

# Listening to Our Children: Why They Participate in Sports

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It is estimated that over 30 million American children participate in organized sports programs every year. What motivates all those children to play organized sports? If you ask a child between the ages of 6-18 years old why they play sports they will say, “to have fun, to improve skills and to be with friends.” Winning is usually not in the top seven reasons. Winning is a concept parents and coaches emphasize. Sport researchers have asked this question for the last two decades and children have provided essentially the same answers each time. In a 1990 landmark study of 10,000 children, age 10-18 years, children were asked their motives for participation<sup>1</sup>. The top 12 motives for participation in sport for boys and girls were as follows:

<b>MOTIVES FOR PARTICIPATION</b>	
<b>BOYS</b>	<b>GIRLS</b>
1. To have fun	1. To have fun
2. Improve skills	2. To stay in shape
3. For the excitement of competition	3. To get exercise
4. To do something I'm good at	4. To improve skills
5. To stay in shape	5. To do something I'm good at
6. For the challenge of competition	6. To be part of a team
7. To be part of a team	7. For the excitement of competition
8. To win	8. To learn new skills
9. To go to a higher level of competition	9. For the team spirit
10. To get exercise	10. For the challenge of competition
11. To learn new skills	11. To go to a higher level of competition
12. For the team spirit	12. To win

Boys and girls shared four of the top five motives including: to have fun, to improve skills, to stay in shape, and to do something I'm good at. Winning was at the bottom of the list, rated eighth by boys and 12<sup>th</sup> by girls.

Children participate in sports because it is fun. Exactly what is fun? Fun for a six year old may be something that is quite different for a 16 year old. External rewards (ribbons, food) are appropriate for young children. As kids age, completing tasks that are more difficult and complex becomes fun. For a 16 year old, finishing a challenging running workout is fun. Here are some sources of fun:

- My coach tells me what to do to improve
- Being with friends
- Being on a team/cheering for teammates
- My coach compliments or encourages me
- Receiving rewards or medals
- Varied workouts

<sup>1</sup> Martha Ewing and Vern Seefeldt (1990), Michigan State University, American Youth and Sport Participation, Athletic Footwear Association.

Parents have a large influence, both positive and negative, on whether children enjoy sports. From studies on other sports we can draw general conclusions about the role parents play in enhancing the sport experience for kids. Children like to have unconditional support and encouragement from parents. The physical presence of parents at competitive events enhances the experience for children. However, pushing children to do too much is unwelcome. Researchers found that in swimming children liked parents who both supported and challenged them. This notion was termed “Optimal Push.” There is a fine line between pushing for a beneficial effect and pushing too much for a detrimental effect. Every effort should be made to support and challenge children for a positive benefit.

Coaches also have a big influence over why children enjoy sports and why kids drop out of sport. When asked to list the six most important changes they would make to get involved again in a sport they dropped the kids in the study (Ewing and Seefeldt) listed:

- Practices were more fun
- I wish I could play more
- Coaches were better teachers
- Coaches understood athletes better
- Less conflict with studies
- Less conflict with social life

Coaches have a responsibility to make practices fun, interesting and challenging. When coaches emphasize skill development and provide positive feedback to an individual it has far more long-term benefits than an emphasis on winning. Like all of us, children like to have a sense of competence when engaged in sports. Improvements can come in small or large doses when accomplishing a skill or reducing time in a running event. Setting goals and measuring progress toward those goals is a way of emphasizing individual improvement.

### **Coaching Running Workouts**

So how do we design running programs for children to address these issues? Here are some ideas that keep practices fun and focus on teamwork and skill development:

- Obstacle Course – 200-600m in length for younger children, 6-9 year olds
  - Use hoops, tunnels, and slalom poles that force kids to jump, turn, crouch and sprint.
- Cross Country Course – 800-1500m for older children, 10-13 year olds.
  - Find a course that goes over fields and through a forest.
- Fun drills that emphasize good running technique.
- Relays that emphasize teamwork.
  - Use relays legs of varying lengths.
- Orienteering – courses and tasks are designed to fit younger and older children.

### **Recommendations for Parents:**

- Provide unconditional support and encouragement at practices and meets.
- Provide just enough challenge so it is a benefit.

**Recommendations for Coaches:**

- Coach according to the motives of why children participate in sport
- Keep practices fun
- Coach to improve the individual skills of each child
- Structure practices to emphasize teamwork