

10-1-2017

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Recommended Citation

Martin, P. D., & Kaufman, E. K. (2017). Double Play: The Need for 4-H to Partner in Youth Sports. *Journal of Extension*, 55(5), Article 20. <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/joe/vol55/iss5/20>

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Double Play: The Need for 4-H to Partner in Youth Sports

Abstract

Fewer children in the United States are playing team-based sports, and the trend is making national headlines. While there is no complete agreement as to the predominant reason for this trend, it is clear that a national conversation on this problem has begun, and Cooperative Extension holds the potential for getting kids back in the game. At its core, this conversation is about the healthful development of our children and their advancement as contributors to society. Cooperative Extension has decades of experience creating a "playbook" for youth development, and it is time to put that playbook into action.

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Introduction

Youth participation in traditional team-based sports is in sharp decline, and the implications are significant for the lifelong physical, mental, and social well-being of today's young people. Between 2008 and 2013, participation in common team-based sports declined by 2.6 million among children between the ages of 6 and 12 (Farrey, 2015). Fewer than half of U.S. children meet the U.S. Surgeon General's recommendations for physical activity, and physical activity declines dramatically with age (Troiano et al., 2008). In contrast, adolescents who participate in team sports are eight times more likely to be active at age 24 (Farrey, 2015). Participation in sports also has been shown to lead to lower rates of depression and involvement in risky behaviors (Jewett et al., 2014). The need to address the decline in youth sports participation presents an opportunity for 4-H to be a game changer for youths.

A Whole New Ball Game

The decline in youth sports participation is likely due to a combination of factors. A national survey about parents' attitudes toward sports indicated that nearly 88% of parents had safety concerns, about 82% were apprehensive about coaches, over 70% were concerned about costs, and 66% were concerned about the emphasis on winning over having fun (espnW & Aspen Institute, 2014). Other barriers to participation include a lack of neighborhood recreation spaces, exclusionary league and team policies, excessive time demands on families, cultural norms, and too few sport options to accommodate the interests of youths (Farrey, 2015).

Getting in the Game: The Historical Connection Between 4-H and Youth Sports

There is a long history of 4-H's providing both formal and informal spaces for youth participation in team sports. A look at 4-H archives revealed that 1921 national publications encouraged youths to play sports during their winter club meetings to stay healthy and active. Agents were also encouraged to organize team sports through their clubs, and the formation of many 4-H–based teams and even leagues steadily increased into the 1950s. By the 1960s, the term "sports" had transitioned to "recreation"; by the 1980s, "fitness" became the term of choice (Krug, n.d.). Although terminology around "healthful lifestyles" is common in Cooperative Extension, specific linkages with youth sports are not found as much as they were in the early days of 4-H. As youth sports have primarily become under the guidance of municipal recreation programs, schools, and elite travel-focused organizations, the trend of less participation suggests that fresh approaches are needed.

Stepping Up to the Plate: Beginning a New Approach to Youth Recreation

The Aspen Institute lays out an eight-point plan for changing how our nation approaches youth sports (Farrey, 2015) (Table 1).

Table 1.

Aspen Institute's Plan for Youth Sports

Strategy	Rationale
Ask kids what they want.	Over 90% of kids who play sports say the reason they play is that they want to have fun.
Reintroduce free play.	Informal play has been shown to enhance creativity in children, and it promotes youth-developed teamwork skills.
Encourage sport sampling.	The tendency to focus on one sport year-round is leading to high rates of burnout, injury, and overall dissatisfaction with sports.
Revitalize in-town teams.	Though travel teams offer high levels of competition, they are forcing a pay-to-play culture that is a barrier to access for low-income youths and families.
Think small.	A reinvestment in small, decentralized recreation areas would enhance the physical access to play areas that is found in many urban and rural settings.
Design for development.	Fueled by unreasonable expectations, those involved with some sports are attempting to teach games and skills in advance of the normal developmental progress of children.
Train all coaches.	Studies show that only 5% of children quit a sport if they

play for a coach who has had training, whereas 26% quit otherwise.

Emphasize prevention.

With safety being a major concern of parents, proper techniques, training, and equipment are necessary for ensuring the safety of children who participate in sports.

Note. Adapted from *Sport for All, Play for Life: A Playbook to Get Every Kid in the Game*, by T. Farrey, 2015, The Aspen Institute, Washington, DC.

Touching the Bases: Recognizing the Opportunities to Partner in the Solution

Considering the Aspen Institute's plan for revitalization of youth sports, it is easy to see that 4-H could be a national leader in guiding these changes. For example, the Aspen study noted that only one fifth of coaches had any kind of formal training (espnW & Aspen Institute, 2014), yet 4-H has extensive trainings related to youth safety, youth motivation, and inclusive approaches to youth activities that could allow coaches to be more effective (Homan, 2006). Additionally, 4-H's training and certification programs for volunteer leaders in shooting sports could provide a model for training of coaches in other sports.

Beyond local partnership development, 4-H could seek new national partnerships, following the example of a recent partnership with FIRST Robotics Leagues. Since 2009, FIRST Lego Robotics and 4-H have partnered to support the development and inclusion of 4-H-based robotics teams (National 4-H Council, 2012). Perhaps similar partnerships with national youth sports associations could serve to enhance youth participation in sports.

Applying 4-H philosophical concepts could help refocus the purpose of team sports. Alumni of youth programming point to their 4-H experiences as having had a greater impact on their development of character-related qualities, such as leadership, communication acumen, and responsibility, than other experiences of their youths (Radhakrishna & Doamekpor, 2009). Encouraging 4-H agents and volunteers to create spaces for unstructured play related to program activities and camps could help involve children in team-based play concepts in an environment that is focused on character building and fun as the primary goals rather than winning in a hierarchical competition.

Heading for Home: How 4-H Can Bring Sports Back to Youths

Some 4-H programs are already stepping up to the plate to meet these needs, perhaps because of the value 4-H participants place on competitive events (Radhakrishna, Everhart, & Sinasky, 2006). In Wisconsin, Dunn County 4-H organizes a co-ed youth softball league featuring objectives that reference sportsmanship, companionship, meeting new friends, competing in a positive way, and teaching understanding of others (University of Wisconsin–Extension, n.d.). In Goshen, Indiana, 4-H sponsors a three-on-three basketball tournament at the county fair, and it is one of the most popular events at the fair (Pippenger, 2015). This type of venue harks to the friendly spirit of competition that historically has encouraged participation in team-based sports.

Perhaps the most interesting return-to-roots approach is the Oregon 4-H soccer program. This program began a few years ago when an Oregon State University 4-H faculty member tossed a ball out on a field full of kids

and said, "Let's play some soccer!" The area's robust Latino community, in particular, responded to the incorporation of soccer in 4-H meetings, and there are now 90 teams supported by 4-H (Stewart, n.d.).

Crossing the Plate

As this conversation around reimagining youth sports is taking place, there is an opportunity for Cooperative Extension to be a national leader in the movement. Beyond 4-H, this issue is congruent with Cooperative Extension's ongoing promotion of healthful, lifelong habits. Youth sports is a logical piece of this broader conversation. This article is intended as a call for Cooperative Extension to consider how it can collaborate at the local and national levels to enhance youth sports programming. At its core, this conversation is about the healthful development of our children and their advancement as contributors to society. Cooperative Extension has decades of experience in creating a "playbook" for youth development, and it is time to put that playbook into action.

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