

Youth Sport Ministry: Looking Beyond the Court
by
Marlene Dixon and Stacy Warner

Every year millions of children participate in church-sponsored sport leagues throughout the U.S. and Canada. In fact, the Upward sport program reports that over a half of million 5-12 year-olds compete annually in their sport leagues alone¹. Pastors, staff, and volunteers shoulder the task of creating and implementing a Christian-based youth sport experience that is both fun and meaningful for children. While youth sport participants in these programs typically walk away with both enhanced sport skills and a better understanding of the teachings and principles of Jesus, what is often overlooked is that youth sport serves more than the just the children.

Meet the Parents

Numerous studies indicate that parents struggle to find a sense of community and belonging within their neighborhood, church, and/or workplace. Despite technological advances, Americans have become less connected in their communities and have fewer close friends or even people that they feel they can talk to about important matters^{2,3}. Further, sense of community is connected with many physical, emotional, and spiritual benefits; thus, it is vital that the church continue to find ways to connect parents in community and help them experience the body of Christ (Romans 12:5).

Recent research⁴ points toward youth sport as a means to address this need for parents. As researchers at East Carolina University and The University of Texas at Austin, we found that youth sport can play a significant role in increasing the overall sense of community that parents experienced. Simply put, youth sport is important site for building relationships among adults in a community. Although church administrators often offer a variety of intentional activities in an effort to build community (e.g., small groups, potluck dinners, festivals, etc.), for many parents the youth sport environment can also serve this function. In fact, our research demonstrated that for many sport is a preferred avenue to building community as it provides common ground for parents in and out of the church to build relationships. Our research concluded, however, that this community does not build automatically. Rather, sport ministry staff and volunteers must carefully construct the youth sport environment, such that parents also reap benefits from it.

Creating a Youth Sport Environment that fosters Community

In our study of church-based youth sport, we found four key elements that work together to ensure that parents also reap the benefits from organized sport. First, *the child's experience* was the most important element. The parents in the study repeatedly mentioned that they could not have a positive experience themselves if their children

were not happy in the sport program. A positive child experience, we found, is accomplished by: 1) having a positive atmosphere that focuses on fun and teaching rather “coaching,” 2) having opportunities for all children to participate in meaningful ways, 3) improving sport skills such that the child feels a sense of accomplishment, and 4) focusing on individual and team improvement rather than beating an opponent. It was clear that the child’s experience drove the parents’ experience as many parents articulated the idea that if “our kids are happy, we are happy.”

Organization was the next element that was important to the parental experience. While this may be taken for granted, it is vital that the sport league be well managed. Smooth logistics and clear communication from the sport league are expected, but are not always present in various leagues. This includes clear scheduling policies, minimized schedule changes, regular and timely communication to parents (e.g., email, website), obvious directional signage in and outside of church buildings, and a visible individual in charge at all events. Organization puts parents at ease and allows them to move past worrying about logistics and toward a focus on building relationships.

The next element the parents spoke about being important to their experience was the *caring and concern* from the administrators of the sport program. A friendly and welcoming demeanor of those in charge creates an engaging atmosphere and does not go unnoticed by the parents. While coaches and administrators may feel pulled in various directions, the simple gesture of greeting parents should not be overlooked. In fact, it will not only help start relationships but also help create an atmosphere that encourages others to assist with issues that may arise.

The last factor that was instrumental in fostering a healthy environment for parents within youth sport was the *equity* in the league. If the league was run in a manner in which the parents thought was fair and balanced, a greater sense of community was experienced by all. The Upward leagues, specifically, have policies and procedures designed to create a balanced competitive field. For example, Upward programs create teams with a variety of skill levels, match children according to skill level for game play, and utilize a substitution system that ensures equal playing time. When efforts are made to ensure everyone is treated fairly, this impacts the parents’ experience by building a sense of trust and respect, which is often the foundation for community.

Focusing on these four elements of youth sport programs will help create an environment that serves more than just the children. As parents see how the church provides for and creates meaningful experiences for their children, they gain a trust and respect that draws them closer to the church body. People don’t need just a “church,” they need a community that points them towards better understanding Christ’s love for us. A youth sport ministry is one way to provide that, not just for kids, but for their parents as well.

¹ Upward Sports. (2012). Kids Sports Leagues and Kids Sports Camps: The Place to Play Fun Sports. Retrieved from <http://www.upward.org/aboutus/>

² McPherson, M., Smith-Lovin, L., & Brashears, M. E. (2006). Social isolation in America: Changes in core discussion networks over two decades. *American Sociological Review*, 71, 353-375.

³ Olds, J., & Schwartz, R. S. (2009). *The Lonely American: Drifting Apart in the Twenty-First Century*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

⁴ Dixon, M. A., & Warner, S. (May, 2012). *Meet the parents: Examining the parental experience in community youth sport*. Presented at the North American Society for Sport Management Conference, Seattle, WA.