

Matching Child-Centered Policies to Age- and Stage-Appropriate Development in Youth Sport

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Understanding Youth Development to Support Training and Sports Participation

Youth sports participation offers many benefits if led by qualified coaches, supported by parents and embraced by the players themselves. Coaches are the first line of promotion of sport-based youth development and the first line of defense against overuse, overtraining and burnout among youth athletes. At every stage of youth development there exist evidence-informed recommendations for the amount of sports-participation experience boys and girls should engage in relative to practice and competition as well as general guidelines for age-appropriate training strategies to support healthy development and sport success.

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Youth sports need a development-centered perspective that remembers that kids thrive on having fun, making friends, solving movement problems and learning new skills. These important goals of youth sport have been classified within the 3Ps: performance, participation and personal development.¹ The 3Ps are central to quality youth experiences that simultaneously balance the achievement of excellence and participation.² In his 2003 book *Double Goal Coach*, Jim Thompson explains that although they seem like opposites, program emphasis on excellence and participation can not only coexist but thrive together when coaching programs are properly designed.³ When combined, a focus on both outcomes can emphasize winning while supporting actions on the field that instill teamwork, perseverance, sportsmanship, empathy, work ethic and other critical life skills. The key is aligning the goals of the program and the coaching actions to promote mastery, respect for the game and a positive social-emotional culture.



While originally designed with youth sports in mind, this concept applies across all levels of scholastic sport. Unfortunately, however, the current youth sports climate commonly overemphasizes winning while undervaluing holistic development.² A grassroots, bottom-up coached approach that promotes developmentally appropriate local league policies has been suggested because the top-down national sport systems strategies often have limited impact (Skille, 2011).⁴ As central figures in the youth sport experience, coaches should strive to work with their organization’s policy-makers to create age-and-stage league policies that help all kids succeed (see Table 1).

Table 1. Implementing the 3Ps into Sport Policy	
Performance	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Introduce multisport programs at grassroots• Encourage healthy participation without overemphasizing winning• Emphasize inclusion and opportunity and avoid using a talent-selection approach until specialization is appropriate• Promote deliberate play within and beyond organized sport
Participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Design seasons that are developmentally appropriate with seasons that are 3-4 months long• Allow opportunities for local sport engagement and discourage extensive or frequent travel in youth programs
Personal Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Design practice activities focused on supporting intrinsic motivation• Allow children to play different positions within a sport to enhance development and creativity• Allow children opportunities to both win and face challenges to support resiliency and growth• Discourage early single-sport specialization



Coaches' Talking Points for 3P Policies

It is important for coaches to be aware of developmental ages and stages to understand the reasons behind sports-participation recommendations. All coaches should be aware of the advantages of multisport participation versus the concerns associated with focusing on one and only one sport at the expense of all other sports and activities. Coaches should encourage participation in multiple sports (but only one team per season) throughout the year and avoid sport specialization before age 15. To maximize long-term healthy athletic development, it is important for kids under age 15 to spend at least two to three months per year away from sport-specific training and competition. Prior to age 12, aspiring athletes should spend at least 80% of time in other sports; youth aged 13-15 should spend 50% of time on other sports; and youth ages 16 and above should spend 20% of time in nonspecialized sport and deliberate play. All youth athletes should have one to two days off per week from competitive sports and training.

In terms of youth development and learning to love to play the game, coaches should place an emphasis on practice and the importance of a mastery and effort mindset for

developing physical skills, decision-making ability and player confidence. Youth should spend no more time in hours per week in structured play (such as sport) than their age in years. For example, a 12-year-old should participate no more than 12 hours per week in their sport. The recommended balance between structured play and free play is 2:1, so the same 12-year-old should have six hours per week of free play. Promotion of an adequate balance of structured play and free play enhances skill development, enjoyment and motivation.

Competition should be viewed as a unique practice experience for supporting growth as opposed to being the end goal itself. Whenever possible, choose competition opportunities wisely. Limit extensive travel and strive for a schedule that uses competition to support developmental goals. Developing players benefit from both winning and losing as they work to develop both the physical and psychological skills necessary to be resilient and successful.

Key Take-Home Box

Coaches have far-reaching influence in their community. As such, coaches should consider being the servant leader presenting to other coaches, parents and volunteer boards the 3Ps, sharing the matching age-and-stage considerations, and proposing solutions within grassroots youth sports teams and leagues. It is a collaborative process of leading by example, educating and creating the space for all coaches to promote long-term age-appropriate sports participation for all kids.

References

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