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The Benefits of Youth Sports

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The Benefits of Youth Sports

By

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May 2022

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to determine and identify the many benefits that can be earned through participation in youth sports. Many parents and guardians enroll their children in youth sports programs as a way to introduce them to new hobbies and activities to pass the time in their youthful years, but there are many added benefits other than simply enjoying sports as a pastime. Youth sports can provide opportunities for children to better themselves in many different avenues of life, including socially, physically and mentally, and allow them to find their role in society at an early age. Beginning with the statistics of how popular youth sports are in America, the benefits that come from youth sports are discussed using multiple sources to credit these claims. The topics that are discussed throughout this paper are social development, life skills, physical and mental health, the Special Olympics, racial inclusion and opportunity, and team vs. individual sports. These are followed by a section containing counter arguments to all claims made prior, as well as discussion leading to debate. Youth sports provide opportunities for children of all ages to better themselves physically, mentally, as well as helping them to understand valuable life lessons along the way.

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Introduction

It is no secret that in the United States, sports play a significant role in our lives and dominate a large portion of the media and information we receive. When we think about youth sports in America, most of the time, we visualize small-town baseball parks where popcorn and slushies are being sold at the concession stand, and each player supports a local business' logo on their jersey. As youth sports have become more modernized, the days of youngsters participating in local leagues for the fun of the game and just passing the time are gone. Youth sports have become a semi-professional world where excellence is demanded, and results are measured in detailed statistics. Children are often coerced to begin athletic participation at young ages and are encouraged to develop big dreams of playing sports professionally once they have reached adulthood. For many of us, sports are an excellent pastime to enjoy as we cheer on our favorite teams, wear our favorite fan gear, and possibly even participate in our own local sports leagues. Are the added pressures of youth sports beneficial for children, or would they be better off not being involved in competitive sports at an early developmental stage of their lives? A few years ago, a study was administered to 283 children who were labeled as socially vulnerable. The question the study aimed to answer was if participation in sports programs provided a positive reflection on the children in certain aspects of their development. These qualities were listed as problem behavior, prosocial behavior, school performance, subjective health, well-being, and self-regulation skills (Super et al., 2018). A questionnaire was given to each athlete at the beginning of the study, after six months had gone by, the same questions were given to the athletes, combined with data gathered from each individual

child during the participation interval of six months. Results at the end of the study concluded that nearly every one of the participants experienced growth in all measured categories of human development, with the most advanced being achieved in the categories of prosocial behavior, subjective health, and personal well-being (Super et al., 2018). Based on these results, we can assume that involving children in youth sports is beneficial, especially in terms of social and cognitive development. Are these results relevant to every child that may participate in youth sports, and how will they affect children from impoverished communities or those with intellectual disabilities? My goal in my research is to gain a better understanding of how participation in sports for children can help them to become more effective and contributing members of society, as well as how it positively affects their growth and development from childhood to adulthood.

To gain a better understanding of how involvement in sports may affect our nation's children, first, we need to find out roughly how many children are currently involved in organized sports, as this may help us to establish conclusions on the lasting effects of participation. It is reported that a staggering 71.8% of children between the ages of 6 and 12 will compete in at least one athletic activity in a given year (Lange, 2021). With so many young children involved in sports and competitive activities across our nation, it is compelling to ask how youth sports affect the development of young children as they mature and grow. It is also important to note that 61.8% of children ages 6 to 12 were reported to be involved in at least one organized team sport in a given year (Lange, 2021). I feel this is important because I am interested in seeing how children are affected differently if they are involved in team sports or if they are involved

in individual sports or activities. In my personal experience, I was never involved in any individual sports, where I was the only performer. I have only been a part of sports that involve a team, so researching the potential differences in development will help me better understand how different athletic activities play a role in the development of young participants.

As established in the above paragraphs, children have many different opportunities to participate in sports or competitive activities. The question I am seeking to answer is how being involved in these activities positively affects the growth and development of children. I plan to eventually conclude what activities potentially provide the most benefits for development as well as counter and provide the activities that may produce the most harm. As previously stated, my main goal is to determine how sports and competitive activities positively affect the development of children as they move forward in their lives. Therefore, instead of researching the broad question, I plan to outline my research by subjects that tie back to the main goal of my research. I feel that this structure and outline will help provide a more thorough research process and aid in seeking out the benefits and potential drawbacks of participating in competitive activities. The main subjects that I will be dissecting in my research are; social development, effects on physical and mental health, the Special Olympics and how they provide ample opportunity for children with special needs, and how youth sports prepare children for their future, more specifically, the life skills that can be attained through participation in sports and other competitive activities. After covering these specific topics, I plan to provide specific sports or activities that are the most beneficial to children and the activities that are not.

Social Development

As children grow and mature, they will find themselves on the path to finding their personal identity. A child's development can depend upon an endless number of factors and experiences they respond to in their daily lives. Over the last 40 years, companies and workplaces have been actively looking for candidates with excellent social skills, as most jobs in today's society require a higher level of social competence than in our country's past (Deming, 2017). Providing our children with ample opportunity to develop and promote social skills is a necessity, as this can help progress them as their life advances. Involving children in sports will help them to establish their tendencies in a stressful situation, as well as how they react and respond to other individuals' actions. Dr. Susan Canizares defines social development as the process through which a child builds personal relationships (Canizares, 2018). Canizares adds that a child is actively learning to have meaningful connections within social development. A child can learn and gain knowledge about other people, using that to help add to and maintain existing relationships while helping build new opportunities (Canizares, 2018). Through social development, children are made aware of how their personal feelings play a role in their daily lives, as well as strengthening their ability to interact with others and develop a deeper understanding of what others are experiencing emotionally and mentally (Cherry, 2020). Having children in sports can offer an accelerated developmental experience, as children are forced to learn the confines and rules of the respective game they are involved in. Additionally, children must learn to develop the ability to communicate clearly and effectively with others, whether it be coaches or their teammates. Parents often only see sports as an opportunity for children to be more

active and to possibly better themselves physically, but adding sports to a child's day will aid in developing positive life skills through another avenue of learning (Hoban, 2020).

One major aspect of involving children in sports is they are able to establish new relationships and meet new friends that they may otherwise not have had the chance to interact with within their normal school environment. Obviously, we are aware of the significant impact that being close with someone can have on us, friendships and meaningful relationships are a necessity in our lives, especially during our childhood when we begin to learn and grow into ourselves. As children become more involved in social situations, this can help promote their growth and allow them to communicate and interact with others positively. Friendships will allow children to develop a sense of belonging and purpose, including boosted self-confidence and pride in themselves (Mayo Clinic, 2022). In today's world of influencers and larger-than-life personalities on social media, many question their sense of purpose. For children who are already facing many challenges of growing up and fitting in, the opportunities that surround them in sports can offer a way to find a small portion of their identity, giving them a purpose and providing them with personal pride and self-confidence that they may have never felt before. Sports also have the ability to allow children to simply experience bonding with others that are not of relation (*The Role of Friendships in Youth Sports*, 2021). Parents and guardians should not overlook the opportunity for children to experience social interaction through sports. Introducing a child to sports or other competitive activities could provide a wonderful experience for an individual to find their role in society and their sense of belonging to their selective social group, in this case, being the team they

are a part of. Additionally, involving a child in youth sports programs enhances the opportunity for them to meet new children and begin friendships from all different backgrounds and cultures that they may have never had the chance to interact with, if not for their shared experiences in sports. The importance of providing children with increased opportunities for socialization is necessary for their social development. As children make friends and have natural experiences with others their age, they begin to understand social rules and experience common dilemmas that come from friendships, including anger, fear, frustration, and rejection (Gurian & Pope, 2009). Gurian and Pope also state that without friendships, children will not be able to reason with and understand the feelings of others that are not biologically related to them. Participating in sports will help a child find their personal group or clique. Obviously, children do not have to be involved in groups, but as humans grow, there becomes a natural shifting of social groups that is commonly noticed around the ages of 10 to 12 (Gurian & Pope, 2009). A lot of times, these groups are formed by what activities these specific children are involved in, as this helps them to fit in with a general crowd and feel a sense of belonging and brotherhood. Sports can provide an opportunity a child needs to help to help accelerate them to overcome their fear of crowds, fear of failure, or simply their fear of performance. Throughout a youth sports season, children are actively involved in the lives of their teammates, whether they realize it or not. Through the multitude of practices, workouts, and games, natural relationships are built and strengthened on and off of the playing surface (*The Role of Friendships in Youth Sports*, 2021). These friendships are not just limited to an individual's childhood, as many long-lasting friendships are born through being involved in youth sports together. For a relationship

to last a lifetime, each party must be able to give and receive at times and work through difficult situations that create fiery moments. Sports competition may drive some to anger and jealousy of others, but being able to remain in close relationships with those you compete alongside are the friendships that can stand the test of time (Brown, 2017). Establishing long lasting friendships and relationships are likely to occur through involvement in sports because of the inevitable ups and downs that sports can bring into the lives of those participating. As children begin new friendships, they will learn what it means to be in a relationship, whereas your friends may rely on you just as you rely on them. Additionally, friendships can go through rough patches where tempers can flare and arguments will begin. Having experience in this at a young age can aid a child in their ability to handle conflict between those they are close with, eventually leading to a resolution. As adults, taking your ball and going home is not an effective coping strategy to resolve conflicts between peers or friends, so for friendships between children that are born through similar interests in athletics, this can provide great experience and lessons in how to properly manage relationships throughout the rest of their lives.

Another benefit of involving children in youth sports is that sports have been promoted as a way to help youth student-athletes improve their natural problem-solving skills. According to a study completed by Hasan Sozen at Ordu University, individuals participating in sports or physical education training possess higher problem-solving skills levels than their counterparts who were not involved in the same activities (Sozen, 2012). The improvement of a child's natural problem-solving skills may not be noticed without attention, but through the battles on the field, and the lessons learned between an individual and their teammates, a child can limit their hesitation in the presence of

timed decisions or basic problem-solving exercises. This study helps to strengthen the argument that children involved in sports could possess a higher level of growth and social development when it comes to problem-solving. Possessing the ability to react in certain situations where a problem arises is not just useful on the playing field, but having the craftiness to think through and solve issues that may arise can set an individual apart from their peers, whether the problem arises at school or in the workplace. Through their efforts in athletics, children who welcome problems and actively search for solutions will grow to become natural leaders in their field, allowing them to be the helping hand for those who cannot overcome a certain problem or situation.

Participating in physical activities or sports may not guarantee positive outcomes or enhanced self-confidence. (Petitas, 2005) discusses how a coach's style and goals can play a significant role in the social development of youth sports:

Youth sports programs that promote psychosocial development are those that use sports as a vehicle to provide experiences that promote self-discovery and teach participants life skills in an intentional and systematic manner. In addition, these programs have clearly defined goals and strategies to enhance the generalizability and transfer of life skills to other important life domains.

The message is simple: without a determined and detailed leader, whether that be a coach or mentor, youth sports programs will fail the individuals involved in them, resulting in a lack of opportunity for social development. The nature of one youth coach can force a child to exit youth sports and potentially never try any other sport or physical activity again. However, on a positive counterpoint, one positive experience with a

coach or mentor in a child's early athletic career can promote growth, as well as the ability to understand and learn the factors that contribute to a positive role model. Most children experience leadership from their parents, other family members, and their teachers in school, but an athletic coach can help provide good insight on how to be a productive person, including how to interact with others in a positive and welcoming manner. In his section on Social Learning Theory, Bandura states that a majority of what we learn about social interaction is through imitation, specifically, imitation of those we see in charge or who is to lead us (Bandura, 2019, 141-142). How does this play a role in developing a child's social skills? When children are involved in sports or competitive activities, they tend to copy and imitate the behaviors and mannerisms of their coaches and mentors. (*Role Models and Children*, 2017). Implying that a youth coach positively influences the kids on their team, their players will soon begin to fall in line and start to cognitively understand social laws and rules, even if most are unwritten. James Flaherty established that youth athletes could experience three products of coaching: excellent long-term performance, self-correction, and self-generation (Flaherty, 2010, 3). Long-term excellent performance is described as an ability to understand and compartmentalize the expectations of the specific sport or activity the child is involved in, while also being able to utilize this knowledge to help benefit them in a situational matter. Self-correction and self-generation are not the same, but they do work together to help better the individual. Players who are able to use self-correction effectively are able to understand when they are performing well and when they need to increase production, thus allowing them to be able to identify and solve the current issue in front of them, without relying upon the help and correction of a coach or mentor after each

mistake. Self-generation involves possessing the ability to understand and solve a current situation, but it is more focused on the long-term impacts. Self-generation focuses on the desire for a player or individual to excel and progress in their talent or skill, including that the person is not reliant upon the instruction or order of a leader or coach. The player has learned through experience in competition to not only work through current issues but in preparation be able to prevent these issues through self-regulation and practice before the central athletic performance or event. These skills that are learned through positive leadership in competition and sport can be easily transmitted into the American workplace environment, as employees who possess the ability to self-correct will be more successful. Still, until they can be self-generating, they may never achieve promotion if daily mistakes continue to occur. The benefits of having your children around good role models and ideal societal members can allow your child to feel trust in another adult other than a family member. As they grow and progress in their game, they are also developing socially while gaining more personal self-confidence in their role and identity.

Life Skills

One thing that stays consistent throughout life is discussing how individuals are progressing in their craft or work. These reviews and analyses could be coming from teachers, bosses, or even our own family and friends. If you tune into sporting events on TV or attend local events, you will often hear the same style of gossip on how specific players are progressing in their abilities or roles on the team. In sports and life in general, constant improvement is considered to be a valuable asset for any player or person to reach their highest potential. Oftentimes when these discussions are centered

around sports or competition, we lose sight of the life lessons that are being taught and processed throughout the games being played. A multitude of life lessons can be and are learned through youth sports. These life skills are not just useful for the child in the early years of their life, but skills that will stay with them throughout their entire walk on Earth. Competition ushers in new and unknown challenges to a child's life; they will grow and continue their development as they face the ups and downs of battle in the realm of sports. A famous quote by Judy Blecha states, "adversity spawns creativity and the passion for activating whatever forms our destiny," meaning that no matter what challenges we face, we can and will always learn and grow from them for our own betterment in the upcoming future.

One of the most apparent life skills adopted through participation in sports is the ability to work in a team environment. Teamwork is one of, if not the most valuable tools learned through competition and sports, as individuals are able to come together for the betterment of the team or group, that is when true success can be measured (Barrett, 2017). Barrett continues in her discussion on teamwork:

When teamwork is effective, communication, collaboration, and combined efforts make for a better outcome. Everyone brings their skills, talents, and experiences together for a common goal. The different styles of each person make for more creativity and innovation.

What Barrett is describing is how teamwork is not just about individual achievement, it is about accomplishing major goals and achievements as a team or an organization. As children become involved in youth sports, they are thrown into new experiences where they are not the sole focus of the exercise, and the greater good reigns supreme in

comparison to the individual. For instance, in the game of American football, there are 11 players on the field for a given team at all times. Each individual player has their own responsibility within each play, and as long as all 11 players do their individual assignments, the play can have a successful outcome. More importantly, the game of football is not just one single play. The average number of offensive snaps in a single football game for a single team is 68.2 (Wuensch, 2015). Knowing this number, we can assume that there are over 100 plays on both sides of the ball during the course of a football game, thus increasing the importance of working successfully as a team for the greater goal of winning. Having a role on the field or court can help a child understand they have a greater purpose than just their individual self; as they see the results of their work being added to the work of their comrades, they will soon realize that the fear of production does not lie within the individual, for there are no individuals on a true team. How does teamwork help prepare children for the challenges and difficulties they will face in life? To be a good teammate, a player must possess the ability to communicate clearly and effectively, or necessary and time-sensitive information may not be spread throughout the team. The importance of communication cannot be underestimated. Communication is one of the most vital roles in human life. Without being effective communicators, we could not have achieved anywhere near what we have in our history (The Scientific World, 2020).

Teamwork is not the only life skill that children learn through participating in youth sports. Another major life skill that can be learned and practiced in youth sports is how to handle responsibility. Previously in talking about teamwork, connections between responsibility and teamwork could be made, as an important part of being on a team is

to complete your individual responsibilities successfully. Being involved in sports can allow children to face the challenges of having new and unique responsibilities comparable to their daily responsibilities that have become the norm.

One way that being involved in sports will help a child practice responsibility is a requirement of following a schedule. Many children rely upon their guardians to inform them of where they need to be and when, but sports can give a child the needed stimulant to develop and learn the aspects of time management. Sports allow a child to manage their time properly, forcing a child to balance their homework, leisure time, and of course their scheduled time for competition (Hayes, 2019). Sports can help activate a child's internal clock and calendar, allowing them to look forward to their upcoming week or month and set a rough schedule to detail and lay out their future plans. Once a child has gotten a grasp on their ability to plan and lay out a schedule, this can also help to improve their time management skills. Time management is the sign of a well-put-together individual, as we must practice good time management throughout our entire lives, whether it be for a youth baseball practice or a career-defining board meeting.

Learning responsibility through sports can be difficult for a child, especially if they have never been required to handle themselves or face the consequences of their actions. As we all know, our actions have consequences, most of the time those consequences are negative when we lack responsibility or we fail to use our time wisely. Sports can teach a child that responsibility is not just being able to develop a schedule or be aware of upcoming events, but you must attend and be punctual as well. Sports teach children that it is important to be on time and to be present at all events if

possible, including practices, fundraising events, and games. As children grow older they are expected to be on time and ready for action, whatever that is. In adulthood, we are expected to arrive at work on time and be prepared for the day and what it may bring, as well as maintain productivity throughout our work schedule. Involving children in sports allows them to develop the understanding that if they do not feel like practicing or attending a fundraising event, then they may not be able to see the field during game time, or be able to enjoy the positives that come for those who are effective and involved in all team-related responsibilities.

Through sports, many obstacles and challenges may come up, whether it be a lack of playing time, a pure lack of God-given ability, or an ill-timed injury. Although we never want to see a child struggle, through adversity the child can become stronger and more resilient, as long as the appropriate steps are taken. We all face adversity, but those who use it to strengthen themselves and learn from their past misfortunes, are the ones who can be effective members of society one day, as they use the difficulties that appear before them as stepping stones to new possibilities (Patel & Angelou, 2018). Returning to the topic of adversity in sports, failure is not an avoidable interference, at least for those who participate in competitive events for a decent amount of time. Gymnasts fall off the beam, batters strike out, and goalies allow the other team to score. Failure in sports is inevitable, but those who understand that and choose to find ways to combat adversity and develop goals to put their mistakes behind them will go on to elevate themselves above others (Edwards, 2020). Children who are able to overcome their struggles and shortcomings in sports will be better suited for when the creeks rise in their adult life. Many children spend their developmental years of childhood not

having to worry about failures or how to respond when they do not meet their expected goals, which of course is not a negative, but involving kids in sports can help expose them to these situations and scenarios. Developing strategies to handle adversity and failure can strengthen a child's resiliency, which moving forward will provide unlimited benefits in their lives. In 2019, BYU conducted a study to hopefully determine the amount of resiliency a child involved in sports possesses, compared to that of their peers who were not involved. For the study, 276 high school students were involved, 214 of which were involved in sports, and the remaining 62 were not affiliated with sports (Swenson, 2019). Results from this study concluded that the students who were involved in sports had tested higher in terms of resilience and problem-solving in daily life. This study also showed that students who participate in sports are capable of handling stressful situations, as well as finding natural and responsible ways to cope and find solutions to the situations they find themselves in, notably due to the experience they have obtained from engaging in competition.

The ability to be resilient and combat adversity positively can help propel a child in the right direction, especially as they begin to mature and take on many other ventures. However, with adversity often comes failure. Obviously, no person ever chooses to fail, as failure may come with many unwanted consequences, but failure is a part of life that we all face from time to time. In sports, failure is often seen as the result of poor play or a lack of preparation. Most notably in sports, we often measure success and failure by who wins or who loses. Athletes are programmed differently than most people, as athletes are taught to feed off of failure, turning the negative into a positive, eventually overcoming whatever the failure may be (Lemmons, 2017). Lemmons

continues to transcribe how athletes must accept failure as a part of life, without it, they will have nothing to overcome or strive for. Involving children in youth sports can be a way to ease children in the reality that failure is an inevitable and proven part of life, the true measure of one's success is how one can overcome their individual fears and failures. Participating in athletics gives the child an opportunity to experience failure and losing at a young age where the stakes of failure are not high. Experiencing loss or failure at an early age, especially through athletic participation where the child is in control of their own actions and decisions is a great way to expose them to failure, providing a way to develop healthy and effective coping strategies as they grow up (Frechette, 2020). The ability to rationalize failures and turn them into potential growth and learning opportunities will help children keep from falling victim to failure. (Myers, 2020) discusses how youth athletes can benefit from understanding failure in their performance, as she refers to a piece from the 2009 World Series:

During the 2009 World Series, Chase Utley of the Phillies and Mark Teixeira of the Yankees talked about dealing with failure. Through game five of the Series, Teixeira was hitting 2 for 19. "When you're in a rhythm during the season, you're going to fail seven out of 10 times," said Teixeira. "When you're not in a rhythm, you're going to fail a lot more." Teixeira understood the importance of accepting failure and moving on.

Myers refers to this situation as a way to relate to young athletes, as they may be going through a slump or a time where they cannot seem to get back on track in terms of their play. Youth athletes need to welcome failure and mistakes, without either, they will not be able to learn and better themselves in certain areas of their game. The ability to cope

with failure and work through difficult circumstances will vastly improve a child's ability to survive the American work environment. For a young adult entering their first job search, they may feel overwhelmed by the requirements they need to possess to be considered a potential candidate for a job. Young adults may also face rejection following a job interview, possibly never hearing back from companies they have applied to, which can lead to negative personal feelings and an increased level of self-doubt. Through these inevitable challenges that a person may face in adulthood, being able to fall back upon their experiences in sports and competition may allow them to face failure head-on, instead of being blind-sided and shocked by the arrival of failure. Myers continues to explain how failure should be welcomed in the minds of children involved in sports, as once failure is accepted in a healthy way, true growth can occur after the initial issue causing the failure is identified and conquered.

The goal of youth athletics is not to force children to experience failure and self-examination, as most children are taught to do their best to avoid failure. A fact of life is that failure and defeat will happen to everyone at some point along their journey, but the way a person responds is the true indicator on how they are prepared for the next negative event that may take place in their life. As we grow older, we learn that in life, a major aspect of failure is the addition of being criticized. Children may not have much experience dealing with criticism due to the possibility that they may have truly never experienced negative criticism. Of course, children will experience reports and conduct evaluations in school and at home, but these criticisms may not be delivered in negative ways that can unintentionally belittle a child, making them question their abilities and potentially gauging their physical talents as their only measure of success.

Of course, we should never measure a person's worth on their ability to play a sport, but we cannot turn a blind eye to the pressures that children and adults involved in sports face due to the level of importance we place on sports within our American society. There is not an athlete that has ever competed that was immune to criticism or the pressures that come along with it, but how an athlete responds is what will determine whether they are average or will emerge above the rest of their competitors (Cohn, 2019). Of course, this statement is singling out the benefits of effectively handling criticism in terms of sports, but this statement can be applied to life as well. As stated, no person is immune to criticism, we all face criticism and pressure every day, whether that comes from our family, employers, or whoever else may feel the need to lay judgment upon us. The ability to handle that criticism is the true measure of the person, allowing greatness to emerge from significant pressure. Ideally, we can use the analogy of the lump of coal that can be turned into a beautiful and perfect diamond. The diamond does not crystallize just in time, it must experience immense pressure before it can reach its final state, becoming one of the most precious and sought after objects on the planet. This can be said about children who are involved in sports, as criticism will fall upon their shoulders, their ability to compartmentalize and receive that criticism will be the deciding factor on whether or not they will use it to benefit themselves or to theoretically crumble like anthracite. Children who are experiencing the added stressors that accompany sports and athletic competition are able to process and understand the criticism that they will face in life, not just on the field of play (Merkel, 2013, 154). Merkel explains that children that are involved in sports are able to quickly realize through coaching and constant evaluation that criticism can be a positive resource, even if it

may be delivered in a negative manner such as yelling. Children who are able to take what a coach or mentor is telling them, then process the information without letting the information overtake their emotions, finally, will be able to accomplish more on their own as they continue through life, as they will have added experience and knowledge of how to handle criticism effectively, even if it is not delivered to them in an appropriate or positive way.

For many, the key reason to enroll in competitive events and sports is to achieve success, as well as to develop one's skills along their journey as an athlete. In most circumstances this would be considered a shared desire for any person navigating their way through life, whether they are involved in sports or business, the main goal of entering the race is to be in contention to win as you near the end. Oftentimes in life, we are challenged with failure and rejection, maybe your co-worker got the big promotion that you applied for, or potentially you were not included on the guestlist for the office's annual Super Bowl party. As most people transition into adulthood, life quickly provides examples of how it truly is not fair. Life is not fair, a simple statement that has devastating impacts when in action. Children involved in sports will quickly find themselves in situations where they are not treated fairly, whether this is intentional or not, this will help provide children with hurtful experiences in time will help them become stronger and more resilient as growing adults. Recent studies have shown that children as young as 12 months have the ability to develop a fundamental sense of fairness (Mcauliffe et al., 2017). This means that from roughly the time a child is beginning to take their first steps, they are cognitively rationalizing a sense of what fairness is and how it plays a role in their life. Hopefully, there are no youth sports leagues in the world

that welcome the participation of year-old individuals, but this helps us see how quickly humans develop a sense of what is fair, and how whatever stimulus they are exposed to is affecting their individual self compared to the treatment of others around them.

Involving children in youth sports can help children face unfairness early on in their lives, allowing them much-needed practice in understanding and reacting to these situations. Sports are a breeding ground for unfair treatment, whether it be the way a coach speaks to certain players, the amount of playing time a child is getting, a coach's relationship with specific players, or a multitude of other possibilities when it comes to a lack of fair treatment in sports. Whatever the case for a child's belief that they are receiving unfair treatment, they will be able to document their experiences, using them for personal betterment in the future. Many children feel resentment towards their coaches or teammates when they do not receive the same amount of attention as others, but as children are able to work through their feelings about the situation, they will be able to process and understand that they should not compare themselves to others. Many players get caught up in the comparison trap, allowing themselves to become bitter and resentful towards teammates who are playing more or having more success, with help from their coaches and or parents, they will be able to healthily work through the issues where they compare themselves to others, eventually focusing on their own worth and talents (Benzel, n.d.). Most of the unfair challenges in life we face are out of our control, we can only control how we react to the situation in front of us. An additional way for children involved in sports to overcome life being unfair is by increasing their ability to respond positively to negative events. At the end of the day, a child can not control how much playing time or attention a coach gives them, just like an

adult can not control when their boss forces them to work an unscheduled Saturday shift, but the ability to let the aspects of the situation that they cannot control go, and to only focus on their response and on what they can control personally, will help them get through the situation more effectively (CoachUp, 2013). It is not always easy to stay positive, especially when unfair treatment is not justified, but with the ability to maintain a good outlook and to continue doing your work, eventually, good things will occur.

For most young athletes, the dream and desire is to make the big leagues and be successful professional athletes making millions of dollars each year to play their favorite game. I consider myself a realist, and as a former youth athlete who shared these dreams, I completely understand that the possibility of reaching the professional level in sports is one of the most challenging goals a person can place upon themselves. Still, I want to focus on the act of developing long-term goals and plans. Fewer than 2% of NCAA athletes ever make it on a professional team in their respective sport (Cliburn, 2021). Although this may be a problematic fact to come to terms with for some youth athletes, the ability to set expectations for themselves will better prepare them for their future, whatever career path they find themselves on. For many children and teens, the fear of the unknown about their future can be debilitating, especially if they feel that they have no skills to use for their success. A significant benefit of sports is that children and young adults can witness themselves develop and grow as individuals in society. Players can utilize their talents and skillsets for more than just a game but in the real world. Children involved in sports have the opportunity to feel who they are and how their talents and skillsets can help propel them forward in life, whether that be in relationships, school, or in their future careers. Possessing this knowledge

can help a child to understand themselves and potentially find their educational and career path based upon these traits and skills they possess and have identified through participation in youth sports. For a child who could be the first of their family to attend college, the fear of falling into the same pattern of their relatives may be too much to overcome, but with their experiences of failure and success in sports, they may be able to rely upon the self-confidence they have built up through athletic competition to achieve what has seemed to be impossible for other members of their family. Children may feel overwhelmed when they first enter what is known as the real world, but being able to fall back on their experiences on the athletic field and make comparisons to their current situation will help them to overcome their fears or doubts. Sports have an amazing impact on the way a person develops their attitudes towards failure or rejection in life. Those who experienced major setbacks through injuries, being cut from a team, or a crushing defeat are the people who can process a negative situation and turn it into a learning experience to better themselves in the future (Ghildiyal, 2015, 165). Ghildiyal states that "Sports helps an individual much more than in the physical aspects alone. It builds character, teaches and develops strategic thinking, analytical thinking, leadership skills, goal setting, and risk-taking, just to name a few." As a person grows from a child to a young adult, many of their life's greatest moments will be related to athletic performance and the achievements they conquered if they have been involved in sports from a young age, but a child will also be accustomed to the struggle of competition, facing defeat and not having the ability to control all situations that may arise. Knowing this, an individual who participates in youth sports in their early years is better prepared for the adversity that may await them. Their characteristics to overcome negative

situations or circumstances offer them a step ahead. They will have surely developed the ability to receive and process constructive criticism and negative feedback, keeping them from being halted by the initial report and moving on to solve the greater issues at hand.

As stated previously, a major goal for young athletes is to make it to the big leagues, but our society has placed a negative connotation on those who see themselves as living out their dreams and expectations. Sports can allow a child with seemingly nothing going for them to become a dreamer, allowing them to have a goal in front of their eyes to seek and to work towards. Of course, many who seek to reach the major leagues in athletics will fail, but a child who develops a well-structured work ethic when it comes to goal setting is unknowingly preparing themselves for future accomplishments outside of sports, even if their initial dream is not accomplished. Children who set goals for themselves at a young age are more likely to accomplish other goals they set in their life, as they grow and mature they may begin to understand that some goals are unattainable, but that should not stop them from continuing to believe in themselves and working towards every goal and dream they set for themselves, eventually achieving their other desires and dreams (Writing, 2010).

A person's ability to achieve continuous improvement and success is not solely based on the opportunities they receive, or how fair life has treated them thus far, as most of a person's accomplishments can be attributed to their work ethic. Sports can be a great reminder and educational opportunity of the importance of work ethic and how it can either promote or demote us in whatever task or activity we are involved in. There are many life skills that can be learned and practiced once a child is involved in sports.

These life skills will not only help the child become a better athlete and skilled competitor, but they will also allow the child to utilize the skills and lessons learned through competition to excel in their life once they have aged out of youth sports and begun to explore other ventures in life, hopefully using the lessons and tools gained from participating in youth sports to positively impact others and themselves throughout the rest of their lives.

Effects on Health

In recent years, increased physical activity has been a major emphasis in the United States, as a large portion of the population suffers from obesity and other health issues due to excessive weight. In 2018, the percentage of Americans diagnosed with obesity was a staggering 42.4% (CDC, 2021). Additionally, 1 in 5 children in the United States is obese, affecting nearly 14.4 million children (CDC Division of Nutrition, Physical Activity, and Obesity, 2021). The importance of involving children in physical activity programs is arguably more important than ever before, as 22.4% of American children have obesity, bringing unnecessary and preventable health risks along with the diagnosis (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2019). The importance of providing children with athletic opportunities can not be underestimated, as data suggests that obesity rates will continue to increase if intervention does not take place, as the childhood obesity rate jumped from 19.3% in 2019, to 22.4% in 2020 (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2020). Involving children in youth sports programs will offer a multitude of health benefits, not just limited to physical health but also emotional and mental health. Involvement in sports can provide a child with good habits, including the natural inclination for physical activity moving forward in life.

Initially, the most simple health benefits of a child's involvement in youth sports are the improvements in physical health they will quickly notice. Fears of a child's growth or development being stunted through the participation in youth sports can quickly be dismissed, as long as coaches, parents, and players do not go overboard with training or expectations, involving a child in sports or competition will provide countless health benefits. Evidence has shown that growth for a child participating in sports or competitive events is very unlikely to be stunted or slowed, as only a few cases of children being persuaded to perform extensive weight training or extreme practice sessions and times have shown a potential delay in development (Craig, 2009). As previously mentioned, obesity is a major physical health issue that plagues many Americans, but involving children in youth sports will actively help to combat the build-up of unhealthy fats. Research has shown that children who participate in organized team sports are 22% less likely to be overweight or obese compared to their peers who are not involved in sports (Rabinstein, 2012). Using this information, simply being involved in sports or competitive activities will offer nearly a 25% reduction in the chance of becoming overweight or obese. This is significant for the increased physical health of a growing individual because for someone who is considered obese, the chances of developing heart disease increases by 28%, not including other risk factors a person may possess (National Institute for Health Research, 2017). Maintaining a manageable body weight is a major key to living and enjoying a healthy lifestyle. As the human body engages in physical movement, calories are burned. Individuals who use their time to exercise and are actively involved in sports have a higher chance of maintaining a healthy weight and even losing a high percentage of unnecessary body

fat over time. The appropriate amount of body fat for a person depends upon many individual and unique characteristics of their body. Children involved in sports are able to keep negative weight off, while also increasing their ability to gain muscle mass and increase their cardiovascular health. Physical activity is a major influence on the development of a child's body, including muscles, bones, and vital organs. Involving children above the age of 2 in at least 30 minutes of physical activity a day helps to promote heart development, increasing the strength and endurance of the heart (Johnson, 2015). This does not require a child to be active the equivalency of a full length football game, but can simply be walking around a track or even their yard, or playing catch with a friend. Anything to get the heart and blood pumping can improve endurance and promote stronger heart health. Cardiovascular health is a vital part of a person's ability to function properly and effectively. Cardiovascular health refers to how our body carries oxygen and nutrients throughout the body, spreading the supplies to their necessary locations for the betterment of our entire body (HealthyWA, n.d.). Involvement in sports helps to promote increased levels of oxygen in and out of the lungs, as our cardiovascular endurance improves. Cardiovascular endurance is described as the body's ability to deliver oxygen to the cells of the body where it can be used as energy (Kiikka, 2019). The more active we are, the more oxygen our organs and cells need to function properly and efficiently. So whether a child is involved in a low-impact sport such as golf, or a high-intensity sport such as football, the child will benefit from the physical activity and motion, allowing an increased cardiovascular endurance, resulting in better overall performance and health for the child. Involving children in sports can also be beneficial in injury prevention. Of course, participating in

sports at any age comes with the risk of becoming injured, but research has suggested that due to the physical growth experienced through competitive activity, children are less likely to be injured during physical activity than their peers (Sothorn et al., 1999, 272). As described, children who are involved in physical activity and exercise receive accelerated bone and muscle development, allowing their bodies to handle more stress, resulting in more physical resilience to nature and other outstanding factors. Through exercise and physical activity, the body's immune system also receives a boost in production while combating infections to defer sickness from overtaking the body. Following the COVID-19 Pandemic, research has been conducted to determine how exercise not only improves the immune system's ability to fight off infections, but to also increase the effectiveness of certain vaccines. For individuals who only experienced a limited amount of physical exertion through a day, under 10 minutes of constant physical activity, were more likely to be admitted into the hospital with infections such as the flu or even COVID-19 (Ford, 2021). Allowing a child to develop positive habits and routines of physical activity can help promote a healthy immune system, in turn leading to a healthier and happier child.

Physical activity is not only beneficial in obtaining stronger muscles and more endurance, but improvements to an individual's mental and emotional health are often overlooked as potential benefits one can receive from being involved in sports and competition. Many children may feel out of place or lack self-esteem due to mental disorders or limited social experience. Sports can be a natural way of providing a sense of purpose for a child while also helping to build a child's self-esteem. As detailed earlier, the United States has a significant issue with obesity and how this disease

affects a large portion of the population, but another widespread disease that is sometimes not considered serious is depression. Research has shown that 4.4% of children in the United States, roughly 2.7 million, have depression or a related mental disorder (CDC, 2022). The numbers only worsen as more than 6.7% of American adults have depression, affecting more than 16 million American adults (Mental Health America, 2022). In the past, individuals suffering from mental health disorders were advised to keep it to themselves or simply get over it, as others would stigmatize them as weak or lesser because they were just sad. Today, health experts understand that depression and other mental health disorders are not caused by a person's lack of effort or ability to handle situations but by a complex chemical imbalance in the brain that affects the way a person feels or responds to certain stimuli (Harvard Medical School, 2022). For children suffering from depression, involvement in sports can be a way to promote positive feelings of inclusion and self-purpose. In an article produced by the Institute for Quality and Efficiency in Health Care, the writers detailed how sports and competitive activities can help combat the effects of depression and other mental disorders:

Many people who manage to do sports in addition to having other treatments – despite having depression – say that it feels good to be able to do something to fight their depression themselves. Sports give them the opportunity to be active and to meet other people. It is also thought that doing sports has a positive effect on the brain's metabolism, and therefore on the depression itself too.

As discussed in the above quote, involvement in sports can allow children to overcome and battle their depression in a healthy way, while also providing them with the feeling

of control over their disorder and their personal treatment. The opportunity to give children a sense of control over their treatment will help to build their confidence, while also positively progressing them through their medical condition. Physical activity and exercise are also beneficial in easing symptoms of depression due to the endorphins that are released during physical activity (Mayo Clinic Staff, 2017). Endorphins are naturally produced during stressful or high-intensity situations as a natural way for our body and brain to challenge negative feelings and pain. (Bruce, 2020) discusses how endorphins from exercise and physical activity help us to fight negative emotions:

Endorphins act as analgesics, which means they diminish the perception of pain. They also act as sedatives. They are manufactured in your brain, spinal cord, and many other parts of your body and are released in response to brain chemicals called neurotransmitters. The neuron receptors endorphins bind to are the same ones that bind some pain medicines. However, unlike morphine, the activation of these receptors by the body's endorphins does not lead to addiction or dependence.

Through physical activity, children who have been diagnosed with depression or other related mental illnesses will have an increased level of endorphins during and after their athletic performances. These depression-fighting endorphins will naturally alleviate some of the symptoms of depression while the child participates in their favorite activity, providing the spark a child may need to be on the path of recovery and escape from depression.

Another major mental illness children often face is anxiety. Performance anxiety can be a crippling thing for a child, as it can affect their grades in school, social skills,

and ability to perform in athletics. In the United States, 25.1% of children between the ages of 13 and 18 have been diagnosed with anxiety disorders (Anxiety and Depression Association of America, 2021). Exercise and physical activity have been proven to reduce the effects of anxiety, including active reduction of symptoms and potential episodes if participation is consistent (Lago et al., 2019). Exercise and participation in sports have been shown to limit the impacts of anxiety in the following ways: taking an individual's mind off of the cause; increased body movement eases muscle tension; an increased heart rate changes brain chemistry, and exercise helps the human body continue to produce positive emotions throughout the day that will help keep anxiety at a minimum (Ratey, 2019). Exercise helps take a person's mind and thoughts away from the source of stress, as the participant must focus largely on the physical task they are completing. Through physical movement, our muscles and bodies must release built-up tension and pressure, allowing us to move freely without constraint. In the process of easing tension throughout the body, the mind and brain will also collaboratively lose tension. Referring back to earlier, endorphins are released in large quantities when the human body becomes active, once endorphins are released the brain and body naturally begin to implement the "feel-good chemicals" that help us to not only release muscle tension but also strain upon our mind and brain (Mayo Clinic, 2020). In addition to the number of endorphins released, the body increases the availability of serotonin, gamma-aminobutyric acid (GABA), brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF), and endocannabinoids, or in simple terms, natural anxiety fighting chemicals that help ease tension on the brain (Brellenthin et al., 2017, 1688-1694). Continuously, actively exercising or playing sports requires the body to maintain the production of endorphins

and other anxiety-fighting chemicals. For children who are active for roughly an hour a day in sports or competitive activities, their bodies will continue to produce and release these chemicals to help keep anxiety and stress under control, allowing for a more positive experience during any situation they may encounter during the day (Audiffren & Andre, 2019, 340-347). For children suffering from anxiety disorders, involvement in athletic programs will provide them with a natural way to combat and hopefully alleviate symptoms of their disorder by simply attending practice, communicating with teammates or coaches, and participating in games.

Many Americans struggle with maintaining focus, whether it be during work or in the classroom. In recent years, schools across the nation have seen increased numbers of students losing focus in the classroom. It is estimated that a staggering 47% of students find themselves struggling to focus or maintain attention during a classroom lecture throughout a given school day (Valley, 2020). With increased technology helping to eliminate idle time for the brain, how can we increase student focus during lectures and classroom discussions without implementing technology? Without entering into a discussion on teaching tactics, studies have shown that students who are also involved in routine physical activity or athletics are able to focus better than their classmates, as well as possess the ability to maintain that focus in the classroom throughout the day. Routine exercise and athletic participation significantly increase blood flow to the brain, which is attributed to aiding in the construction and repair of nerve connections in the brain (Khelil, 2015). Khelil continues that as these neurological connections are created and strengthened, improvements can be unprecedented in the areas of increased

concentration, enhanced memory, stimulated creativity, and better-developed problem-solving skills (Kheilil, 2015).

The correlation between sports and a child's academic success has been a topic of discussion for years, but recent studies have potentially established a clear connection between the two. Due to recent studies, children who are involved in sports or physical activities are more likely to perform better in school. In a recent study of 5000 young students, the students who were active participants in a local sport or exercise program consistently scored higher averages on standardized tests and other cognitive evaluations in the school environment (Acha, 2019). The ongoing argument that is often discussed is that involving children in sports takes away their available time to study and focus on schoolwork, eventually leading to negative performance and lower academic scores. However, multiple studies have actually debunked this theory, showing that students who participate in organized sports or physical activities are more likely to excel academically, compared to those who lead sedentary lifestyles. In 2012, the Los Angeles Unified School District performed a study that involved 35,000 student-athletes, resulting in a significant increase in GPA and attendance for the students involved in sports. The results showed that students who were also athletes were able to obtain better overall grade point averages by as much as 0.55 to 0.74 points, and were present in school for nearly three weeks more than their peers (VanTassel & VanTassel, 2014). Most school districts in the United States require their athletes to maintain a certain level of conduct, as well as a certain grade point average to be eligible for play. These requirements alone are enough to keep a majority of students on task and present in class, as a skipped class may result in a negative

grade, leading to punishment or becoming ineligible to play until academic requirements are met.

Special Olympics

In July 1968, awareness for people with mental disabilities reached the world stage, as Eunice Kennedy Shriver launched the first official Special Olympic games, which took place at Soldier Field in Chicago (Special Olympics Delaware, n.d.). Shriver used her popularity as the sister of President John F. Kennedy to elevate awareness, support, and opportunities for inclusion for individuals with special needs. Shriver dedicated her life to working towards fair and equal treatment for people with physical and intellectual disabilities, making sure they had ample opportunity for success and inclusion in normal activities that the majority of people were able to complete without issue. Today there are more than 5.5 million children actively participating in the Special Olympics across the world (Shriver, n.d.). There is a multitude of benefits, both physical and mental, for children with special needs who are involved in the Special Olympics. Benefits include increased physical health for children with disabilities and improvements in self-esteem and confidence. The most major benefit of the Special Olympics program is the opportunity for inclusion and involvement for children struggling with disabilities, as well as a natural way for children to surround themselves with others like them, not focusing on their disabilities, but focusing on their achievements and development. Allowing children with special needs to feel empowerment through their accomplishments can be a great morale booster, providing a much-needed confidence boost, and allowing their true selves to shine in a positive light. Children with special needs need an additional push when it comes to developing

positive attitudes and views about themselves, participation in a local sports leagues or even the Special Olympics can promote healthy living, while also building the foundation of personal pride and confidence for a child who already struggles with so much (University of Rochester Medical Center, 2022). Personal pride can be physically seen on a child as they accomplish a goal they may have never believed they could achieve. Involving children with special needs in sports and other programs such as the Special Olympics can help alleviate feelings of doubt that may come for children who must face their disability each and every day, providing them an opportunity for hope and the development of pride in themselves that they may never have been able to come to terms with. Once a child develops the ability to have pride in themselves, even if it is just as simple as them being able to run around a track or dribble a basketball, the feelings of accomplishment and inner pride will never crumble under the pressures or challenges of daily life, as they will be able to lean upon their own experiences of triumph and victory as they progress through their daily lives. Involving children with intellectual or physical disabilities places the focus on their talents, instead of focusing on what they can't do, giving the child a more open and positive view of life, while also potentially leading the child to experiment with different activities as they develop and strengthen their personal talents and skills (Special Education Guide, 2013).

The Special Olympics has a program that is designated for young athletes. This program is designed to help in the development of their physical abilities, but also social practices. This program is titled Special Olympics Young Athletes. Special Olympics Young Athletes provide their participants with opportunities to make friends naturally, improving upon their social skills, allowing for a more comfortable experience, not only

in athletics but in school and at home (Special Olympics, 2022). The foundation and approach for the Special Olympics Young Athletes program are to help promote the advancement of social skills so that children with disabilities can become active and effective members of their communities. In 1996, the Special Olympics were seen as a positive for those dealing with mental disabilities, but questions remained on if there were significant social developmental benefits for the participants. Elisabeth M. Dykens and Donald J. Cohen set out to evaluate whether or not participating in Special Olympics programs provided a social and developmental boost for individuals with a developmental delay disorder. 104 athletes were given different tests to conclude their skills in the following categories: social competence, adaptation, and self-perception. Over the course of four months, these specific tests would be readministered to the athletes to test the effectiveness of involving athletes in different activities and sports within the Special Olympics program. Regardless of the age or IQ of each athlete, the length of time that a specific individual spent participating in their activity was the best predictor of the positive development of social competence, as all members of the study increased their ability to view themselves relative to others and the world as a whole (Dykens & Cohen, 1996, 223-229). An additional research study completed in 2011 sought to not only prove these claims but increase awareness of how effective and beneficial the Special Olympics can be for the social development of mentally challenged individuals. This study was to develop conclusions on how involving special needs children and young adults in the Special Olympics would help them to increase their social involvement in more specific tasks, such as eye contact, contributing relevant information to a conversation, and effectively being able to take turns speaking

in a conversation. For 14 weeks, the individuals in the study were to participate in soccer, including practices, private sessions, and games, wherein this time they would be required to work alongside teammates, take coaching from their instructors, and be challenged to remember responsibilities on the field as well. After the 14 weeks were complete, results were documented for the final time of physical involvement in the game of soccer, however, participants would be called back in after five weeks away to conduct a final evaluation to test if the children had been able to permanently absorb the information and be able to use it in practice. At the end of the 14 weeks, results for all participants showed an increased ability to communicate effectively with others, as well as share concerns and ideas relative to the game of soccer, concluding that using both the physical and mental aspects of the sport to work together to allow cognitive development for the children (Alexander et al., 2011, 297-310). A majority of the participants showed an increased ability in maintaining eye contact throughout the conversation, as well as being able to take turns speaking in a conversation, without interrupting the other side or losing focus while the other side communicated. These results were consistent with the 1996 study that showed an increased sense of self-competence, as the athletes were able to recall specific assignments and responsibilities on the field after practice and repetition through physical activity. As the participants returned after five weeks away from study and participation in soccer, all of the participants showed a decreased recall ability in what their specific goal or responsibility on the field was, but a negligible decrease in the ability to maintain communication eye contact helped to prove that the study had long-term benefits in social development for individuals with special needs, specifically developmental delay

disorders. An additional bit of information charted after the five-week check-up was that every single participant had not only maintained or improved their ability to communicate and keep eye contact but had added an additional social skill or ability that was untested in the initial 14 weeks. For example, one participant had developed the ability to communicate with their hands while speaking, which emphasized a deeper and further understanding of the information they were receiving and then delivering in conversation.

Many parents of children with developmental disabilities are hesitant to enroll their children in competitive activities such as the Special Olympics due to a fear of exposing their children to unnecessary scrutiny or pressure that may come with sports. The Special Olympics and their partners have vowed to keep the pressure out of the game or activity for their athletes, as there is no need to worry about performance or success, limiting the only focus on building up their athletes and participants in a positive manner. The motto of the Special Olympics is “Let me win. But if I cannot win, let me be brave in this attempt.” This motto is to be adopted by all competitors, family, and fans for the benefit of the participants, with the main focus on personal achievement and effort, not the aspect of winning or being the best (Special Olympics, 2022). Children deserve the ability to grow and play without hesitation or fear of failure, allowing children to participate in the Special Olympics can alleviate the stresses they may face in their daily lives at school or home, freeing the mind and body of the challenges that may plague them, providing personal pride and achievement. Many children and adults struggle with the ability to accept themselves for who they are mentally or physically. Participation in the Special Olympics and other accredited

organizations can allow a child to express themselves without fear of judgment, allowing them to live freely and not feel as if they are odd or not normal when in a group.

Especially with the care and support of the Special Olympics coaches and mentors who help to motivate their athletes through every step of the competition, leaving competitors with increased self-pride, confidence, and allowing these children to experience positive reinforcement so they can witness and understand how extraordinary they truly are (Tamara, 2021).

Along with the proven cognitive and mental benefits of participation in athletics, children with special needs can obtain an endless amount of physical benefits from sports and competitive activities. Individuals with developmental disabilities are far less active than the general population. The general misconception of this is that most individuals with developmental disabilities are unable to physically move as well as others, so obviously, they are less active, but the actual reasoning behind the staggering difference in physical activity is the lack of access to appropriate activities or programs for individuals with disabilities. The Special Olympics do not limit themselves to just sports and competitive activities, as they offer three different opportunities for individuals with developmental disabilities to have access to physical fitness programs, along with dietary guidelines and education. These programs are known as Fit Families, SOfit, and the Unified Fitness Clubs (Special Olympics, 2021). As described on the Special Olympics website, Fit Families is a six-week program designed to help engage Special Olympic athletes and their families in healthy living, which includes dietary education and planning, while also providing physical fitness programs and routines that are targeted at individuals with special needs. SOfit was created by Special Olympics

Minnesota as an eight-week program where one person with and one without an intellectual disability are paired together and learn and work to achieve and more healthy lifestyle. These teams are taught specific exercises and how to make certain dietary accommodations to their lives to implement a well-rounded approach to improved physical performance and health. SOfit allows the teams a flexible approach as an introduction to a new healthy life, which is good for many who struggle with mental disabilities, as too much change can be overwhelming all at once (Special Olympics, 2021). Finally, the Unified Sports Fitness Club is a program that meets weekly for specific physical activities that can promote healthy movements and increased mobility. The main focus of the Club is to promote new relationships and friendships throughout the community, as inclusion and social skills can be improved while also being physically active (Special Olympics, 2021).

Sports and physical activity have been proven to help children who have intellectual disabilities, including improvements in hand-eye coordination, increased stamina, and increased muscle strength and endurance (Surgeon General Report, 1999). As most individuals with mental disabilities are prone to lead sedentary lives, becoming overweight or obese can become a major issue for those who are confined to a chair or room for a majority of the day, simply walking for 30 minutes a day has shown significant improvements in total body fat of individuals with mental disabilities (Surgeon General Report, 1999). Involving children and young adults who have mental disabilities can provide them with a longer expected lifespan due to the body's improved organ function and mobility due to activity and participation in the competition (Department of Economic and Social Affairs Disability, 2016). In a study completed in 2012 for the

Journal of Age Research, results were taken from individuals who were physically active on a regular basis, including those who were considered to have a developmental disorder, where life expectancy for individuals with special needs experienced a dramatic increase of roughly six years if the individual was a regular participant in sports or other physical activities (Reimers et al., 2012). Of course, the idea of being physically active improving the longevity of human life is not a new concept, but in the case of individuals with special needs, an additional six years is an astonishing number, as tragically the expected lifespan for individuals with disabilities is usually not much longer than the early to mid-'20s.

Racial Inclusion and Diversity

A harsh reality we must come to terms with and understand is that minority children in the United States may not have as many opportunities for success or development as others. However, through participation in sports and other competitive activities, they can receive the same opportunities and accomplishments as others, no matter the color of their skin or the culture they originate from. In recent years, it is no secret that the issues of racism in the United States have been an ongoing battle, as awareness and efforts to eliminate the issue have been increased. Professional sports leagues such as the NFL have created and promoted major programs with the intention of increasing minority representation and support throughout our major sports leagues and businesses. As youth sports leagues continue to become more and more popular across the country, using the power of youth sports can be a potential way to eliminate racism for the next generations. In mixed-race communities, it has been shown that younger generations have been shown to have lesser incidents of racism, especially

where local schools have a more even ratio between minorities and whites (Grenardo, 2020). Grenardo continues to explain how children are less likely to identify themselves as different races if it has not been previously identified to them, so involving children in diverse sports leagues and on teams with high levels of diversity can help promote positive experiences and relationships across the racial divide. The ability to offer mixed athletic performance between young children, allowing them to establish friendships without unintentional segregated teams or leagues can allow for a more comfortable experience and understanding of different cultures and races. Offering diversity through youth sports leagues can help to alleviate social biases and racial stereotypes that could potentially be learned behaviors. Furthermore, the potential of minority children being able to look up to positive white role models can further help to eliminate stereotypes or irrational fear of differing races, or vice versa, as it would be significantly beneficial for white children to have a minority leader or coach to look up to, offering a positive role model for the remainder of their life, potentially helping to eliminate stereotypes before they can develop.

Additionally, involving minority children in youth sports programs, especially those living in violent or low-income communities can help promote positive living, as well as provide safe and productive hobbies and after-school activities. As discussed earlier, involving children in youth sports helps promote better physical and mental health. In terms of minorities, across all minority groups, participation in sports is directly attributed to a significant increase in self-image, body positivity, as well as a documented decrease in depression diagnoses in Latino youth and teens (Duncan, 2015). It has been documented that low-income communities that have organized youth sports

programs or leagues have lower levels of violence and crime (Stodolska et al., 2014, 613). In the past, disadvantaged communities have been forced to rely upon non-profit youth sports programs operated by churches or private groups. Following this study, Major League baseball began to target these communities and has built and operated athletic facilities and programs to offer minority children the opportunity to become active and healthier, while also learning to play and love the game of baseball (Stodolska et al., 2014, 613-614). The goal of Major League baseball is to promote positive experiences for minority youth in disadvantaged communities, with hopes of creating positive role models and habits that will spread throughout the local community, eventually helping to raise each community to become safer and a more enjoyable place to live. Extensive research has been conducted to find answers as to what motivates youth participation in athletics, but specifically, research on how minority youth are motivated to participate has shown that self-image and self-confidence are major contributing factors (Stodolska et al., 2014, 616). Offering minority youth the opportunity to feel pride in themselves through athletic performance and achievement has led many to consider the educational benefits for these children who have a heightened sense of self and ability. It has been proven that American students who were active participants in at least one team sport finished their high school career with a GPA that was 10% higher than their classmates who did not play sports (Maslen & Guide, 2015). For children living in low-income communities, sports have often been an escape from the stresses and worries that they are challenged with at their homes. Sports can offer a child a way of expressing themselves when they may not have the ability to in the classroom or at home. Giving a child a uniform and opportunity for

success in front of an audience can help boost their self-confidence and allow them to understand they have the potential to be successful in the future. Participating in youth sports may be the spark a child needs that can open their eyes to their own potential and abilities, not limiting themselves to the pattern of those in their community.

African-American youth who are active participants in youth sports programs are more likely to have big dreams and future goals, especially when it comes to attending college and obtaining a degree (Project Play, 2020). Using athletics as a motivator for self-improvement and seeing potential in oneself can propel minority youth to seek academic success alongside being successful athletes.

Team vs. Individual Sports

Across the globe, the majority of focus on sports is relative to competitions that would be described as team sports. Most televised sporting events are team sports, as soccer is the most popular sport on the planet, with an estimated following of 4 billion (Naismith, 2020). However, many athletes from individual sports are globally celebrated as house names, such as Conor McGregor, Tiger Woods, and Serena Williams to name a few. Clearly, involving a child in a team sport is beneficial in the aspects of learning how to work with others, being accountable, and having trust in others. I am interested in discovering if there are added benefits to involving a child in a team sport, compared to an individual sport, or are the benefits minuscule enough to go unnoticed, and without consideration.

As previously discussed, involving children in athletics allows them to beneficial experience of working alongside others, counting on their teammates, while sharing moments of triumph and the heartbreak of defeat. Involving a child in a team sport

allows them to remove themselves from the main focus, as they must shift their attention to what is best for the team, not themselves as an individual (Fresno Pacific University, 2021). This not only forces the child to see themselves as part of the whole, reducing selfish tendencies in their play and life but also allows them the opportunity to make decisions that will not only affect them but the entire team as a whole. Requiring children to experience the consequences of their actions and decisions can promote them to think critically before making a decision, especially when their decision affects those around them.

Individual sports help to create a level of confidence and reliance upon oneself. Those who participate in sports like golf or tennis are more likely to have more confidence in their abilities, as they are the only person who can determine the outcome of their performance. Individualized athletes can provide a great experience for athletes in goal-planning and setting expectations for themselves (Fresno Pacific University, 2021). Relying upon themselves can help to establish positive relationships with their coaches or mentors, as training sessions and practices will usually be one-on-one, allowing for a more focused approach in training and performance reviews.

As detailed, both styles of sport offer their own benefits, but it is important to note that each style may offer similar benefits that impact the player in different ways. (Amenta, 2021) states in a SoCal blog:

Team sports and individual sports both achieve athletic development and good character. However, the principles that dictate success relative to each are different. Individual sports foster mental toughness and personal mastery. Team

sports teach kids cooperation and “teamwork”, for lack of a better term. Both are valuable for kids to participate in.

Essentially each style of sport offers its own specific benefits for the individual, but an argument can be made that the benefits of team sports can also be utilized through individual sports, and vice versa. It is hard to determine which style of sport is best suited for the generic athlete, as all children possess unique talents that are different from their peers. A suggestion would be to just simply use trial and error to effectively determine what style of sport works best for each individual child.

Counter Points

Throughout this entire paper, I have discussed and identified multiple reasons why it is important and beneficial to involve children in sports. Although a large portion of the nation’s children are involved in sports, many individuals possess a different viewpoint and attitude towards youth sports and if playing offers or provides more benefits than consequences. Major concern parents face when involving their children in sports is the potential for serious injury, especially at a young age. Kids are resilient creatures, but a serious injury is no laughing matter and can affect their growth and development. As youth sports have progressed in the level of competition, children are being asked to attend daily training sessions or practices to keep up with their competition, which can provide unnecessary stress on their growing bones and joints, which can result in pain and in severe cases, stunted growth (Rabin, 2019). Rabin continues on to say, “Bone and muscles are still growing in children, making them more susceptible. So-called growth plates, where the bone is being built, are especially vulnerable to injuries that may disrupt growth and may lead to chronic health problems.”

As children mature, they are actively growing and developing physically, because of this children face a higher risk of physical injury due to overuse. Overexertion can be attributed to at least 37% of all injuries that will occur to athletes under the age of 13 in a given year (Bean et al., 2014). Additionally, studies have been completed to show that youth athletes involved in multiple sports are nearly twice as likely to suffer at least one injury during their youth careers as a result of athletic competition (Brenner, 2007, 1244). Although these statements and studies may lead some to be wary of allowing their child to participate in sports, the CDC assures that nearly 50% of all youth sports injuries can be prevented through proper preparation, including stretching, wearing appropriate gear and equipment, and to always give children time to settle into a sport or activity before going full speed (Cary Orthopedics, 2021). Although the fear of having a child go through an injury is frightening, most injuries can be prevented, and if a child still suffers an injury, with the power of modern medicine, athletes of all ages are making faster and stronger comebacks than ever before.

Injuries may not be the only reason children remove themselves from youth sports. In recent years, youth sports have intensified in their nature, as some leagues across the country choose to represent themselves and their athletes as professional athletes who are still attending local elementary and middle schools. Many parents of young athletes will do anything it takes to provide their child with the opportunity to be successful in their respective sport, as many will drive 100's of miles every weekend and pay big bucks to keep their child up to par with the others in one of the cutthroat youth leagues across the country. Leagues and clubs across the country continue to claim that the main goal of the league is to promote healthy competition and fun for all

players, but any viewer of the series “Friday Night Tykes” would know this is not the case (Christensen, 2015). The parents of these children have faced blame for how youth sports have become an over-intensified and super-serious pastime for American children. Added pressure from parents who want to see their children have success on the athletic field has caused many issues for community sports leagues, where the unsettling displays that occur on a weekly basis at local soccer parks of adults yelling and fussing at their young children for not playing like they are representing the United States in the World Cup have gotten out of hand, and has become a fixture of these local parks (Youth1, n.d.). Additionally, declining numbers of participation for athletes entering their mid-teens may be a result of the added stressors that playing sports can put on a child, especially for those who have dealt with the stress from a very young age. Recent reports have shown that for young athletes who were involved in youth sports for more than one year, nearly 80% will stop playing at least one sport before they turn 15 (Atkinson, 2021). As many children in recent years have been forced to play sports where their performance is heavily scrutinized by coaches and parents, it is not surprising that many children decide to leave certain sports due to the unnecessary pressure it may add to their life. Although youth sports have become more serious, the importance of teaching children valuable life lessons and skills through sports should still remain the central goal of their time in these leagues. It may be difficult for some, but allowing children to set goals for themselves and not force children to live up to the goals set by little league coaches or parents can help a child have a positive and fulfilling experience through youth sports without having the added stress and anxiety of performing at a certain level. Children have enough to deal with in their lives outside of

sports, taking the enjoyment out of sports and competition may negatively affect them in more ways than are understood (Conat, 2013). Sports should be an outlet for positive and negative emotions for children, allowing them to express themselves in ways they may not be able to anywhere else, while also allowing them to be their own individuals.

Conclusion

As I conclude my research, I feel as if I have been able to provide an abundance of facts that are supported by multiple sources to prove that the benefits of youth sports far outweigh the drawbacks. Although involving children in sports may push them towards unwanted physical injuries or even increased anxiety about performance, through perseverance and dedication, these issues can be overcome. As stated by The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, "Sports help children develop physical skills, get exercise, make friends, have fun, learn teamwork, learn to play fair, and improve self-esteem." Sports offer children across the United States to feel proud of who they are, and to become better individuals physically and mentally through the competition they are exposed to. I feel confident in stating that youth sports have more benefits than drawbacks for the children involved in them. As discussed throughout my research, involving children in sports offers them unlimited benefits, including positive development in social skills, the opportunity to learn valuable life lessons, improved physical health, and strengthened mental clarity and health. Youth sports help to break down the barriers of society, whether it be for the intellectually disabled or for racial inclusion, youth sports provide a valuable service to children within all communities across the country. The feeling of success and accomplishment for a child is a necessary and important emotion children need to experience. Through this they can

create a more positive personal image and an improved level of confidence in themselves. Using their personal experiences from participation in sports through the developmental periods of their lives, individuals who were actively involved in sports can grow up to be our nation's leaders and decision-makers, utilizing the skills and knowledge they learned through competition.

My reasoning for conducting this research is simple, I was one of those typical American young men who grew up idolizing professional athletes and dreaming of playing alongside them someday. I even began to mimic some of my favorite athletes' mannerisms when I was younger in whatever respective sport I was playing. Eventually, when I became old enough to begin to grasp the aspects of different sports and develop an interest in them, I found great pride in putting on my uniforms and performing. At the same time, my parents and family watched through the fence or from the sideline. My love for sports was first established after my family and I traveled around following my older brother while playing whatever sport was in season. With the energy of the crowd, the excitement of a big hit or a great play, followed by the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat, I soon realized that sports brought out something inside me that at that time I did not know existed. Still, I could only describe it as the thrill of competition. Throughout my childhood, I was consistently involved in whatever sport was being played, depending on the time of year, so generally, I was playing a team sport all year. Throughout this time, I was able to have many different coaches or mentors, and I was also able to establish long-lasting friendships that are still intact to this day. I can look back at my memories from my time playing youth sports with a generally positive attitude. I will be forever grateful for the friendships and connections I made through

playing sports when I was younger, as I feel I have been able to use lessons learned from those days to help better prepare me for the challenges I have faced so far in life. I can confidently say that youth sports played a significant role in my developmental years, and I am still currently involved in youth sports. Of course, I'm no longer a participant in the local recreational little leagues, but I have found a new role in youth sports. After my final days of being an athlete came to an end with my graduation from high school, I found myself quickly thrown back into the world of youth sports. A few months after graduation, I accepted a position as an assistant football coach at my former middle school. After four years of coaching young and developing players from ages 12 to 14, I find myself amazed at how every child is unique and on their own path of development. I have witnessed many of my players mature through my time with them on the playing field, and I began to wonder if they would have reached the same level of development without being involved in sports. Are they more advanced than those who do not participate in organized sports, or could they possibly be behind in development? These questions had driven me to conduct and complete this research, where I could eventually provide context to how sports affect the young developing minds and bodies of the children involved in them. I can personally say that without sports, my life would have been entirely different, and I credit many of my personal triumphs and current position in life to the time I spent involved in youth sports. Through my participation and coaching of youth sports, I have found what drives me in life, as I have been able to acknowledge my true passion as I am working towards becoming a teacher. Of course, coaching and sports are not the only reasons behind this, but without being involved in youth sports, I may have never found my talent for working

with young children, helping them grow and learn through practice and trial and error.

Youth sports have remained a large part of my life. I hope that I can continue to promote positive experiences for those in my local community's sports leagues, leading to an increased number of children attempting to join in on the fun and the benefits that transpire from youth sports.

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