



RESEARCH CORNER

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Coaches

IMPROVING YOUTH OUTCOMES ON AND OFF THE FIELD

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The Issue

Youth participation in sports and athletics is essential to healthy lifestyles, reducing childhood obesity and increasing overall levels of fitness. But sports and fitness activities can also support additional youth development outcomes: improved self-confidence and sense of self, the ability to set goals and follow through with them, improved cognition and mental acuity, and a sense of connection, camaraderie and community. Yet research suggests that while participation in sports can further all of these outcomes, they are not an automatic result of participation. A safe, secure climate together with coaches who understand and teach through a youth development lens are essential to achieving these positive outcomes.

This brief synthesizes research on how sports and fitness programs can support youth development outcomes and highlights the importance of skilled and knowledgeable coaches to achieving those outcomes. It also provides an overview of the coaching landscape in Washington, D.C. and offers recommendations to policy makers, practitioners, funders and researchers on how to improve coaching in the District and, with it, the opportunities and outcomes for youth.

What sports can do to support youth development?

Sports and fitness activities are essential to the health and well being of youth. Researchers have identified numerous ways in which participation in sports programs can support the development of healthy lifestyles in children and youth:

- > Studies have credited participation in sports with “building healthy bones and muscle; reducing the risks of developing chronic diseases such as heart disease and diabetes; reducing the chance of being overweight and obese; reducing feelings of anxiety depression and hopelessness; and promoting psychological well-being.”¹
- > Youth participants in sports are also less likely to smoke cigarettes and marijuana than their non-participating peers and report healthier diets.¹

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- > Moreover, those who participate in sports programs as children and youth are more likely to participate in sports and fitness activities into young adulthood.¹

In addition to these physical benefits, participation in sports and fitness programs can improve academic and socio-emotional outcomes. Participation in sports has been associated with:

- > Completing more years of education, increased attachment to school, and higher grades in school;²
- > Increasing levels of attention and working memory;²
- > Protecting youth from isolation and promoting positive attachment to the community.³

WHY SHOWING UP ISN'T ENOUGH

While the benefits of participation in sports and fitness programs can be many, they are not guaranteed. Although many youth do experience positive development outcomes through participating, others experience negative outcomes. Parental pressure, poor relationships with coaches, and a stressful competitive environment can negatively impact self-confidence and feelings of mastery.⁴ More commonly, youth outcomes are flat: youth attend a program but they do not make progress in developing greater autonomy, communication skills, and attachment to teammates and community.

Researchers are clear that the climate of the program—created by coaches, parents, officials, and the youth themselves—goes a long way in determining outcomes.²

Why coaches are so important

Coaches occupy a unique and potentially highly influential position in the lives of youth. The coaches youth consider “experts” occupy a position of trust and respect that is often unparalleled in the community. This is particularly true in low income, African American neighborhoods, where black male coaches provide youth with valuable social capital and social support.⁵ Youth who participate in sports programs often have more direct contact with coaches than they do with other adults like teach-

ers and even parents. The frequency, duration and intensity of these experiences with coaches give them authority and make them highly influential.⁶

Every time a coach suggests a new approach, offers praise, or presents a criticism, he or she participates in a “micro-intervention,” whether for good or for ill. Over the course of their childhood and adolescence, youth experience or observe anywhere between hundreds or tens of thousands of coaching micro-interventions. It follows, then, that “training coaches to increase certain behaviors and decrease others can change the quality of the micro-interventions to which children are repeatedly exposed.”⁷

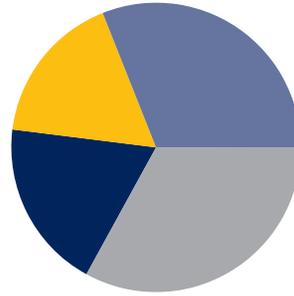
These trainings change coaches’ behaviors and improve youth outcomes. In one study of youth baseball, coaches trained to increase their supportiveness and instructional effectiveness were more successful in helping boys with low self-esteem achieve increases in general self-esteem than were untrained coaches.⁸ More broadly, the President’s Council on Physical Fitness and Sports explains that when coaches provide “positive and informational feedback, appropriate role modeling, and autonomy-supportive behaviors”, youth are most likely to achieve positive development.⁴

Unfortunately, most volunteer youth sports coaches in recreational leagues in the United States do not receive formal training in coaching and, therefore, are not taught strategies for either increasing positive youth outcomes or the importance of them.⁷ Instead, most coaches rely on common-sense behaviors or their own experiences as guides when working with youth. While there is no evidence that such practices harm youth development, researchers and practitioners agree “it may be possible to enhance the benefits of youth sport participation by supplementing common-sense coaching with theoretically-derived and empirically-validated behaviors for enhancing youth development.”⁷ In other words, teaching coaches what works and why and how it works can help coaches become more effective teachers, mentors and role models for the youth they work with.

D.C. Coaching Landscape

The Trust reached out to District agencies that operate the majority of youth sports leagues and programs and employ the majority of youth sports coaches in the city: D.C. Public Schools (DCPS), the Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR), and the D.C. State Athletic Association (DCSAA). They reported a total of approximately 1600 coaches. Other community-based youth sports programs involve an estimated 800 coaches as paid staff and volunteers.

Each of these agencies requires that coaches be trained in CPR/ First Aid and concussion prevention/acclimatization awareness, vital supports to ensure the safety and well being of youth athletes. Although youth development trainings are offered, they are not currently required of all coaches.



YOUTH SPORTS COACHES EMPLOYED IN D.C.

400

District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS)

750

District of Columbia State Athletic Association (DCSAA)

450

Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR)

800

Other Community-Based Organizations

WHAT YOU CAN DO

POLICY/FUNDING

- > Invest in playing fields, recreation centers and sporting facilities that are safe, accessible, and well maintained
- > Address opportunity gaps to ensure that under-resourced youth and under-active youth are able to participate in programs that support their healthy development
- > Require that all D.C. coaches participate in a core set of trainings that include safety, instruction, and youth development
- > Promote opportunities for workshops, clinics and camps in health, youth development and sports-specific sectors
- > Provide adequate funding to pay for the trainings so coaches do not have to spend their own (often limited) funds

RESEARCH

- 1 Better understand the role of coaches as social supports, mentors, and role models for adolescent young men and young women of color
- 2 Conduct evaluations of coaches' certification programs to better understand how those programs affect youth outcomes so that trainings can be enhanced and improved

PRACTICE (COACHES, ATHLETIC TRAINERS, ATHLETIC DIRECTORS)³

- > Seek education and professional competencies in positive youth development
- > Create climates where youth feel supported and are encouraged for their efforts, improvements, and successes
- > Give quality informational feedback that allows youth to improve their technical skills (which will lead to better performance and more confidence)
- > Teach life skills (e.g. interpersonal, self-management, goal-setting, and resistance)
- > Encourage safe participation and promote health and well-being through nutrition, hydration, stretching, and safe play

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