

Sports-based youth development programs can provide settings that enable positive developmental experiences for youth if the program organizers, staff, and volunteers are intentional about the program goals and implement best practices.

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Characteristics of sports-based youth development programs

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FROM JUNE 11 TO 13, 2006, a group of youth sports social entrepreneurs (individuals who started their own youth sport programs), researchers, and youth advocates participated in a three-day summit sponsored by Harvard University's Program in Education, Afterschool and Resiliency (PEAR), Sports PLUS, and the Vail Leadership Institute. The summit, entitled Active Youth: A National Leadership Summit to Connect Sports, Health and Learning in Out-of-School Time, took place in Vail, Colorado. Its goal was to create a national agenda and an umbrella organization for sports programs in out-of-school time. Through a series of targeted discussions, the term *sports-based youth development program* was coined. Sports-based youth development programs are out-of-school-time programs that use a particular sport (for example, tennis, soccer, squash, baseball, or basketball) to facilitate learning and life skill development in youth.

The researchers who attended the summit were intrigued by the consistent themes that emerged among the social entrepreneurs

who started sports-based youth development programs and intermediaries. The social entrepreneurs made it clear that the sport skill was a secondary goal to the life lessons being learned. They talked about sport as the medium through which youth learn teamwork and decision-making skills. Sports are the hook that entice young people to participate in these programs.¹ In one program, for example, youth participate in soccer but also engage in writing. Soccer is the initial hook that brings the youth together, but these young people soon become heavily invested in writing as well. The creators of these programs believe that sports are not only hooks but that they possess intrinsic value. If appropriately managed, sports provide opportunities for youth to learn some of life's important lessons and can potentially provide them a physical activity.² Nevertheless, the consistent message from the conference was that sports are an excellent medium to engage youth and foster positive youth development.

Sports can be designed to promote athletic skills and healthy lifestyles. For example, participation in organized sports can provide opportunities for youth to learn more about specific skills and exercises associated with a particular sport.³ Organized sports can also provide a venue to teach youth about nutrition and cooking. However as Bergeron noted in his article in this volume, youth who are participating in sports do not necessarily acquire good physical fitness habits and skills for keeping fit in the future. Coaches, parents, and sports organization staff need to be explicit in their design to teach the skills they wish youth to acquire. Thus, sports programs must establish clear goals and use youth development best practices to foster healthy and contributing youth now and in the future.

Community youth development framework

Community youth development programs are defined as purposeful environments that provide beneficial, positive, and encouraging positive relationships with adults and peers that are sustained. At the same time, they provide an array of opportunities that enable

youth to build their skills and competencies and enable them to become engaged as partners in their own development and their communities' development. Programs that take a community youth development approach create opportunities for young people to connect to others, develop skills, and use those skills to contribute to their communities, which in turn increases their ability to succeed.⁴ The sports-based youth development programs discussed in this volume are examples of the community youth development framework in action.

Essential features of positive developmental settings within sports-based youth development programs

Sports can be contexts that promote positive youth development if the adults responsible for the sports program are deliberate in their actions to create a setting of developmentally intentional learning experiences. Such experiences have three main components.⁵ First, they provide opportunities that nurture positive relationships among youth and adults and among youth and their peers. Second, those working in the program identify and target specific knowledge, skills, and competencies for the young people to learn and develop. Moreover, they use teaching methods and activities that link to the knowledge, skills, and competencies being sought. Third, the experience is tailored to the individual needs of the participating youth. Thus, high-quality youth programs are those efforts that conduct activities, establish environments, and develop sustained and positive peer-peer and youth-adult relationships that are intentional and deliberately focused on building capacity and skills in their participants.

Creating an appropriate context is crucial for fostering community youth development. When youth work collectively with other peers and adults to achieve a common goal, they also practice problem-solving and decision-making skills. Such opportunities enable young people not only to build cognitive and social competencies⁶ that they can apply to other areas of their life, but also to foster the development of initiative or intrinsic motivation,

which often is absent in school settings.⁷ Thus, how youth become engaged in sports programs is more important for their development than whether they win. Therefore, programs must ensure that the context is engaging and has features based on the core concepts of a community youth development program. These elements are derived from the work of National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine⁸ and other scholars.⁹ These features of positive developmental settings for youth were presented during the summit and refined to fit within the sports-based youth development program context:

- *Physical and psychological safety.* The sports program provides a safe haven physically and emotionally. In terms of physical safety, the space for play is free of health and safety hazards, is clean, and has easily accessible drinking water. The emotional climate of the session is predominantly positive (supportive, relaxed, mutually respectful, characterized by camaraderie and inclusiveness) with a lack of negative behaviors.

- *Appropriate structure.* An appropriate structure has clear communication, developmentally appropriate flow and pace of sessions, and unambiguous rules and expectations. The staff and volunteers explain all activities clearly, and the sequence of events is developmentally appropriate. The amount of time for activities seems reasonable in that youth have time to practice and learn the skill without becoming bored or disengaged. The sports program has clear rules, expectations, and responsibilities for youth, parents, coaches, officials, and the sports organizers. The consequences are clearly stated and appropriate in terms of severity for the rule violation committed. These rules are prominent at all sporting events. Enforcement of the rules is adopted by all involved, youth and adults alike, as their responsibility. All stakeholders (youth, parents, coaches, officials, and sports organizers) participate in creating the rules, expectations, and responsibilities. Generally those rules are embraced by stakeholders when they have direct input in their development.

- *Supportive relationships.* The sports program has caring adults involved in the program's activities and events. Through these activities and events, adults and youth are able to establish trusted connections. The adults are intentional about building positive relationships with the youth, and winning is deemphasized. The adults communicate high expectations for behavior and skill mastery.

- *Opportunities to belong.* The sports program provides activities and events that foster friendships and provide youth with a positive group experience. Thus, peer relationships are inclusive, and there is a lack of small cliques within the sports program. Youth strongly identify with the program and their peers in it. The program transcends an individual's experience to be an experience for the whole.

- *Positive social norms.* The sports program's culture (for example, habits and expectations) that governs behavior and daily interactions involves conventionally positive social norms and good sportsmanship. A positive peer group culture establishes social norms that reduce social alienation and allow for the acquisition of improved social skills. Sport, as an activity, appears to provide a peer group culture that may assist youth in co-constructing their values and identities.¹⁰ Thus, youth help one another during practice by having conversations that are social and task oriented.

- *Support for efficacy and mattering.* In terms of efficacy, sports programs emphasize a youth's improvements in their athletic abilities rather than focusing on a youth's superior abilities as compared to those of peers. Thus, self-improvement rather than social comparison fosters higher motivation and perceptions of self. *Mattering* is the notion that a program provides young people, both individually and in groups, the opportunity to be useful and to make a difference in their social worlds. For a sports program, this might include helping each other during a sporting event and engaging in community service activities that extend beyond the sporting event, such as cleaning up the sports field of play and helping young children play a game. Youth engagement in meaningful tasks is most fruitful when the benefits extend beyond the individual and link him or her to the surrounding community.¹¹

- *Opportunities for skill building.* The sports program develops skills and competencies through its activities and team-building experiences. It provides youth the opportunity to build both sports-related skills and life skills—for example, leadership skills, decision-making skills, cultural competence, communication skills, problem-solving skills, and civic responsibility. The adults encourage youth to learn new skills or attempt higher levels of performance within developmentally appropriate limits. The outcome of the attempt is not emphasized; rather, adults provide encouragement to youth to keep trying to improve their skills.

- *Opportunities to foster cultural competence.* Sports-based youth development programs are sensitive to the cultural context surrounding their program. This means that the rules and expectations are culturally relevant and respectful of the unique values of the population that is being served. In addition, these programs deliberately foster cultural competence by providing a venue for youth to experience working with peers who are different from them. Youth who play on teams with diverse membership in an inclusive environment learn acceptance of and respect for cultural differences and continual expansion of their own cultural knowledge.

- *Active learning.* The sports program provides interactive and reflective learning opportunities that engage multiple learning styles. For example, sports programs are viewed as experiential learning opportunities, and youth are encouraged to take positive risks, such as doing a handspring on a balance beam. Whether they are successful or unsuccessful, these attempts are viewed as part of the learning process. Indeed, youth learn how to take risks and also learn how to fail courageously.¹² Reflection and teachable moments in practice or during a game are common techniques that officials and coaches in the program employ. Youth are given the opportunity to reflect on their activities in various ways, for example, by writing in journals, sharing progress and accomplishments, and providing feedback to program staff and coaches about their experiences. Adults frequently use open-ended questions, that is, “why, how, and what-if?” questions, throughout the activity, and the

questions are related to the context. This type of questioning encourages critical thinking and problem solving among youth.

- *Opportunities for recognition.* Youth are sincerely acknowledged for their contributions to a sport and their team. These recognitions convey a positive view of youth that is beyond winning. Therefore, effort, improvement, and sportsmanship are recognized and praised. Adults demonstrate support for youth in terms of their contribution or accomplishments by acknowledging what they said or did with specific and nonevaluative language.

- *Strength-based focus.* Sports-based youth development programs are strength based because they draw on individuals' strengths and assets to develop new skills or refine existing skills. Although the programs may reduce risk factors associated with poor outcomes, such as youth engagement in problem behaviors, the program objectives are developing strengths. Indeed, the program is focused on increasing individuals' ability to thrive by building their capacity to manage the multiple, ongoing demands of life. Fostering resiliency and thriving is not a program but a process. Three major strategies guide the process: fostering caring relationships that are grounded in listening and basic trust, high expectations that emphasize strengths and assets, and opportunities for skill development and engagement in the process. These strategies are seen in the features of a youth development setting.

- *Ecological and holistic programs.* By their very nature, effective and successful sports-based youth development programs are ecological programs, that is, they address multiple facets of the physical and social environments.¹³ In addressing the whole child within the multiple roles children play in their lives and not just their role as a player, these programs use multiple methods to address the needs of the whole child and foster a healthy and contributing young person. The message is positive and focused on building on skills and assets for improvement.

- *Integration of family, school, and community efforts.* The sports program coordinates its efforts and communicates regularly with families and schools to ensure similar norms and expectations across settings. It offers a variety of activities and events that involve parents—for example, social events, parental workshops,

and volunteer opportunities. Positive youth development is facilitated when the adults in the different settings of young people's lives have consistent messages. Encouraging parents to volunteer increases the likelihood that a clear, consistent, and positive message is being communicated to youth. Sport organizers need to establish a working relationship with schools that enables both entities to establish policies that deliver a consistent message, for example, a sports organization that has an excused absence policy for academic or enrichment activities. Moreover, several sports-based youth development programs are aligned with the goal of strengthening academic skills through tutoring, for example.

Conclusion

Sports-based youth development programs have an essential role to play in promoting healthy youth who contribute to society. They can provide settings and experiences that enable positive developmental experiences to occur if program organizers, staff, and volunteers are intentional in how they go about implementing these programs. We need to consider time spent out of school for youth as an opportunity for fostering positive youth development. Indeed, according to Villarruel and colleagues, "By engaging and providing youth with real opportunities to contribute to the communities where they live, the clubs and organizations that they participate in, and the families that they grow up in, we believe that we are ensuring the successful development of youth now and in the future."¹⁴

Notes

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