

## Motivation of Young Athletes

by Richard Stratton

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### **Why Kids Want to Participate in Sports?**

Why do children want to play organized sports? What are their goals, hopes and aspirations? Each child has his or her own specific answers to these questions. Understanding their reasons for wanting to play sports is a critical first step towards helping children to have the best possible experiences in sport.

Articles in magazines and newspapers as well as some coaching textbooks often suggest that socialization is a major value of participating in youth sports. Certainly, learning to work together in a group and striving to achieve group goals are potentially important outcomes. Learning about and practicing sportsmanship also is a worthwhile goal, as is understanding how to deal with success and failure-winning and losing. Is this what the kids expect to get out of playing organized sports? Actually, NO!

Numerous research studies completed in the last 20 years have asked youth sport participants why they decided to participate in organized sports. Although there is some variation in the ranked order of the reasons that children cite, depending on the particular sport they are playing, the top reasons are very consistent. Children expect to have FUN, learn SKILLS, develop FITNESS, and participate because they enjoy COMPETITION. Socialization related reasons typically are near the bottom of the list, with sportsmanship somewhere in the middle. Winning and receiving individual awards (medals, trophies, etc) also do not appear among the top reasons. The bottom line is that children want an opportunity to participate in competitive sports, to develop the skills and fitness that will allow them to play effectively, and to have fun doing it.

### **Continuing to Participate or Dropping Out**

Once children have decided to participate in organized youth sports, the next issue in terms of motivation is what keeps them in sport or, conversely, why do many children drop out after only participating for a couple of years?

As one might expect, the primary reasons for continuing to participate in sport are fundamentally the same as the reasons they first started sport, that is, to have FUN, to learn SKILLS, to develop FITNESS, and because they enjoy COMPETITION.

Although many children continue to participate in youth sports for many years and even move up to higher levels of competition, 25% of all children drop out within the first 3 years. There are a wide variety of reasons why this happens. In a recent study of almost 700 youth sport drop outs, the top ranked reasons the kids gave for quitting were: I lost interest, the coach played favorites, I was not having any fun, and I developed other non-sport interests. Of these, only the development of non-sport interests was related to the age of the child, meaning that as they got older they were more likely to drop out because they became interested in activities outside of sport.

Because children rarely drop out for just one specific reason, we also did a cluster analysis of the reasons for dropping out. In this analysis we found that the primary combination of factors contributing to dropping out was related to the team environment. Specifically, the children felt that their coaches were not doing a good job, there was too much pressure to win, and the members of the team did not get along well with each other. Fortunately, these are problems that can be resolved.

Dropping out of youth sports can be a very emotional situation for children and their parents. It doesn't have to be if it is kept in perspective. Children (and adults, for that matter) drop out of a wide variety of activities all the time. Often it is nothing more than someone trying to find an activity that they can enjoy and find worth while doing. Sport is not for everyone.

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