

Sports in Society: Issues & Controversies

Chapter 5
Sports and Children:
Are Organized Programs Worth the Effort?

Origins of Organized Youth Sports

- Organized youth sports emerged in the 20th Century
- The first programs focused on “masculinizing” boys
- Organized youth sports grew rapidly in many industrialized countries after World War II
- Programs in the US emphasized competition as preparation for future occupational success
- Girls’ interests generally were ignored

Social Changes Related to the Growth of Organized Youth Sports

- Increase in families with both parents working outside the home
- New definitions of what it means to be a “good parent”
- Growing belief that informal activities provide occasions for kids to get into trouble
- Growing belief that the world is a dangerous place for children
- Increased visibility of high-performance and professional sports in society

Major Trends in Youth Sports Today

- Organized programs have become increasingly privatized
- Organized programs increasingly emphasize the “performance ethic”
- An increased in elite training facilities
- Increased involvement and concerns among parents
- Increased participation in “alternative sports”

Youth Sports: Types of Sponsors

1. Public, tax-supported community recreation programs
2. Public, non-profit community organizations
3. Private, nonprofit sport organizations
4. Private commercial clubs

Privatized Youth Sport Programs

- Growth is associated with the decline in publicly funded programs
- Most common in middle- and upper-middle income areas
 - May reproduce economic and ethnic inequalities in society
- May not be committed to gender equity
 - Private programs are not accountable in the same way as public programs

The "Performance Ethic"

- Refers to emphasizing measured outcomes as indicators of the quality of sport experiences
- Fun = becoming better
- Emphasized in private programs
- Related to parental notions of *investing* in their children's future

Elite Sport Training Programs

- Most common in private, commercial programs
- Emphasize the potential for children to gain material rewards through sports
- Children often "work" long hours and become like "laborers," but programs are not governed by child labor laws
- Raise ethical issues about adult-child relationships

New Interests in Alternative Sports

- A response to highly structured, adult-controlled organized programs
- Revolve around desires to be expressive and spontaneous
- May have high injury rates and patterns of exclusion related to gender and social class
- Are being appropriated by large corporations for advertising purposes

Different Experiences

Formal Sports Emphasize:

- Formal rules
- Set positions
- Systematic guidance by adults
- Status and outcomes

Informal Sports Emphasize:

- Action
- Personal involvement
- Challenging experiences
- Reaffirming friendships

Different Outcomes

Formal Sports Emphasize:

- Relationships with authority figures
- Learning rules and strategies
- Rule-governed teamwork & achievement

Informal Sports Emphasize:

- Interpersonal & decision-making skills
- Cooperation
- Improvisation
- Problem solving

When Are Children Ready to Play Organized, Competitive Sports?

- Prior to age 12, many children don't have the ability to fully understand competitive team sports
 - They play "beehive soccer"
- Children must learn how to cooperate before they can learn how to compete
- Team sports require the use of a "third party perspective"

What Are the Dynamics of Family Relationships in Youth Sports?

- Sports have the potential to bring families together
- Being together does not always mean that close communication occurs
- Children may feel pressure from parents
- Parent labor in youth sports often reproduces gendered ideas about work and family

How Do Social Factors Influence Youth Sport Experiences?

- Participation opportunities vary by social class.
- Encouragement often varies by gender and ability/disability.
- Self-perceptions and social consequences of participation vary by social class, gender, race/ethnicity, ability/disability, and sexuality.

Recommendations for Changing Informal & Alternative Sports

- Make play spaces more safe and accessible to as many children as possible
 - Be sensitive to social class and gender patterns
- Provide indirect guidance without being controlling
- Treat these sports as worthwhile sites for facing challenges and developing competence

Recommendations for Changing Organized Sports

- Increase action
- Increase personal involvement
- Facilitate close scores and realistic challenges
- Facilitate friendship formation and maintenance

Recommendations for Changing High-performance Programs

- Establish policies, procedures, and rules to account for the rights and interests of children participants
- Create less controlling environments designed to promote growth, development, and empowerment

Prospects for Change

- Often subverted when priority is given to efficiency and organization over age-based developmental concerns
- May be subverted by national organizations concerned with standardizing programs
- May be subverted by adult administrators with vested interests in the status quo

Coaching Education Programs

- Are useful when they provide coaches with information on
 - Dealing with children safely and responsibly
 - Organizing practices and teaching skills
- Can be problematic when they foster a "techno-science" approach to controlling children as they teach skills
 - Creating "sports efficiency experts" should not be the goal