be able to visualize these relationships to determine their position and move accordingly.

Without understanding the roles of all the other players on both teams, judgments about one's own position are nearly impossible to make. This is true for all team sports. Positions are territories and responsibilities that are constantly changing depending on the actions and relationships among other players. Positions are emergent dependent on where everyone else is.

It is possible to take young team members and condition them to stay in their positions. But the process is tedious for both players and coaches because there are so many different situations that occur during a game. To create each of these situations in practice and have each player rehearse individual responses to them would be extremely boring to team members and coaches.

In baseball, for example, this involves hitting dozens of ground balls to infielders and telling them that given certain conditions the throw must go to first base where one of their teammates will be to catch it. This is difficult to do, but it gets even more complicated when “force outs", “tag outs”, and "double plays" are taught. These new situations involve changing responsibilities even though the ground ball is the same.

Think of how difficult it is to teach children under age 12 on a little league team to know their positions when there are base runners on first and second with one out and the batter hits a line drive into deep right-center field. To have all nine players on the team go immediately to where they should be requires years of conditioning done by coaches. For example, the child playing second base should move into a position to take a relay throw from an outfielder. At the same time, the shortstop should cover second base with the third baseperson covering third base. The first baseperson would move into a “cut-off” position between the relay position of the second baseperson and the catcher who covers home plate. And the pitcher should move into back up the catcher, and the left fielder should move in to back up the third baseperson.

This all-at-once collective team response is unlikely unless the players have entered the game stage of self-development. It is only then that they have the ability to simultaneously take the roles of the three base runners and each of their eight teammates, and use this collection of different perspectives to determine their position. When few players are in the game stage, coaches will have to subject team members to rigid conditioning to get them to respond in the appropriate ways. And the more rigid the conditioning, the more boring and tedious participation becomes for the players. Unless, of course, coaches can convince players that winning is all-important, and that winning depends on doing what they are told. Players who can be converted to this way of thinking are most likely to stay involved in the sport; others are likely to seek satisfaction in other activities involving less sophisticated role-taking abilities.

Mead's theory leads to the conclusion that when organized youth sports involve players under the 12-years old there will be many of them who remain in the play stage of development. Therefore, adults should "beehive soccer' and its equivalents in other sports – unless the children have been subjected to rigid conditioning during practices. It may be frustrating for adults to watch beehive soccer with children always out of position, but it is especially frustrating to children when they participate in the tedious practices needed to condition them to be always in the right position.

## Exceptions and Qualifications

Now and then a player under 12-years old may defy these conclusions based on Mead's theory of self. There is no precise age at which the transition from the play stage to the game stage occurs. The transition itself occurs over time and some children go through it earlier than others. Therefore, there may be a proportion of the 912-year-old participants in youth leagues who catch on to the dynamics of team play more quickly than others. However, in most cases this "catching on" is probably grounded in processes of modeling and imitation rather than a full understanding based on sophisticated role-taking abilities.

Some children have watched certain team sports and the players in certain positions long enough to act in ways that appear to involve a full understanding of the game and game strategy. The actions of these young players may be surprisingly appropriate during the playing of a game, but their actions are usually the result of imitation and roleplaying rather than real role-taking. Nevertheless, coaches look for players who have developed sets of imitative behaviors for key positions so that they can be assigned those positions on the team.

Coaches will also tell players with advanced physical skills that they should always “play the ball” so they can use their individual skills without staying in position. So there may be a shortstop on a baseball team who does nearly everything in the field without having to think about what teammates are doing. A quarterback and linebacker on a football team may be given the same freedom because they are so good that whatever they do is likely to be “the right thing.” Some soccer and hockey coaches have even invented new positions or “non-positions" for skilled players who have the energy to roam all over the field or ice playing both offense and defense. But the accomplishments of these players are grounded in their physical skills and the freedom to use those skills as individuals rather than in sophisticated role-taking abilities.

## Conclusion

Using Mead's theoretical approach, it could be concluded that the cognitive and interpersonal abilities of most children under the age of 12 are incompatible with the demands of complex team sports. Children in the play stage of development cannot fully understand the concept of social structure so they must be subjected to tedious behavioral conditioning processes to effectively participate in team sports to the satisfaction of adults. This suggests that game models should be simplified and adults should revise their expectations related to the performances of young athletes.

# 4.4. The “logic” of sport specialization: Using children for adult purposes

**Note:** This section is a revised and updated adaptation of Coakley, Jay. 2010. The “logic” of specialization: Using children for adult purposes. *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation and Dance* 81(8), 16-18, 25.

Through most of the 20th century, most people believed that the best athlete was the one who played multiple sports and had all-around skills. Playing three different sports in high school was an admired feat, and the decathlete who could sprint, jump, run, and endure was the model of athletic achievement.

But definitions of athletic excellence today are different. An all-around athlete in the 21st century is often pressured to specialize in one sport, or even in one position. Youth programs that encourage year-round specialization in a single sport have become so quickly and thoroughly normalized in United States culture that their historical novelty is often overlooked.

Sport specialization has emerged in connection with two changes in the larger society: (1) the privatization and commercialization of youth sports, and (2) the development of unique ideas about parenting, especially the definition of what constitutes a good parent.

## Privatizing Youth Sports

During the 1980s President Ronald Reagan and his administration tapped into an emerging cultural belief that *government was the problem, not the solution* to whatever was ailing the United States and the rest of the world. He and his political allies felt that the only way to solve contemporary national and global problems was to assume that *society was a figment of liberal imagination and that in reality, there were only individuals and their families*.

These two ideas – *government is the problem, not the solution* and *there is no society, only individuals and their families* – created a policy framework that has had a major impact on U.S. culture. Within this framework decisions and policies in both the public and private spheres have been based on the ideological assumptions that:

1. the sole foundation of social order is personal responsibility
2. the most effective source of economic growth is unregulated self-interest
3. the basis of personal motivation is competition and inequalities of income and wealth

At the same time, anyone who supports community-based public programs is labeled a “tax and spend liberal” and marginalized in local, state, and national politics. As a result, funding for park and recreation departments was cut to such an extent that it has become difficult or impossible to sustain public youth sports programs.

Park and recreation departments have been reduced to being brokers of sports fields and venues. Instead of maintaining and managing a full range of youth sports, they now issue permits to private programs organized around the ideas of eager parents and entrepreneurs wanting to establish careers in youth sports.

These changes have led to the emergence of various traveling, competitive, club teams and programs. Some of these use public fields and facilities, and others, especially in upper-middle-income areas, have purchased property and built their own. Commercial programs have also entered the scene with gymnastics facilities, indoor tennis, indoor soccer, specialized training venues, and other youth sports.

Youth sports today have become a career track and the primary source of income for some adults. Although most of these people are well-intentioned and committed to a combination of sports and child development as they define it. But to survive and support their families they need year-round income. Therefore, they have had to convince dues-paying parents that year-round memberships and participation were absolutely essential for the future success of their children—for their focus, skills, self-confidence, acceptance into college, college scholarships, careers, and even professional sports contracts.

The result has been a concerted *selling of specialization* in youth sports. Opportunistic program youth sport developers have received media attention hyping their highly specialized programs in volleyball, tennis, soccer, and other competitive-tournament-based systems that focus the attention of parents and young athletes on championships at the community, district, state, regional, and even national levels.

The success of youth-sport entrepreneurs and the extent to which they have shaped youth sports programs nationwide is amazing. The result has been longer seasons, more demanding practice and competition schedules, year-round participation, extensive travel to scheduled games and a growing array of tournaments, and high rates of early-childhood specialization in sports. Keeping up with the Jones’s kids has now become a coaching and parental preoccupation.

Over a single generation, youth sports have been transformed with new foundational philosophies and new goals that guide coaches, parents, and child athletes nationwide. These changes have changed the everyday rhythm of family life as well as family relationships and budgets. Children’s play patterns and priorities have shifted with a focus on the family rather than the local neighborhood and community as the sponsors of youth sports.

Local communities have become increasingly irrelevant as teams are now composed of young people from wherever their parents were willing to drive to make sure their children trained with the best coaches and players. The livelihood of these coaches now depends on win-loss records and year-round participation in their programs. When teams and programs have winning records, it is easier to recruit the next cohort of families and players as dues-paying members of clubs and programs.

Youth-sport organizers, entrepreneurs, and hustlers have not forced these changes on parents and children. Cultural changes in the larger social context of the United States have altered definitions of good parenting and what many parents want for their children. After all, it has been parents register children for programs, pay fees, buy uniforms and specialized equipment, and gas up their SUVs to drive the family to practices, games, tournaments, and national championships at Disney World and in numerous communities that now host events to boost local tourism.

## New Ideas About Parenthood

As the emphasis on individualism and personal responsibility has influenced people, ideas about parenthood and what constitutes a good parent have changed. For the first time in any society, parents in the United States were held totally responsible for the whereabouts and actions of their children, 24/7, 365 days a year. Although this focus on the family and these expectations for parents been defined as unrealistic and impractical throughout human history, they are now embraced across the United States.

Due to this cultural shift, the moral worth of parents has become directly linked to the actions and achievements of their children. If a child succeeds, especially in highly visible, culturally valued activities, moms and dads can legitimately claim to be morally worthy as parents and others are likely to see them as such.

The idea that the character and actions of children are created by parents has led mothers and fathers to dedicate themselves to the success of their children in ways that previous parents did not do. Parents today have become obsessive about nurturing the dreams of their children and seeking culturally valued and professionally supervised activities for them. Youth sports are ideal for proving parental moral worth because they are highly valued, visible, and organized to emphasize progressive skill development. They may even be given media coverage, which parents value because it adds legitimacy to their claims of moral worth.

High-profile, professionally administered, exclusive, specialized, and usually expensive youth sport programs are now seen by many parents as ideal contexts for controlling their children and making sure they are doing things that are culturally valued. Finding the best programs and sponsoring the involvement of their children is what good parents do today, according to new cultural beliefs about family and parenting. In the process, they have chauffeurs, assistant coaches, team moms, purchasing agents, laundresses, uniform and equipment dealers, facility managers, board members, phone-tree participants, email list readers, web site managers, and overall supporters of their children’s sport dreams.

Some parents have mixed feelings about this approach to parenting and have questioned why their children play year-round in a single sport. Therefore, they brag and then complain about the time and energy they devote to nurturing the sport achievements of their children. They make sure their children are on time for early-morning practices, they leave work early to drive to afternoon practices and competitions, they dedicate weekends and vacations to competitive events, they make payments for and put thousands of miles on SUVs as they chase youth sports schedules and tournaments here and there. They also pay club fees and fees for private coaching sessions. They stay in hotels and seldom have unhurried meals while they are on the road.

They often say that these things stress them out, but they do them to show that they are good parents. At the same time, extreme cases of parental sports sponsorship are covered in the media as models of parental moral worth. For example, when Shawn Johnson’s parents put an additional mortgage on their home to continue nurturing Shawn’s Olympic gymnastics dreams, NBC commentators identified them as ideal parents. During the 2008, 2010, and 2012 Olympic Games in Beijing, Vancouver, and London, media coverage regularly focused on athletes’ parents. Commentators and journalists praised the dedication and willingness of parents to subordinate their own lives to their child’s quest for sport achievements.

Johnson & Johnson, a major sponsor of NBC Olympic coverage, created a special advertising campaign called “Thanks, Mom” to remind everyone that “Behind every Olympic champion is a… mom [who provides] love and care…to help their children achieve their goals.” Olympic medals were won by sons and daughters, but they were merit badges of moral worth for parents.

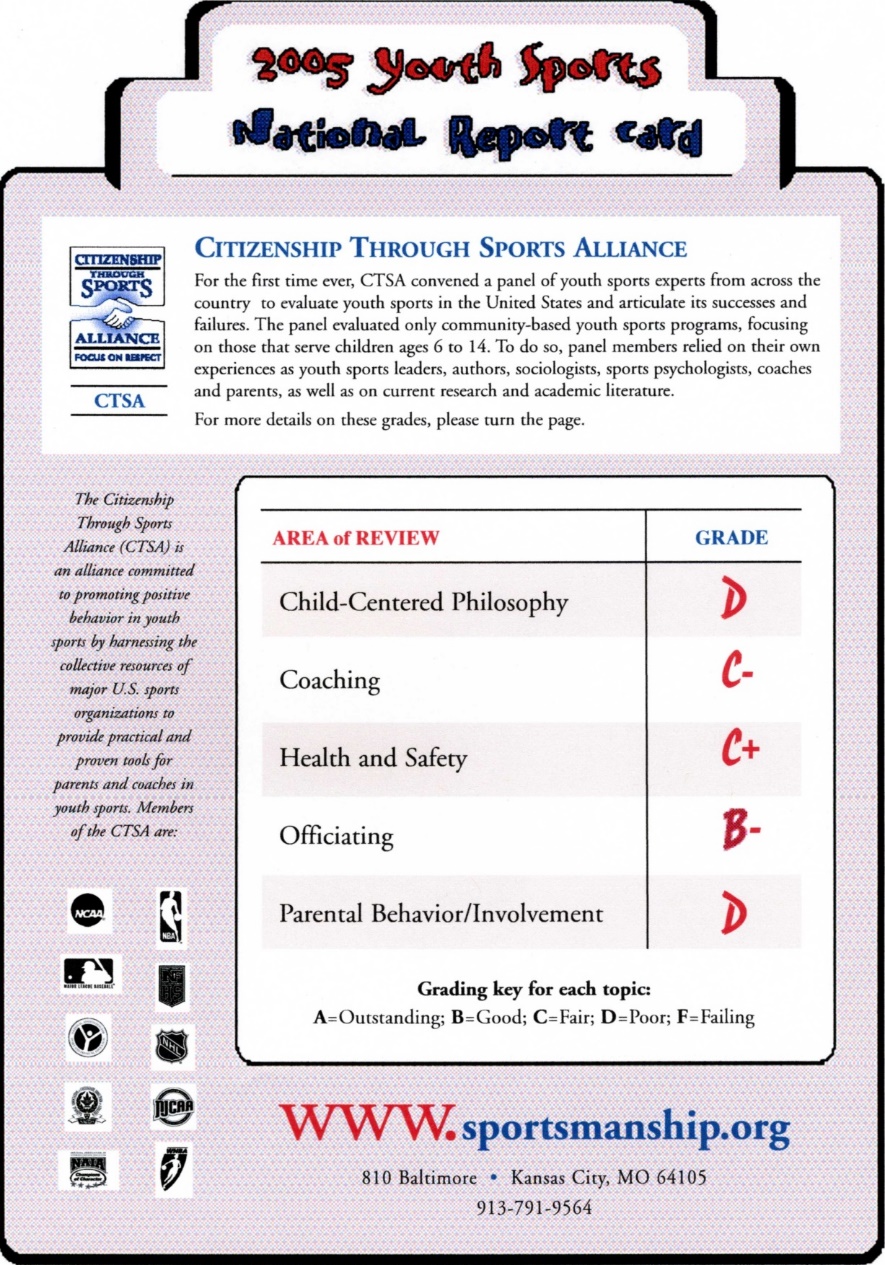
To help people understand the dramatic changes in ideas about parenthood over the past two generations, I often note that when I excelled as a young athlete, my parents were told by others, “You’re lucky to have Jay as a son.” A generation later, when my son and daughter excelled at tennis and played in the regional mixed doubles finals for the U.S. Open (amateur division), people often told my wife and me, “You must be proud of your kids.” But when a child excels in a sport today, the parents are asked, *“How did you create this athlete?”*

Being lucky or proud is no longer the issue because parents are now seen as the creators of a child’s success. This was demonstrated in 1997 when Earl Woods out-earned his son by selling and talking about his book, *Training a Tiger: A Father’s Guide to Raising a Winner in Both Golf and Life* (1997). Like other parents of age-group champions, Earl Woods was identified as the raison d’être of his son’s success, and other parents wanted to know how he did it.

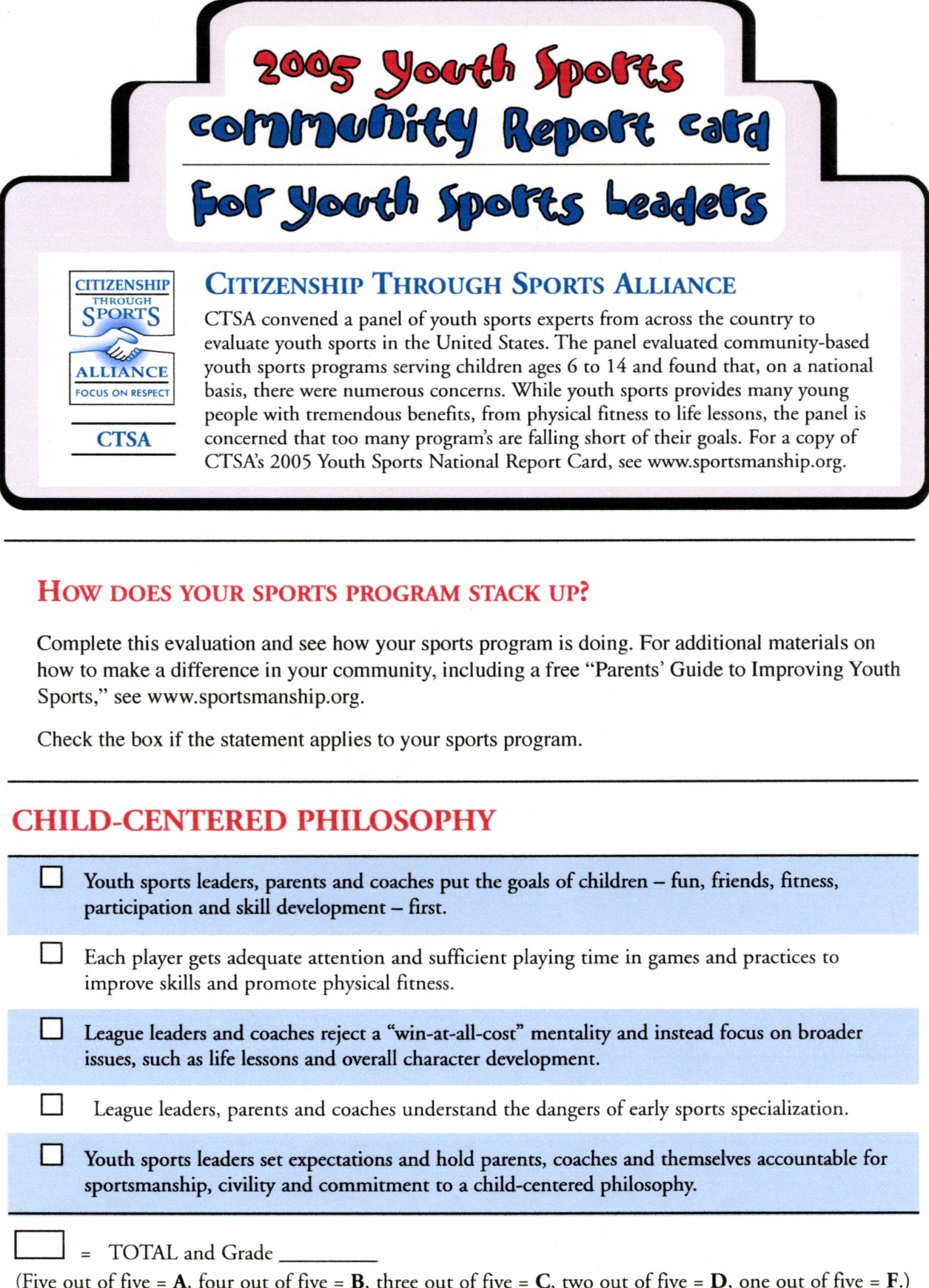
In less than a half-century, parents have gone from being lucky and proud to being the *creators* of child athletes. But the downside of this change is that moms and dads are pushed beyond the limits of their resources as they sponsor and manage their children in highly specialized youth sports. In the process, the experiences of young people are tightly controlled in ways that appear to limit their developmental experiences. Although research is needed on this issue, previous research on child development would lead to the conclusion that this is not the way to maximize a child’s potential.

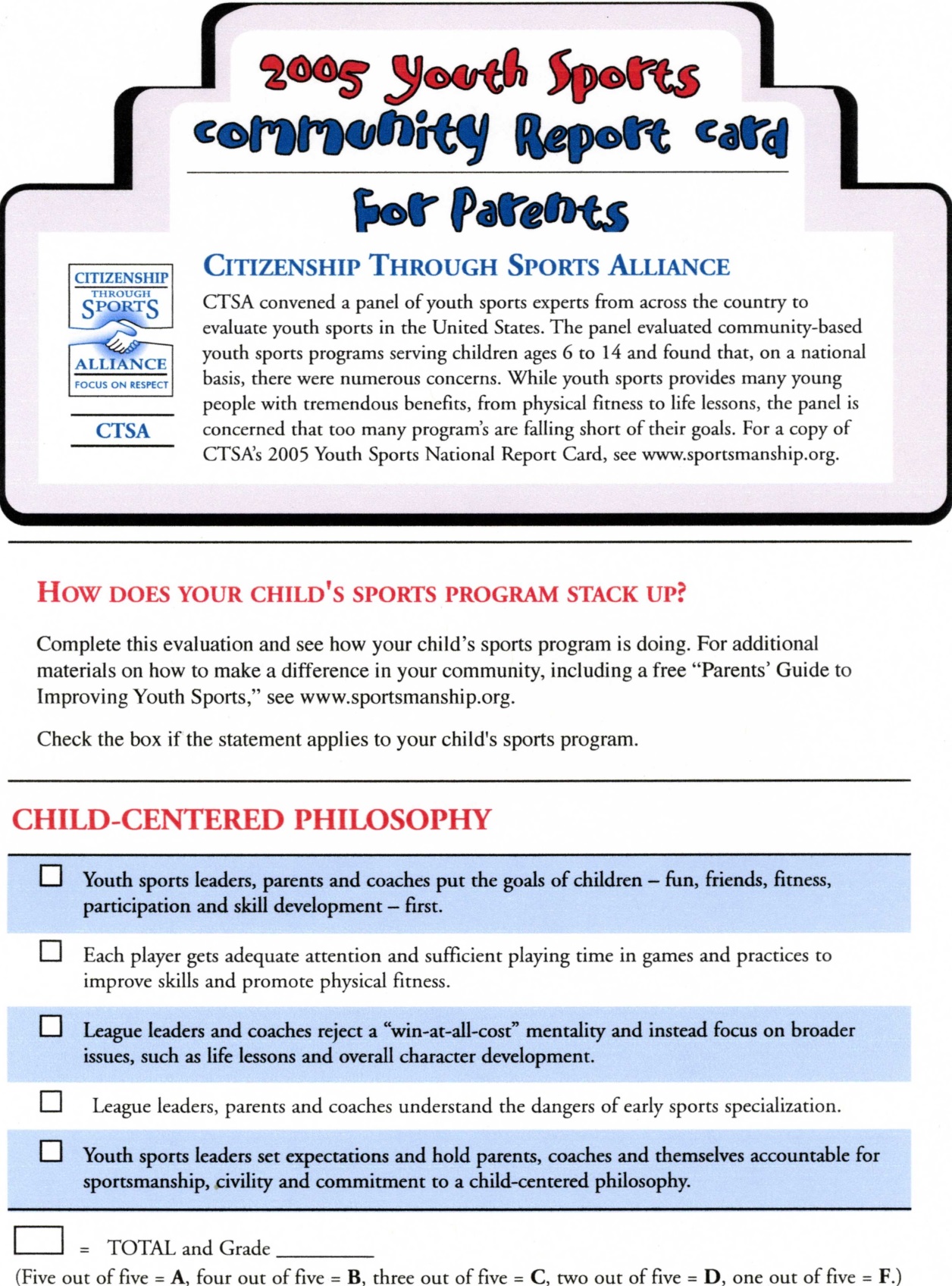
# 4.5. Citizenship Through Sports Alliance: Youth sports report cards

In 2005, an organization called the Citizenship through Sports Alliance asked a panel of experts on youth sports to develop report cards that people could use to evaluate specific youth sports teams and programs. When the grade point average (GPA) is a C or below or when leaders and parents give the team or program a score of 15 or lower, there is a need to make changes for the benefit of the children involved. Here are the report cards:



***Note: the grades in this report card were given by the panel of experts.***





# 4.6. Project Play: Re-creating youth sports in the U.S.

**Note:** This reading is adapted from materials describing the Aspen Institute’s Project Play initiative directed by Tom Farrey, author of*Game On: The All-American Race to Make Champions of Our Children.* (ESPN Books, 2008).

In 2011, Tom Farrey, an Emmy-winning investigative journalist at ESPN was named the director of a Sports & Society Program sponsored by the Aspen Institute, a well-respected organization that encourages global discussions about cutting-edge ideas.

The initial goal of the Sports & Society Program was to convene leaders, facilitate dialogue and inspire solutions that help sports serve the public interest, with a focus on the health needs of children and communities. Beginning in May 2012 with the help of the Robert Woods Johnson Foundation, ESPN, and Nike a series of events brought leaders from various institutional spheres together to discuss how youth sports could be re-imagined and re-invented in ways that would better serve the developmental needs of children in the United States.

As I write this in mid-2014, the Sports and Society division of the Aspen Institute is in the middle of a two-year “Project Play” that intends to lay the foundation for the nation to get and keep more children active in sports, and to use youth sports to encourage habits that promote health, fitness, and well-being into adulthood.

Project Play has been designed by Farrey to connect the silos among sport, policy, philanthropy, academic, media and other groups in a series of cutting-edge roundtables and other events designed to 1) identify breakthrough ideas and solutions that will lift participation rates, and 2) create the conditions for stakeholders to work together to address systemic breakdowns that limit access to quality sport experiences.

## The Aspen Institute’s Project Play: A Rationale

Project Play is organized around research findings showing that under the right conditions, youth sports can be a positive tool for child development, public health, and the promotion of valuable life lessons in teamwork, resilience, and leadership. But despite the potential presented by youth sports, many boys and girls today do not have access to a sports experience.

Largely gone is the era of unstructured play among children. At the same time, less than 10 percent of students now receive daily physical education, and in some urban areas no more than 1 in 4 boys and 1 in 6 girls play on a high school team. Intramurals and middle school teams have been cut, and pay-for-play fees introduced. At the community level, support has shifted toward early forming, tryout-based “travel teams” and away from in-town recreation leagues, often the only options for the adolescent of average ability, the economically disadvantaged, the child of a single parent, and the boy or girl who needs exercise more than any other—the clinically obese. For American children, physical activity drops by 75 percent between the ages of 9 and 15, a far higher rate than in Europe, and it has major negative implications for health care costs.

Children with the greatest access to the sports system, those with the resources to join elite club teams, are often at risk as well. Many get fed organized sports with a fire hose, asked to play one sport year-round from an early age to keep their spot on a roster. More than 9 out of 10 Americans say that more needs to be done to protect the health and safety of children in sports, with concerns ranging from concussions and overuse injuries to burnout and dubious motivational techniques used by untrained, if often well-meaning, volunteers. Parents, coaches, and civic leaders want solutions, but do not know what those are or where to turn.

In most leading nations, the responsibility of guiding the development of sport falls to a government agency with cabinet-level authority. There is no such entity in the U.S. In that vacuum, the Sports & Society Program provides a necessary forum for stakeholders to come together and explore “sport for all” policies and practices that may benefit all citizens and have been adopted over the past decade by countries such as Australia, Canada, and Brazil.

The ideas, findings, and opportunities that flow from the Project Play events are summarized in reports distributed to media outlets and our 800+ directory of organizational and thought leaders. Some of those leaders are spotlighting this work with their constituents, and this will enable Project Play to impact thousands of communities across the nation.

## The Goals of Project Play

The approach used in Project Play is based on the idea that children’s access to sports participation opportunities rests on three pillars:

* People – trained coaches and administrators
* Places – sufficient community parks and facilities
* Programs – appropriate to age, gender, culture, and income level

Therefore, one strategy is to develop content that explores the gaps and opportunities in each of those pillars at four developmental levels. Those levels recognize that the foundation for physical literacy and lifelong enjoyment of sports starts early, and follows a progression based on the physical and emotional stages of child development: Ages 0-5, Ages 6-8, Ages 9-12, and Ages 13-18.

After engaging stakeholders in a range of settings and through a number of focused dialogues, Project Play will publish in early 2015 a document designed as a blueprint to build U.S. sport models based on the principle of “Sport for All, Play for Life” – that all children should have access to a rewarding sports experience. The report will propose a national policy on sports and a framework for stakeholders to work together to address the barriers to participation and lifelong enjoyment of sports. The plan is to also include “Playbooks” (tool kits) for parents, community leaders and others looking to bring such a model to their area or group.

Awareness of Project Play will be generated through a variety of tools – social media, webcasts, text articles, and, potentially, a major media partnership. With all events and communications, the success of the project depends on how effectively it helps:

* Sports leaders discover strategies to help them recruit and retain children
* Policy leaders gain new insights to help them build tools for change
* Journalists find story ideas and sources to grow the dialogue on this topic
* Parents, coaches, and other local leaders make well-informed, quality decisions
* Stakeholders across disciplines develop new, innovative partnerships

Ultimately, the goal is to produce improved policy and practice in the three pillars that support participation (People, Places, Programs). This will be accomplished by helping more children become involved in a greater variety of sports, lifting participation rates overall, reducing attrition, and promoting higher physical activity rates among adolescents. In doing so, the project will re-focus the sport system in our country on serving the needs of children and communities.