



# labnotes

By Barbara A. Brehm, Ed.D.

## Youth Sports: Opportunities and Challenges

The interest in youth sports among school-aged boys and girls has never been stronger. Many health and fitness organizations are responding to this interest by offering a wide variety of youth sport programs. But youth sport coaches and administrators face a variety of challenges. Some of the most important issues that are prompting heated discussions include coaching, programming and parents.

### Coaching qualifications

Many people become youth sport coaches because they have some playing experience, and perhaps their child is on the team. They usually have little background in physical education or coaching, and often coach on a volunteer basis. Many of these volunteer coaches do a great job, despite their lack of education or certification.



As the competitive level of the team and the age of the players increase, the demands of athletes, parents and employers grow as well. Some countries, including Canada, have developed nationwide coaching certification programs. The U.S. has not, and states vary in the amount of training or level of certification required for coaches in public schools.

Several organizations offer certification programs for youth sport coaches, including National Youth Sports Coaches Association, American Sports Education Program, National Coaching Certification Program and the American Coaching Effectiveness Program. If you are hiring youth sport coaches, find out what certifications are available in your area, and decide whether you will require your coaches to be certified. At the very least, all coaches should have

some basic first aid training, and be able to demonstrate good organization, sportsmanship and leadership. A good coach is a good teacher, and should be adept at demonstrating and teaching sport skills.

### Program philosophy

Coaches and administrators of youth sport programs must have a clear coaching

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philosophy that guides their decision-making and coaching behavior. Some of this philosophy must be based on program goals and procedures. For example, a common problem is finding a balance between equal playing time for all players, and winning. Is your program designed to give all players a similar experience? Or do you need to have a competitive edge to attract talented players, and thus use some players more than others? Will you reward effort, talent or both? How will you teach sportsmanship?

How important is "fun"? Having fun is the No. 1 reason children and adolescents join a sports team. What do players in your program call fun? Players often cite improving their skills, being part of a team and winning as fun. Players also like being with their friends, and being recognized for their effort and performance. Concepts of fun vary with age and ability. Younger children are less likely to enjoy the stress of competition. Even older children may only want a light level of competition. Communities need to offer both competitive and recreational levels of play for popular sports, so that sport experiences are available to all levels of interest and ability.

Players say that the coach plays a large role in determining whether the players have fun. Coaches should run informative, well-organized practices and games, reward effort and ability, and encourage

players to improve their skills. They should communicate in a supportive, positive manner, and model a good attitude and good sportsmanship.

### Problematic parents

Youth sports programs have begun to pay more attention to educating parents about sportsmanship. Give parents guidelines for their behavior at practices and games. Tell them where to sit and what to do (and what not to do) during competitions. Coaches may wish to establish consequences for poor behavior from parents and players.

Supportive parents can be a strong asset to your program. Indeed, it is usually the parents who fund their children's participation, and provide transportation and organization. Parents may also volunteer to help you with phone calls and other details.

Good communication can get parents on the right track. Let parents know what is required of players, and what kind of experience their sons and daughters can expect to have. Describe your program philosophy, how practices are run and how contests are structured. Most coaches transmit this information via handouts, although some coaches hold a meeting with parents at the beginning of the season.

Parents often have strong opinions about their children's sport experiences. Give parents a way to communicate these opinions with you that won't take up too much of your time. You may wish to encourage them to email rather than call you at home. Short discussions after practice can let parents know that you care about their opinions, and are doing your best to offer their children a positive experience. **FM**

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