# Keep 'Em Playing:

## Strategies for Building Positive Sport Experiences

### By Karen Collins and Robert Barcelona

**R**ecent reports on youth sport participation continue to show alarming trends. Participation rates have been declining, particularly among children ages six to 12 years old. According to the Aspen Institute's Project Play (2016) initiative, fewer young people are participating in organized team sports today than they were in 2008. Declining participation rates have been recorded from 2008 to 2015 in a diverse array of team sports, including baseball, basketball, soccer, track and field and tackle football (Aspen Institute Project Play, 2016). Other studies have shown that up to or more than 30% of youth drop out of sports each year (Balish, McLaren, Rainham, & Blanchard, 2014), with the dropout process starting at age nine and accelerating after age 11 (Gardner, Vella, & Magee, 2016).

The reasons behind these declines in youth sport participation include a variety of intrapersonal, interpersonal and structural factors, including lack of enjoyment, lack of perceived competence, stress, negative team dynamics, negative relationships with coaches, pressure, and lack of time, among others (Crane & Temple, 2015; Gardner et al., 2016; Perry, 2013). Declining sport participation rates are concerning for a variety of reasons, including that the decreasing levels of physical activity and increasing rates of obesity among children and youth are significant areas of concern for sport professionals (Aspen Institute Project Play, 2015).

Unfortunately, the current youth sport landscape has grown increasingly complex. The demands of sport specialization, the prevalence and growth of private sport clubs, an increased focus on travel and competitive sports, the pressure to play on multiple teams in the same season, and the ever-increasing financial costs to participate have all created challenges for youth sport reform efforts. These demands have been shown to create conditions such as overtraining and stress that lead to sport burnout — and ultimately to sport dropout.

The good news is that youth sport leaders, including program administrators, coaches and parents, can positively influence almost all of the reasons given for sport dropout among youth. The purpose of this article is to provide a set of strategies designed to create positive sport experiences that can be implemented by program administrators, coaches and parents. These strategies are rooted in a philosophy of youth sport that focuses on athlete development and on creating a positive sport experience, and emphasizes three key areas: enhancing sport enjoyment, developing "positive push," and cultivating relationships. In implementing these strategies, it is important to keep in mind the age and developmental level of the athlete. Although the strategies are generally universal, the application may be modified or adapted depending on the context and needs of the specific athlete.

## Enhancing Sport Enjoyment

Having fun — including experiencing pleasure and enjoyment while playing — is a significant facilitator of participation and continuation in sport (Wellard, 2014). In fact, the lack of enjoyment in sport has been noted as the most frequent reason for dropping out of youth sports (Crane & Temple, 2015), particularly for youth ages seven to 15 years old (Gardner et al., 2016). Because enjoyment is such an important predictor of positive sport experiences, youth sport leaders, coaches and parents should focus on intentionally implementing strategies that maximize fun within the context of sport (Wells, Ellis, Paisley, & Arthur-Banning, 2008). Although the amount of fun that children experience in sport is influenced by many factors, youth sport leaders (administrators, coaches and parents) can initiate specific strategies to maximize fun and enjoyment in youth sport programs across different levels of the sport experience.

### Create policies and sport contexts that maximize inclusive opportunities to participate in and increase physical activity

It goes without saying that youth have more fun actively playing a sport than they do sitting on the bench watching others play. Youth sport administrators should create policies that maximize active participation of all athletes. Such policies could include ensuring equal playing time or giving athletes a chance to experience playing different positions while on the field or court. Participation could also be maximized by limiting team roster sizes or playing games in a small-sided format. Small-sided games by nature foster maximum participation and allow athletes to learn the game in context. U.S. Lacrosse, in particular, is using small-sided games as a core component of its athlete development model (Logue, 2016; see Table 1). Maximizing participation also creates more opportunities for increased physical activity.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2017) recommended that children ages six to 17 years old should participate in at least 60 minutes of moderate or vigorous activity every day. Whether participating in youth sports by itself provides this level of physical activity is an open question. Too often in recreational youth sports, athletes spend a significant amount of time standing around, waiting in line, and not moving. Creating practice plans involving constant movement is paramount.

### Create policies and sport contexts that foster prosocial behavior

Children who have negative experiences in sport are more likely to discontinue participation. A key source of negative experiences is poor sportsmanship and a lack of prosocial behavior. Prosocial behavior, or behavior intended to benefit others, is manifested in reciprocity, social responsibility, personal relationships and a focus on similarities between individuals (Wells et al., 2008). A consequence of an absence of prosocial behavior is poor sportsmanship. Administrators, coaches and parents can create environments in which prosocial behavior (e.g., verbally encouraging a teammate) is encouraged and reinforced through positive messaging, a focus on team building, pregame player introductions, close supervision of practices and games, postgame social events, rewards for good sportsmanship, appropriate consequences for poor sportsmanship, and social marketing materials (Ellis, Henderson, Paisley, Silverberg, & Wells, 2004).

### Teach sport skills through games

Youth sport coaches often focus on teaching technical skills in an effort to get athletes to learn the game. This focus

| Table 1. Web Resources for Building Positive Sport Experiences | | |
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| **Organization** | **Resources** | **Website** |
| The Aspen Institute Project Play | Improving access to youth sport | https://www.aspenprojectplay.org |
| Changing the Game Project | Parent and coach resources | http://changingthegameproject.com |
| Centers for Disease Control and Prevention | Youth physical activity guidelines | https://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/physicalactivity/guidelines.htm |
| Positive Coaching Alliance Development Zone Research Center | Resources for parents, coaches and officials | http://devzone.positivecoach.org |
| American Sport Education Program | Coach and parent education resources | http://www.asep.com |
| U.S. Lacrosse | Small-sided games | https://www.uslacrosse.org/blog/small-ball-a-new-approach-to-lacrosse-player-development |
| U.S. Olympic Committee | Quality coaching framework | https://www.teamusa.org/About-the-USOC/Athlete-Development/Coaching-Education/Quality-Coaching-Framework |
| USA Baseball | Ways to play | http://web.usabaseball.com/arc/players-parents/ways-to-play |
| American Youth Soccer Association | Resources for volunteers | http://www.aysovolunteers.org/ |
| Junior National Basketball Association | Practice Plans | https://jr.nba.com/basketball-practice-plans/rookie |
| | Components of developing well-rounded players and people | https://jr.nba.com/the-abcds-of-the-jr-nba |

on "drills and skills" is frequently applied outside the game context, and young athletes can be confused about the relevance of doing repetitive, boring and often mindless drills. The "games approach" (Martens, 2012) holds that sport skills can and should be taught tactically within the context of the game. Games are more fun and relevant to young athletes, and practice situations that simulate game-like conditions can be useful in helping athletes understand what tactics to use and when to use them in a given game situation (Mitchell, Oslin, & Griffin, 2013).

### Reward positive coaching behavior

It is critical for youth sport administrators to eliminate coaching behavior that is contradictory to the philosophy of the program. It is equally important to encourage and reward coaching behavior that positively reinforces the program's philosophy. An example of positive reinforcement would be to award a "gold coaches award" to those coaches who accurately represent the agency's mission. Coaches may be highlighted in a newsletter not for the number of wins, but instead for the positive coaching behaviors they exhibit. These coaches could earn first pick of practice days/times. Or better still, the administrator could target exemplary coaches as mentors for younger,

less experienced coaches. When coaches have fun and feel good about what they are doing, athletes are the beneficiaries of a better overall sport experience.

### Talk to athletes about what they enjoyed during their practices or games

It is probably not a stretch to think that one of the most popular questions that parents ask their young athletes after a game is, "Did you win?" Although there is nothing wrong with striving to win (and winning itself is a desirable sport outcome), focusing on winning as the primary outcome can increase pressure, create anxiety, and exacerbate feelings of disappointment when the answer is, "No." In an effort to be more developmental, parents have been instructed to instead ask the question, "Did you have fun?" This reframes the experience and connects to arguably the number one reason why kids play sports in the first place. The problem with this question is that the response from the typical adolescent or preadolescent is, "Yup" or "Nope." A better question might be, "What did you enjoy most about the game today?" or "What were the things that you struggled with today?" These questions can elicit a deeper and wider set of responses and can give parents more insight into their child's sport experience.

As a sport parent, the key is "to be a good listener and a great encourager" (Henson, 2012, para. 36).

## Developing a Positive Push

Many parents and coaches struggle with the balance of knowing when to push their child/athlete and when to back off and let their child/athlete dictate his or her own progression and development. Experts have indicated that this balance requires a strong understanding of many components, including the parents' or coaches' ability to read not only the child's/athlete's needs, but also their own emotional needs (e.g., a parent really wanting his/her son to play ice hockey because it is the parent's favorite sport). Further, it is also important to consider the overall goals of sport participation as well as overall development. Understanding these components can help in knowing when and how to provide an appropriate balance of structure and expectations (Lauer, Gould, Roman, & Pierce, 2010). Associated with this balance is paying attention to age-appropriate development. Emphasizing core values of the philosophy (e.g., hard work, discipline) is an effective strategy because it reinforces the components of sport that are within the athlete's control while placing little importance on outcomes and winning. Therefore, it is important for parents, coaches and administrators to provide opportunities for a positive push in the youth sport experience. A number of strategies can be implemented to meet this goal.

### Build a mastery climate

Creating a positive mastery- or task-oriented climate seems to be an optimal approach for balancing player satisfaction, reducing anxiety, and facilitating talent development (Smith, Smoll, & Cumming, 2007). Further, a task-oriented climate should enhance perceptions of competence because the achievements and feelings of success are self-referenced as opposed to peer-referenced. The emphasis in this climate is on developing mastery (i.e., skill execution). Research has suggested that perceptions of a coach-created, task-involved climate increase athletes' satisfaction, particularly as it relates to competence and autonomy, two critical characteristics in youth sport development (Sarrazin, Guillet, & Cury, 2001; Standage, Duda, & Ntoumanis, 2003). Specifically, reinforcing effort, individual role importance, and progress maximizes satisfaction (Reinboth & Duda, 2006). Athletes who feel confident about gradually building their skill and recognizing progress are more likely to stay engaged and involved in sport. A key strategy for helping athletes develop a mastery mind set is to encourage SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and timely; Camiré, Forneris, Trudel, & Bernard, 2011) goal setting and encourage process goals over outcome goals.

### Reward behavior that is in line with the programmatic philosophy

As mentioned earlier, administrators can reward coaches whose actions are in line with the program's philosophy.

These strategies are rooted in a philosophy of youth sport that focuses on athlete development and on creating a positive sport experience, and emphasizes three key areas: enhancing sport enjoyment, developing "positive push," and cultivating relationships.

Coaches can also reward athletes for effort and positive sportsmanship. For example, they may have a "hard worker of the week" T-shirt that a particular player gets to wear at practice for the week. Or coaches can reward the team for good effort, and focus on appropriate behavior, by allowing the athletes to choose the next drill. For example, each week, a swim coach rewards the athlete who has demonstrated a great "team-first" attitude or met a team goal by giving them the "red cap." This swim cap allows that particular athlete to be highlighted for the week.

### Develop appropriate game and practice goals

Teams often consist of athletes with varying abilities. Therefore, it is important to match the challenge of the activity to the ability levels of individuals and the team (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). Doing so will keep athletes more engaged. Practice goals are important and should influence game goals. For example, if a coach has practice on Tuesday and Thursday and creates a goal about "maintaining possession and having a positive turnover ratio," then that same goal should be the focus of the game on Saturday. Therefore, during Saturday's game, the coach could track the possession and turnover ratio. When athletes are sitting on the bench, the coach can involve them in the process by having them track these statistics. Involving the players on the bench in this process not only keeps them engaged in the game, but empowers them to provide feedback.

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### Provide and ask for feedback related to the team or program goals and philosophy, and not the outcome

At the end of a game, coaches can give feedback relative to the game goals. If the athletes fall short on a goal, coaches can hold them accountable. What is important to remember is that feedback should be based on characteristics that the athlete can control (e.g., effort, behavior, mental focus). Further, parents can inquire about the game or practice by asking, "What did you learn today? What was today's game goal? How did you do in meeting the goal? What was the best part of practice today?" These questions reinforce philosophy as opposed to focusing on outcome.

## Cultivating Relationships

For a well-structured sport system, it is important for the coach to develop positive relationships with all sport constituents, including sport parents, athletes and administrators (Flett, Gould, Griffes, & Lauer, 2013). More often than not, youth sport organizations cite development and enjoyment as core programmatic beliefs. It is significantly easier to implement these beliefs when there are good working relationships with the agency and sport system. The following strategies could be implemented by administrators, coaches and parents in building positive relationships while maintaining programmatic beliefs.

### Hold people accountable to clear expectations

Whether it be parents or athletes, the clearer the expectations, the better (Gould, Collins, Lauer, & Chung, 2007). These expectations can be delivered during preseason meetings, posted on signs around the facility, or reinforced in emails, newsletters and social media. Having clear expectations is one thing; it is a bit more challenging to hold members of a team accountable to these expectations. Coaches need to be consistent and fair regardless of whether the athlete is the best player or the parent is

a neighbor and best friend. Developing consistency in working with expectations is important, as consistency builds credibility. Once a coach has credibility, he or she has an easier time building trusting relationships.

### Show athletes you care

From ages nine to 12, athletes focus on peer comparison for feedback, and this should be taken into account when adults give feedback. Further, at the same time as athletes use peer comparison as a means of evaluation, they are also looking for positive adult role models who are not their parents. Coaches can fill this role by being honest and kind with their feedback. Coaches should ask athletes about their life outside of sport as well. Conversation starters such as, "Tell me about something funny that happened at school today" can go a long way in building relationships.

### Listen to concerns

Whether concerns are generated by athletes, parents or administrators, it is important for coaches and sport administrators to listen without judgement and take action if appropriate. Listening takes time. Listening builds credibility. Coaches can benefit from understanding and practicing key active-listening skills (Martens, 2012). Active listening includes such concepts as being prepared to listen. For example, if a parent approaches the coach as practice is starting and wants to chat, the coach can either give his undivided attention while not being distracted by other players, equipment and logistics or suggest a time and place (e.g., phone call, after practice once others have left) to talk more effectively. Paraphrasing is another effective active-listening skill. Paraphrasing is important because it provides an opportunity for clarity on the topic at hand. Similarly, active listening means coaches use supportive behaviors (e.g., head nod), while limiting behaviors such as interrupting (e.g., "Yes, but"). Finally, it is always important for coaches to check for understanding to ensure that the message received was the message that was intended. Practicing active-listening skills increases the likelihood of consistent messages.

### Give the athletes a voice

It is important for athletes of all ages to feel they are part of the team on which they are playing. One way to do this is to make sure that the athletes have a voice. For example, before commenting on a game or practice, parents or coaches might ask athletes directly what they thought of the game/practice to allow the athletes to share their initial responses. Keep in mind that adults should try to be inclusive and provide the opportunity for all athletes to have a voice. Remember, it does not take a star player to recognize strategy. Coaches might also allow athletes to give peer feedback by creating a practice system where, at appropriate times, athletes can give one another feedback. The coach can facilitate in delivering the feedback depending on the age and maturity level of the athletes. For example, athletes need to know the "ground rules" for giving feedback to peers. Modeling the "feedback sandwich" (initial positive and encouraging statement, constructive feedback, fol-

lowed by another positive and encouraging statement) could be a useful way to set these ground rules. Implementing these strategies allows athletes to feel empowered. Further, it shows a mutually trusting relationship, an important determinant in building positive relationships.

### Provide contact points and be visible

One way to build relationships is to be visible and available. Whether at practice or games, sport leaders can create "contact points" for athletes, parents and administrators. These contact points could include 15 minutes on either end of the practice slot to be available for questions or concerns. It is important to learn parents' names and be available, within limits, to address concerns.

### Keep parents informed and reinforce positive behavior

Although working with sport parents may seem like a daunting task, in reality, the clearer coaches and administrators are about the program's philosophy, the easier this task becomes. One key component is to reframe the way the agency thinks about sport parents. First, parents are key stakeholders. Second, parents just want what is in the best interest of their children. Third, parents want to be kept informed. Martens (2012) identified three key strategies for working with sport parents: Share the program philosophy with sport parents, hold a preseason parent orientation meeting, and generate parent support. First and foremost, coaches and administrators need to share their program philosophy with sport parents. An early-season parent orientation meeting is a great opportunity to talk to parents about not only philosophy, but also expectations for particular teams, appropriate methods of contacting coaches, the parents' code of conduct, and rules and regulations associated with the program. These strategies can help to build parent support by helping coaches and administrators to see parents as collaborators as opposed to "something we have to deal with." Coaches and administrators should find positive ways to involve parents in the program, while still keeping within the boundaries of the program's philosophy.

Sometimes, parents are unable to attend meetings due to conflicting work schedules or other obligations, but it is still

possible to keep them informed of the program philosophy and expectations. Weekly emails, social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter), blogs and team websites are all valuable tools when used as informational sources. Further, these technological strategies parallel the "on-the-go" lifestyle of many sport parents. It is important to note that even if sport leaders have created positive roles for parents and have been clear about expectations and boundaries, there are situations when the program administrator must take action. Remember that parents just want what is best for their child athlete. Although the execution may be flawed, the intention is usually good. Coaches and administrators need to keep this fact in mind when working directly with parents to create solutions.

## Conclusion

Youth sport is a complex, multifaceted system. Programming is complicated, and attrition is on the rise. Yet, positive experiences in youth sport not only contribute to lifelong memories, but also help in developing an emphasis on physical activity throughout the life span. Coaches, parents and administrators in youth sport are charged with combatting the attrition and implementing strategies to keep kids in sport. Enhancing enjoyment, understanding the concept of a positive push and mastery climate, and cultivating meaningful relationships are three ways to facilitate this process.

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