



SPORT FOR ALL PLAY FOR LIFE

**A PLAYBOOK TO GET
EVERY KID IN THE GAME**

THE ASPEN INSTITUTE
PROJECT PLAY
REIMAGINING YOUTH SPORTS IN AMERICA



WELCOME //

In August 2014, the most-discussed baseball player in the world was a child, Mo'ne Davis, who had just turned 13. She was the star pitcher of the Taney Dragons, and she and her team drew record television ratings for the Little League World Series. The public was fascinated with Davis' against-all-odds story: an African American girl from southwest Philadelphia, overwhelming the best hitters in her age group.

From the mound, Davis did more than remind us that girls can compete with boys—she drew attention to the barriers that kids from lower-income communities must overcome to play. She reminded us that healthy kids are active kids and that, as a nation, we must find a way to extend the benefits of playing sports to all, including the millions of children who grow up with limited access to regular physical activity.

IT'S ALL ABOUT BUILDING HEALTHY COMMUNITIES.

If we are going to ensure that all kids have the chance to grow up fit and strong, we must, among other efforts, eliminate the barriers to sports participation. These include: lack of neighborhood recreation spaces, inadequate coaching, rising costs and exclusionary league and team policies, excessive time demands on families, safety concerns, cultural norms, and too few sport options to accommodate the interests of all. Indeed, we ignore, push aside, and fail to develop the human (and athletic) potential of most children.

These barriers affect not just the kids who are missing out, but all of us. Nearly one in three children and teens today are overweight or obese.¹ Lack of physical activity contributes to the epidemic, and inactive children often become inactive adults. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention cites physical inactivity and obesity as risk factors for cancer, diabetes, heart disease, stroke, joint and bone disease, and depression. By 2030, the combined medical costs associated with treating preventable, obesity-related diseases could increase by up to \$66 billion per year in the United States, with a loss in economic productivity of up to \$580 billion annually.²

Childhood is the ideal time to prevent obesity, and none of the key strategies holds more promise in reducing obesity rates among children aged 6-12 than participation in after-school physical activity programs, according to a 2014 analysis published in the American Journal of Preventive Medicine. That's especially true with black and Hispanic youth.³ We must find new ways to help young people enjoy being active every day—no matter where they live or how much money their families make. It's critical that all kids have the opportunity to find and play sports they love.

The Aspen Institute Sports & Society Program created Project Play in 2013 to find ways to help all children in America become active through sports. At the launch summit, featured speaker David Drummond, a senior executive at Google, said that youth sports today “reminds me of lots of other industry structures,

WE ENVISION AN AMERICA IN WHICH ALL CHILDREN HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO BE ACTIVE THROUGH SPORTS*

*Sports = All forms of physical activity which, through organized or casual play, aim to express or improve physical fitness and mental well-being.

More definitions on terms used in this report are on p. 39

business systems, and ecosystems we see at Google. It looks like one that ought to be disrupted, because it seems there's a huge unmet need out there.” He said he sees the supply of quality experiences not meeting the demand of children or the needs of society, and encouraged us to be “audacious” in pursuing solutions. Since that day, Project Play has convened more than 250 leaders in 10 roundtables and other events, including a televised town hall with President Clinton. From these dialogues, we have identified a set of breakthrough strategies.

This report is the product of our work. It offers an ambitious plan to reimagine organized youth sports, prioritizing health and inclusion, while recognizing the benefits of unstructured play. A unifying document, it collects in one place the most promising opportunities for stakeholders—from sport leaders to mayors, parents to policymakers—to work together to create universal access to early, positive experiences. It's a playbook to help get and keep all children in the game by age 12—whatever the game, whatever the form.

The playbook calls for systems change, starting with the groups that most directly control the policies, practices, and partnerships in youth sports. But it can be used by community changemakers from many realms to break down barriers. It builds on the work of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation with its focus on the health of children and communities. It draws inspiration from Designed to Move, a global plan to address the physical inactivity rates that was developed by the American College of Sports Medicine, the International Council of Sport Science and Physical Education and Nike, and is endorsed by more than 70 other organizations. The playbook addresses the culture and structure of U.S. sports, while being mindful of the words of U.S. Olympic Committee member Anita DeFrantz, who declared at one of our events: “Sport is a birthright.”

We hope this eight-point, cross-sector plan helps deliver on that obligation to our children.

Sincerely,

Tom Farrey
Executive Director
Aspen Institute Sports & Society Program
sportsandsociety@aspeninstitute.org



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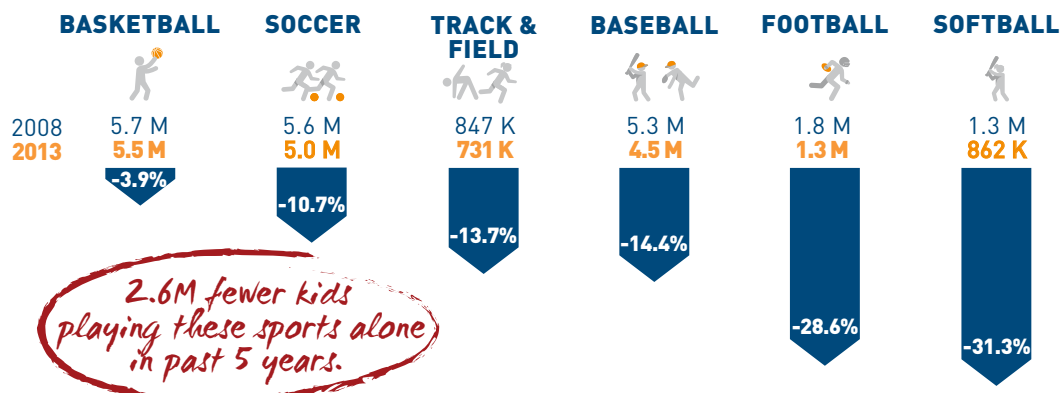
THE PROBLEM //

THE NEEDS OF MOST CHILDREN ARE NOT BEING MET.

Start with the need to be active: fewer than half of children ages 6 to 11 meet the U.S. Surgeon General's recommendation for engaging in at least 60 minutes of moderate physical activity most days of the week.⁴ One way to address that deficit is through sport activity, especially team sports, as children often enjoy playing in groups. But fewer of them are doing so now than just a few years ago. The federal government does not track sports participation rates among preteens, but according to the Sports & Fitness Industry Association (SFIA), which does, 40 percent of kids played team sports on a regular basis in 2013, down from 44.5 percent in 2008. Further, only 52.2 percent took part in those activities even once during the year, down from 58.6 percent.⁵

Fig. 1

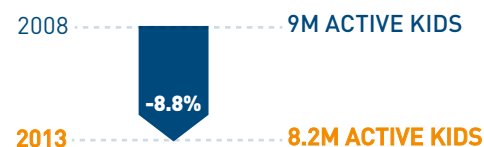
KIDS ARE LEAVING SPORTS SIGNIFICANT DECLINE IN PARTICIPATION AMONG 6-12 YEAR OLDS



With less participation, there's less movement. Fewer kids are active through sports. In 2013, less than one in three children ages 6 to 12 engaged in high-calorie-burning sport or fitness activities three times a week, according to SFIA.⁶

Fig. 2

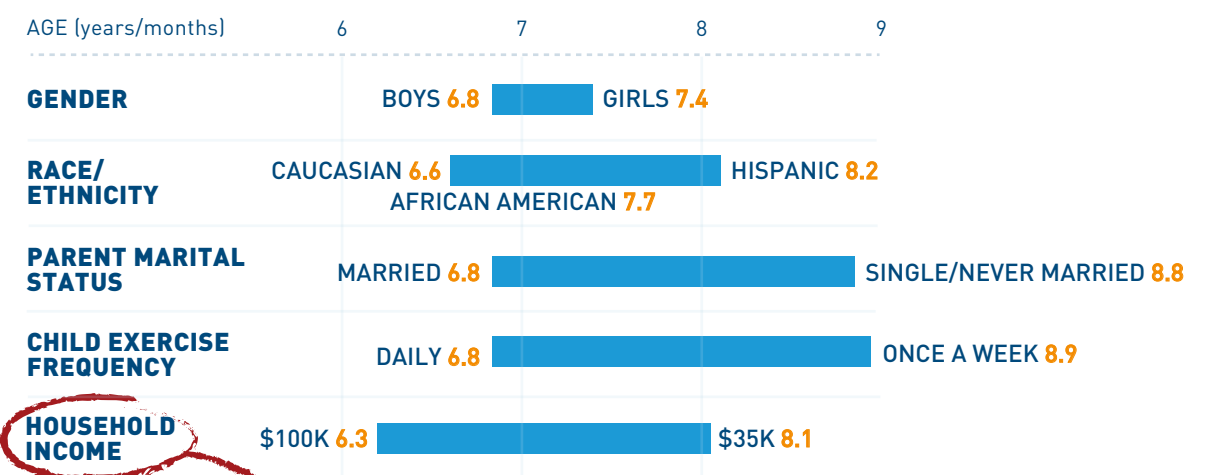
...AND ARE LESS PHYSICALLY ACTIVE THROUGH SPORTS



Sport participation has been a tool of public health for more than a century. But today, most kids miss out. The problem disproportionately affects some groups and starts during the grade-school years.

Fig. 3

KEY INDICATORS OF EARLY ACCESS AVERAGE AGE AT ENTRY INTO ORGANIZED OR TEAM SPORTS



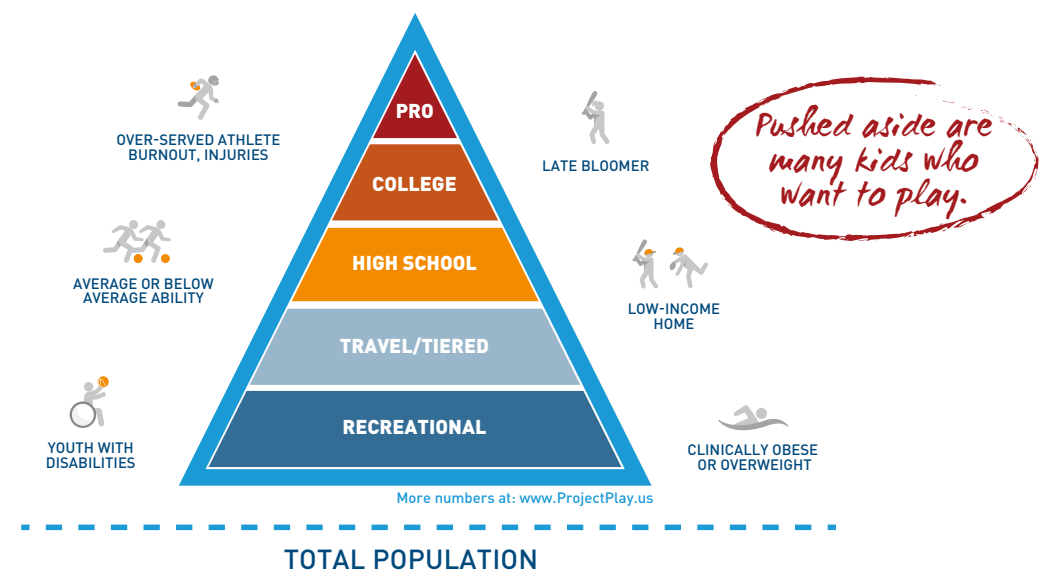
Money is the biggest driver of early participation.

Some children find ways to play on their own. But the era of the sandlot or unstructured play, of kids making up games and playing with friends for hours on end, is largely gone. Today, adult-led competition dominates and tryout-based, multi-season travel teams form as early as age 6, siphoning players from and support for in-town recreation leagues that serve all kids. We emphasize performance over participation well before kids' bodies, minds, and interests mature. And we tend to value the child who can help win games or whose families can afford the rising fees. The risks for that child are overuse injuries, concussion, and burnout.⁷

After-school programs will serve other kids—though far too few—through middle school. But children in many urban and underserved areas often flow into high schools with little athletic experience and where sport options are limited. Sports participation rates among youth living in households with the lowest incomes (\$25,000 or less) are about half that of youth from wealthier homes (\$100,000+)—16 percent vs. 30 percent.⁸ Overall, the dominant model in American sports lacks a commitment to inclusion and is shaped largely but not exclusively by money, leaving many children, families, and communities on the outside looking in.

Fig. 4

TODAY'S BROKEN MODEL PYRAMID DOES NOT MAKE ROOM FOR ALL CHILDREN



WE CAN DO BETTER THAN THIS.



THE SOLUTION //

EMBRACE A SPORT MODEL THAT WELCOMES ALL CHILDREN.

The aspirational Sport for All, Play for Life model guiding this report aims to serve all young people in all communities, while aligning the interests of elite and grassroots sport with public health and other sectors. The model was pioneered in Canada and modified by Project Play to reflect U.S. culture, needs, and opportunities.

The goal of our model is for every child in America to be physically literate by age 12. That is, every 12-year-old should have the ability, confidence, and desire to be physically active for life.

1. ABILITY refers to competency in basic movement skills and an overall fitness that allows individuals to engage in a variety of games and activities. This outcome is achieved through a mix of informal play and intentional teaching of movement skills, among them running, balancing, gliding, hopping, skipping, jumping, dodging, falling, swimming, kicking, throwing and a range of skills that require general hand-eye coordination.

2. CONFIDENCE is knowing that you have the ability to play sports or enjoy other physical activities. It is the result of programs and venues that are inclusive of people with differing abilities, and the support and encouragement from parents, guardians, coaches, administrators, teammates and peers throughout the development process.

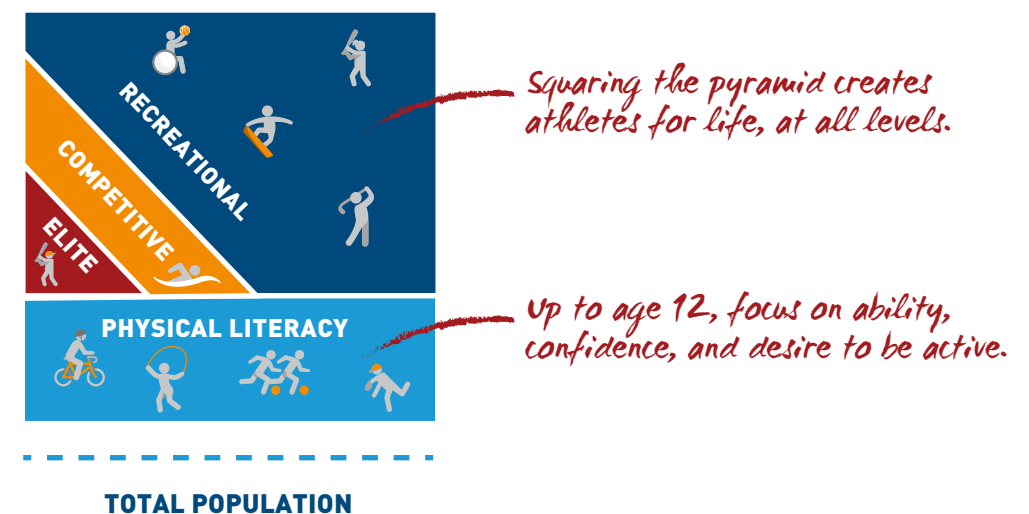
3. DESIRE is the intrinsic enthusiasm for physical activity, whether in organized or unstructured formats, in traditional or alternative sport. This result is achieved through early positive experiences that are fun and motivate children to do their best.

Each of these components builds upon one another to give children the foundation to be active for life. An Aspen Institute Sports & Society Program working group is developing a separate strategy report to guide school, medical, and other leaders in promoting physical literacy across the country through their institutions, with a special focus on underserved populations. More on the initiative can be found at www.ProjectPlay.us.

Sport is just one venue to foster Physical Literacy in All Youth—PLAY—but it's an important one.

Fig. 5

SPORT FOR ALL, PLAY FOR LIFE MODEL BROAD ACCESS LEADS TO SUSTAINED PARTICIPATION



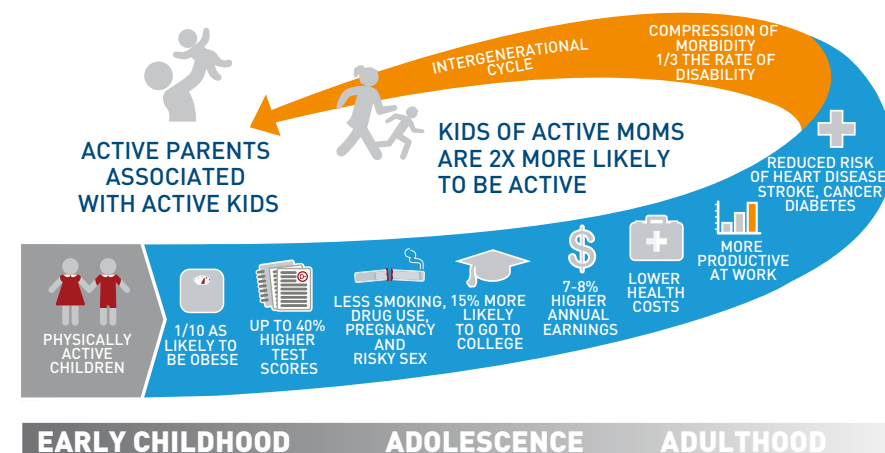
Physical literacy sits at the base of the Sport for All, Play for Life model, providing children with the tools to pursue the most appropriate pathway for them as they enter their teenage years. A few will pursue elite-level sports in adolescence, motivated by dreams of competing at the state, national, college, or professional levels. Many more will follow a local competitive sport track, through school, club, or community sports. The rest may choose less-structured activities and will have developed the skills and desire to enjoy a variety of sports throughout their lives, from cycling and rock climbing to neighborhood or company softball teams to swimming, biking, and yoga.

Versions of this model have been proposed by top academics studying youth and athletic development. It responds to the growing body of research that supports a sampling period of sport activities through age 12, even for elite athletes. Indeed, contrary to popular assumption, athletes are more likely to play at the college level and beyond if they wait until later to specialize in one sport. Both health and performance are served if the preteen years are treated as a development zone, with activities that build physical literacy.⁹

In 2014, the U.S. Olympic Committee embraced a form of the model, hoping to build the base from which more potential champions could emerge. But the real benefits will flow to society at large.

Fig. 6

ACTIVE KIDS DO BETTER IN LIFE WHAT THE RESEARCH SHOWS ON THE COMPOUNDING BENEFITS





THE PLAYBOOK //

Project Play identified eight promising strategies that stakeholders can use to help every child become physically active through sports.

Each strategy is outlined on the following pages and includes four components:

CHALLENGE

A significant barrier to participation

THE PLAY

Proposed solution

IDEAS

Ways in which sectors and groups could support the solution



Business & Industry



Community Recreation Groups



Education



National Sport Organizations



Parents



Policymakers & Civic Leaders



Public Health



Tech & Media

FINDING SUCCESS

Program that has made inroads



CHALLENGE // YOUTH SPORT IS ORGANIZED BY ADULTS

THE PLAY // ASK KIDS WHAT THEY WANT

It's Rule No. 1 in business: know your customer. Video games (and the technology industry more broadly) often get blamed for our kids' sedentary habits, yet they provide much of what children want out of a sport experience, including: lots of action, freedom to experiment, competition without exclusion, social connection with friends as co-players, customization, and a measure of control over the activity—plus, no parents critiquing their every move. Simply put, the child is at the center of the video game experience, all made possible by research and feedback loops that seek input from its young customers.

Now imagine if youth sport providers worked half as hard to understand the needs of kids, especially those who are left out or who opt out of sports. Organized competition can be scary for many children. We should ask them why and what should change. We should also look at minimizing attrition among girls, who drop out of sports at higher rates than boys. And figure out how can we

systematically solicit and act on the diverse perspectives of kids who are living with disabilities, or who have chronic health conditions, or whose families have few resources or don't speak English.

9 OUT OF 10 CHILDREN SAY "FUN" IS THE MAIN REASON THEY PARTICIPATE IN SPORTS

Fewer than one percent of sports sociology papers have examined youth sports through the eyes of children.¹⁰ Most of what we know involves kids already in the game, and it suggests extrinsic rewards and "winning" mean far less to them than to adults. In a 2014 George Washington University study, 9 of 10 kids said "fun" is the main reason they participate. When asked to define fun, they offered up 81 reasons—and ranked "winning" at No. 48.¹¹ Young girls gave it the lowest ratings.

Children mostly want a venue to try their best. While they often want to know the score, and may even cry

if they lose, most don't obsess over results, sport psychologists say.¹² Ten minutes after the final whistle, kids have moved on; often it's dad and mom who still want to talk about the game at dinner. The misalignment of adult and child priorities could play a role in the fact that 6 out of 10 kids say they quit sports because they "lost interest."¹³

We need to ingrain the voice of children into the design of youth sports programs. We need to regularly survey kids at the community and even team levels, both pre- and post-season, and use the results to inform league policies and priorities. In New Mexico, The Notah Begay III Foundation has found such surveys valuable in introducing soccer to Native American children, for example. Additionally, kids need formal representation on decision-making bodies.

Close the feedback loop, and kids' bodies may start to get as much exercise as their thumbs get from gaming.

IDEAS //





	Media, Video Games:	Share what you know about reaching and engaging children; package the insights and make them public. Help youth sport providers tailor their programming.
	Tech:	Develop a simple Internet or smartphone app to conduct surveys that can be offered to schools and community groups for free. Allow for some customization of questions and offer the survey in Spanish and other languages.
	Community Recreation Groups:	Survey kids to capture their feedback, and share data with coaches and the sport board so they can adjust policies and practices. Make room on the board for an athlete or two, just like national sport governing bodies do.
	Parents:	Ask your children about their goals and preferences in sports, then design their activities accordingly. Redefine success on their terms. At the same time, know the odds against your child playing at the college or pro level, and commit to making athletes for life.
	Researchers:	Create tools to evaluate program success based on factors such as fun, diversity, participation and retention rates, and the development of skills that foster physical literacy. Wins and losses shouldn't be the prevailing metric.

Fig. 7

WHAT KIDS SAY IS MOST FUN THEY WANT SOCIAL BONDS AND ACCESS TO THE ACTION

MORE FUN

1. TRYING YOUR BEST
2. WHEN COACH TREATS PLAYER WITH RESPECT
3. GETTING PLAYING TIME
4. PLAYING WELL TOGETHER AS A TEAM
5. GETTING ALONG WITH YOUR TEAMMATES
6. EXERCISING AND BEING ACTIVE

LESS FUN

48. WINNING
63. PLAYING IN TOURNAMENTS
66. PRACTICING WITH SPECIALTY TRAINERS AND COACHES
67. EARNING MEDALS OR TROPHIES
73. TRAVELING TO NEW PLACES TO PLAY
81. GETTING PICTURES TAKEN

Much less of a priority than simply having a chance to play.

"Kids in baseball say they want to hit, catch, and run. Yet, what do parents do as soon as they take over? Eliminate the hit, catch, and run by telling kids not to swing or maximizing use of a pitcher who strikes everyone out. They eliminate the basis for fun."

— Jay Coakley, sports sociologist

FINDING SUCCESS //

The Tony Hawk Foundation—the only national organization that empowers at-risk youth through the development of skateboard parks—provides toolkits that help kids advocate and raise funds for park construction. One Minnesota kid's presentation was so sharp, the mayor put him on the city's parks commission. Since 2002, 557 such parks have been built in all 50 states, work that was honored by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation with the 2013 Steve Patterson Award for Excellence in Sports Philanthropy.



2

CHALLENGE // OVER-STRUCTURED EXPERIENCES

THE PLAY // REINTRODUCE FREE PLAY

Michael Jordan had a “love of the game” clause inserted into his NBA contract that allowed him to play basketball whenever and wherever he wanted. Why? He understood the value of pickup play. He grew up in an era when so much of a child’s activity in sports was in settings comprised of not much more than a space, some friends, and a ball. For generations of Americans, casual play—from the sandlot to the recreation center—was a foundational experience, a kid-directed zone that rewarded expression, fostered social skills, and demanded some degree of inclusion. It also delivered hours of physical activity, without that ever being the goal.

The 1970s are long gone. Today, many parents are reluctant to let children ride bikes across town to play games with friends. Fear of child abductions, while extremely rare, is a psychological barrier, and crime and traffic concerns are real issues in some neighborhoods. Families are smaller,

so there are often fewer siblings to play with at home. But experts recognize the need to reintroduce free play where possible, given the science. “To promote lifelong, intrinsically motivated sport participation, it is imperative to build a foundation during childhood,” sports psychologist Jean Côté writes. “Inclusion of high amounts of deliberate play activities early in development provides that motivational foundation.”

LET KIDS PLAY ON THEIR OWN TERMS, AND THEY WILL

One way to do this is within organized sport itself. In 2006, the U.S. Soccer Federation released a paradigm-shifting document, Best Practices for Coaching in the United States, urging coaches to find a place for loosely structured play within society’s need for adult oversight. “Coaches can often be more helpful to a young player’s development by organizing less, saying

less, and allowing the players to do more.” It advised, “Be comfortable organizing a session that looks like pickup soccer.” The Federation wanted not just more players, but more creative players, like those emerging from the street soccer cultures of South America.

Unstructured play in childhood is also associated with higher levels of academic creativity among college students, according to a 2014 University of Texas study. The ideal mix was a split between organized and free play.¹⁴ Children who spend more time in less structured activities in general are better able to set their own goals and take action on them, researchers at the University of Colorado found.¹⁵ Those studies came on the heels of another one showing informal play is protective against injury in competitive young athletes.

The case is lining up for adults to get out of the way more often—and let the game, and child peers, be the teacher.

IDEAS //



Parks and Recreation:

Recreate the sandlot experience by carving out time at fields and gyms during prime hours each week for pickup play. Provide equipment and loose supervision, and turn the space over to kids.



After-School Programs:

Dedicate time to casual play within the formal commitments that already have been made by leading organizations to promote daily physical activity.



Schools:

Commit to providing recess; kids can accumulate up to 40 percent of their total daily physical activity during recess.¹⁶ As is, one-third of third graders do not get the recommended 20 minutes of daily recess, with students in communities of color getting less than others.



Parents:

Create safe spaces for kids to play through group play dates. Each parent takes turns, providing supervision for one hour at a park or a street.



Business:

Recognize that surveys of 6- to 12-year-olds say many want to swim, bike, hike, and run more;¹⁷ help connect urban kids with outdoor activities. Incent employees to volunteer, supervise.

Fig. 8

FOUR SOCIAL BARRIERS TO INFORMAL PLAY AS RECOGNIZED BY THE AMERICAN ACADEMY OF PEDIATRICS

1

**More single parents,
dual-working parents**

Without supervision,
it’s easy to tell kids to
stay at home after school.

2

**Professionalization
of parenthood**

Cultural pressures on
parents to create super-
achieving kids.

3

**Impact of standardized
testing mandates**

Federal law promoting
academic skills led to
cuts to P.E., recess.

4

**Competition for
college admissions**

Pickup hoops doesn’t build
a student’s resume, so why
invest time, resources?

“I would take a crayon and draw a line on the wall, then take my dad’s tube socks and roll them up, and start shooting on the wall. I’d be dunking on the wall. And my mom would see it and absolutely just lose her mind. This is the type of things kids used to do, or at least I used to do, anyway.”

– Kobe Bryant, 16-time NBA All-Star

FINDING SUCCESS //

While many community soccer programs ignore U.S. Soccer’s best practices document—or don’t even know it exists—the Portland City United Soccer Club is on board. Once a week, the organization rents a small indoor court designed for futsal, a fast-paced game popularized in Brazil, and invites kids to play for free. The director restricts parents to the restaurant and elevated viewing area, explaining: “We are trying to set up an avenue for the kids to play some street soccer where they can explore the game and play on their terms.”



CHALLENGE // SAMENESS AND SPECIALIZATION

THE PLAY // ENCOURAGE SPORT SAMPLING

The Boys & Girls Clubs of America serves 3 million children ages 12 and under, including many in some of the most challenged urban areas. Most keep programs affordable, \$25 a year, so the primary challenge for the clubs is “diversity of opportunity,” Wayne Moss, senior director of health lifestyles, told a Project Play roundtable. Basketball is popular with kids, but as they move into high school there are only so many varsity roster spots. Clubs want to expand their portfolio of sports offered, to better accommodate the full range of interests and talents of children.

Options are better in more affluent areas. Still, most children flow into only a handful of the more than 120 sports played in the United States.¹⁸ And, as early as the grade school years, those identified as having the most promise get the message from coaches and others that they must specialize in one sport at the exclusion of others in order to fully develop their talents and play at a college, pro, or other elite levels. It’s a myth.

In a survey conducted by the U.S. Olympic Committee at the request of Project Play, 7 out of 10 Olympians said they grew up as multisport athletes, and nearly all called it “valuable.” In lacrosse, data from the last four U.S. national teams shows that just three of the 102 players surveyed played

MORE OPTIONS MEAN MORE KIDS WILL FIND A SPORT THEY LIKE

only lacrosse in high school. A UCLA study found that college athletes were actually less likely than other former high school athletes to specialize in one sport. The emerging research says that a sport-sampling pathway leads to less burnout, less social isolation, better performance, and, most importantly, more lifelong enjoyment in sport.¹⁹

Debunking the myth of early specialization presents a real opportunity for elite and community sport organizations to align behind

a common experience for kids through age 12. It buys oxygen for the notion that the development of physical literacy should be the priority, fostered by sport sampling. But that commitment needs to be made to all children, with special efforts designed to reach the sedentary and those who may not be aware of, or have the resources to afford, activities outside the mainstream. We need more initiatives like Fencing in the Schools, which has introduced the sport to 20,000 kids in Harlem, Newark, and other areas by providing equipment and training for physical education (PE) teachers.²⁰ We need more programs like Surfers for Autism, which works to unlock the potential of kids with developmental disabilities. While team sports should embrace all, individual sports can also be more welcoming than team cultures to some kids, LGBTQ or otherwise.

Grow the menu of sport options, create better connections to vulnerable populations, and more athletes-for-life will emerge.

IDEAS //






	National Sport Organizations:	Create pilots for model partnerships with after-school programs in underserved areas to introduce youth to less traditional Olympic sports like team handball or table tennis. They’ll grow your pipeline.
	Community Recreation Groups:	Develop programs and pricing models that encourage multisport play through age 12 and promote them as “smart development.”
	Pediatricians:	Establish communication channels with PE teachers who see kids and have access to fitness data. Help them create tailored “exercise prescriptions” that connect kids with local sport options.
	Schools:	Offer daily physical education, an obvious venue for promoting physical literacy. Bring back intramurals. Add alternative sports that tap into cultural interests, such as double dutch and netball.
	Parents:	Be active. Research shows that the most active kids have the most active parents. ²¹ The more sports you try, the more they will try.

Fig. 9

BENEFITS OF SAMPLING A VARIETY OF SPORTS IT’S BETTER TO TRY A FEW THAN TO FOCUS ON ONE EARLY

1. More options mean more kids will find a sport they like
2. Reach elite status with fewer hours of focused training
3. Increased transfer of motor, psychological skills to other sports
4. Increased motivation, confidence, self-direction
5. Better pattern recognition and decision-making
6. Play sports longer throughout life

*More athletes,
better athletes.*

“My earliest memories were just playing, all kinds of different sports. I didn’t compete in track until high school. I’m really grateful for those early experiences, a little bit of everything to find out what I was good at.”

– Allyson Felix, four-time Olympic gold medalist

FINDING SUCCESS //

One of the more novel summer camps is 2-4-1 Sports in Connecticut. Its tagline is, “Life is too short for just one sport.” Campers learn several sports of their choosing. The camp was created by parents—both former college athletes—after their young daughter’s invitation to join a travel soccer team was rescinded because she didn’t want to quit lacrosse to make the multi-season commitment to soccer. Readers of *Hartford Magazine* voted the camp the state’s best in 2012; the founders’ daughter went on to play lacrosse in college.



CHALLENGE // RISING COSTS, COMMITMENT

THE PLAY // REVITALIZE IN-TOWN LEAGUES

Just as most after-school programs play a role in providing physical activity for the 1-in-5 children who flow into them,²² so do the sport-specific local leagues that supplement and sometimes integrate with them. Historically, these leagues have provided the foundation for sport participation in the U.S., as venues where classmates compete against classmates. It's been a setting where kids of all skill levels and backgrounds play at the same local field or gym, rarely roaming beyond the town borders. But today, house leagues can be stigmatized as inferior, a casualty of tryout-based, early-forming travel teams that cater to the "best" child athletes.

The flight to travel (and to for-profit club) teams thins rosters and the number of teams that can be created. The kids left behind can get the message that they're not good enough, and start checking out of sports.²³ By the end of grade school, in some areas, in-town leagues in sports like soccer and basketball

have lost enough participants that they are no longer viable. That's a major loss, especially as local play is the only affordable option for many families.

CHILDREN NEED A BETTER PATHWAY IN SPORTS THAN 'UP OR OUT'

Little League Baseball has fought to preserve the community-based model, requiring that all kids in a local league come from the area. Major League Baseball has partnered with after-school programs on its Reviving Baseball in the Inner Cities initiative (RBI), reaching 160,000 boys and girls between the ages of 5 and 12. Still, participation in baseball and softball nationally continues to decrease. Targeted interventions like RBI are overwhelmed by the prevailing culture of youth sports, which, in the era of travel ball, costs a family \$800 a year on average in fees, equipment, and other items.²⁴

Revitalizing recreational leagues depends on improving both the quality of the offering and the quantity of available kids. Parents with means must be given a reason not to flee early for travel teams, through programming that develops their child's skills and provides opportunities for advancement, with fewer impacts on family time. Sport providers need to develop business models that wring less money out of more participants. And organizers must look in new places to grow the pool of players. The success of Mo'ne Davis at the Little League World Series reminds us that there's no evidence-based reason to separate girls from boys before puberty, given the same training.²⁵ Combining boys and girls could better sustain recreational leagues, if researchers can help identify a gender mix that works best for each.²⁶

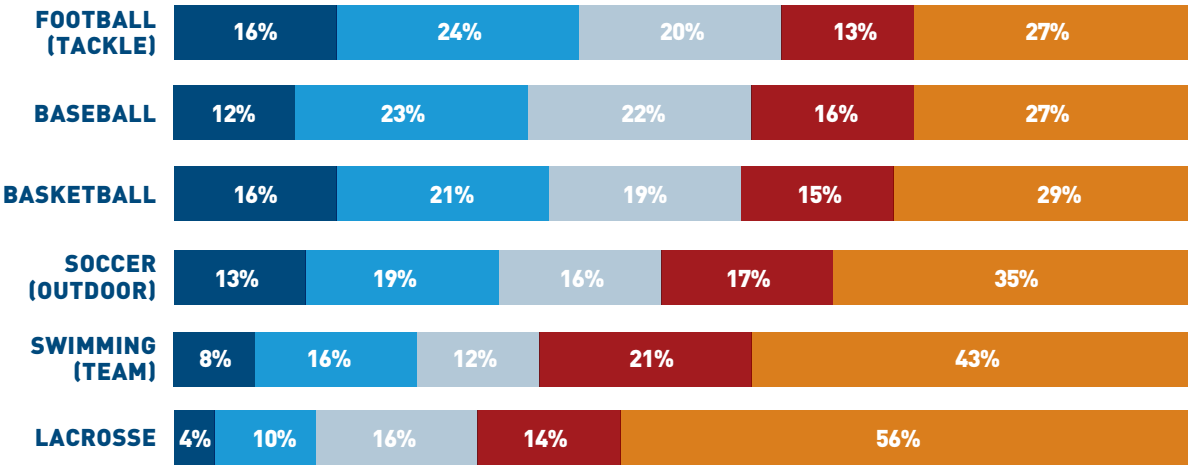
Inclusion is not just a philosophy. It's a commitment to new traditions.

IDEAS //

- Parents:** Advocate for children other than your own. Join a local sport board and promote inclusive policies such as delaying the start of travel teams, adding fee waivers for low-income families, and committing to equal playing time through age 12.
- National Sport Organizations:** Hire diversity officers to develop efforts to engage underserved kids. If you're a national sport governing body, encourage state associations to share club revenues from wealthier programs with those that serve families who need subsidies. Appeal to local foundations for help.
- Spanish-Language Media:** Support an integrated PSA campaign designed to reach mothers. Research shows Hispanic girls want to play, but their moms, especially first-generation immigrants, need to be convinced sports will help them in life.²⁷
- Business:** Identify struggling leagues and teams to support by using crowdfunding tools on the Internet that make it easy. Don't wait for local programs to find you.
- Foundations:** Develop opportunities around Social Impact Bonds, a new approach to funding that has shown promise in other sectors. Identify ways that health-promoting sport can be used to justify investments.

Fig. 10

INCOME IMPACTS SPORT PARTICIPATION
PERCENTAGE OF CORE PARTICIPANTS, BY HOUSEHOLD INCOME



■ UNDER \$25K ■ \$25K - \$49.9K ■ \$50K - \$74.9K ■ \$75K - \$99.9K ■ \$100K+

Families that can afford more, play more.

"Everybody I knew when I was young played team sports. Everybody. There were church leagues for basketball so people like me who couldn't make the [school] teams could play. That's really important because the benefits flowed to everybody."

- President Clinton

FINDING SUCCESS //

The leadership of Special Olympics embraces the theme of competition, while developing competition formats that do not promote exclusion. One of its fastest-growing programs is Unified Sports, which pairs students with and without intellectual disabilities on teams. Unified Sports in Illinois alone grew 184 percent in 2013, with programs in 94 schools. To support the development of physical literacy, a "sports readiness" program is also offered for kids ages 2 to 7.



5

CHALLENGE // NOT ENOUGH PLACES TO PLAY

THE PLAY // THINK SMALL

The state of the art in youth sports facilities is big: sprawling complexes with dozens of fields and courts at destination sites that cater to national tournaments. But growing access to play spaces for most children starts with the small—simple, smart moves that thought leaders at Project Play events and other experts in the field say hold great promise.

In urban areas, this may mean finding small spaces to develop quarter-sized courts for small-sided play, as the U.S. Soccer Foundation has done with local partners in several cities. Those parcels are easier to find, and fields can be installed for as little as \$15,000, a fraction of the cost of a full-sized turf field, which can run as much as \$1 million.²⁸ In downstate Illinois, a parks district has grown its sport offerings with a small staff, through a partnership with a facility developer that shares resources.²⁹

Other smaller-scale efforts can yield big results. Researchers know that kids are far more active during recess after shapes, grids, and games are

painted on the ground.³⁰ In addition to building playgrounds, KaBOOM! is helping cities integrate play into routine spaces like sidewalks and bus stops. When schools agree to share their playing fields and facilities, it gives families and kids, especially those in underserved communities, more places to play in the evenings, on weekends, and during summer.³¹

FIELDS OF DREAMS ARE GREAT – BUT INNOVATE, AND THEY WILL COME

We didn't always have to think small. In 1965, the federal government created the Land & Water Conservation Fund, with dedicated revenues from oil leases on federal lands, to build recreation facilities. Cities and states used the matching funds to develop 41,000 projects in every U.S. county. But much of that activity was before Congress began to divert most of the fund's revenues in the 1980s. In 2013, the matching grants program received

only 13 percent of the \$305 million flowing into the fund. Also, a separate program for urban parks has dried up.³²

The good news: Community Development Block Grants still provide up to \$100 million annually in support. States and cities also received a one-time hit with the 2009 economic stimulus package, providing funds for parks, gyms, and playgrounds, as well as the creation of “complete streets” that include bike lanes.³³ Transportation to parks and school sites is vital, especially in predominantly African American and Hispanic neighborhoods, which often have fewer nearby recreation facilities than other areas.³⁴ That's significant, because people living within a mile of a park are four times more likely to use it than those who live farther away.³⁵

Funding enables, but so do small gestures of other types of support. Which is another way of saying: be creative.

IDEAS //



Local Business:

Support the occasional closing of downtown streets for cycling, 3-on-3 basketball festivals, and other community sports and physical activities.³⁶ Build athletic facilities near schools, offer free use in the 3-5 p.m. slot in exchange for city tax abatements.



Civic Leaders:

Dedicate a share of local taxes to parks and recreation that stands apart from the annual budget process, as parks-rich Chicago has done through a percentage of property taxes (\$164 per home/year on average).³⁷



Tech:

Create a digital platform that allows users to find nearby sites for sport activity. Ideally, allow crowdsourcing with quality measures.³⁸ Integrate with Internet maps.



Hospitals:

Include the availability of local sport facilities in your Community Health Needs Assessment report that is required under the Affordable Care Act. Public health agencies should do the same.



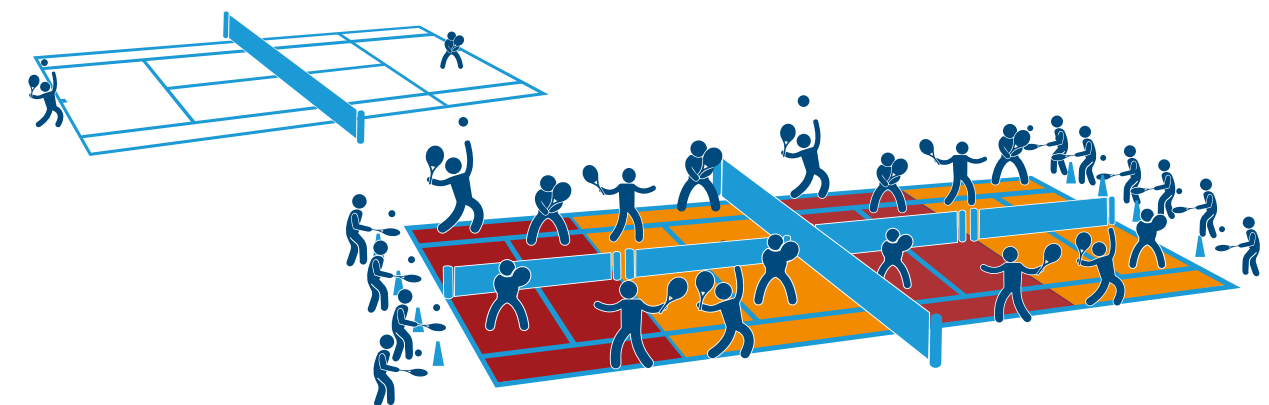
Faith-Based Groups:

Help solve sport transportation barriers, which are especially acute in rural and urban areas.³⁹ Churches, synagogues, etc. often have networks, resources that can be tapped, as well as indoor and outdoor spaces for activities.

Fig. 11

MORE FUN WITH LESS SPACE HOW TO ENGAGE AN ENTIRE PE CLASS WITH ONE TENNIS COURT

The U.S. Tennis Association's Youth Tennis initiative divides a 78-foot court into four playing spaces and uses the surrounding area for tennis-related games. Smaller racquets and lower-bouncing balls make it all possible and help kids find success.



“Saying to a kid, ‘Go play soccer’, when there’s no safe playing field to play on, is kind of challenging.”

– Ed Foster-Simeon, CEO, U.S. Soccer Foundation

FINDING SUCCESS //

A shared-use agreement is a contract between two entities setting forth the terms and conditions for use of public property or facilities, such as school fields or gyms. They have helped grow after-school programs on school sites and can help boost kids' physical activity levels.⁴⁰ U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has highlighted their potential to be used more broadly by youth sports organizations, to open up more gyms and fields during non-school hours. To streamline the process, ChangeLab Solutions created a series of templates that local groups can use to customize their own agreements.⁴¹



6

CHALLENGE // TOO MUCH, TOO SOON

THE PLAY //
DESIGN FOR DEVELOPMENT

If a local facility is the hardware in a child’s sport experience, then a developmentally appropriate program is the software. Leading sport governing bodies recognize it as the organizing framework to deliver what kids need to grow as both athletes and people. Adoption of it is seen as a tool to stem attrition, advance physical literacy, and debunk some of the misperceptions that parents and coaches have about athletic development.

A developmentally appropriate framework recognizes that kids are not miniature adults, or even teenagers. Most lack the neural connections to throw straight before age 6. Most kids struggle to strike balls before age 8. Few kids can jump with proficiency until age 10 or 11.⁴² Even then, many still can’t get their minds around “don’t bunch up around the ball!” Plenty still believe in the Tooth Fairy. So let’s give them an experience that recognizes their mental, emotional, and physical

stages of development, and progressively builds on each. The U.S. Olympic Committee (USOC) has pledged to introduce sanity into the system. Last year, its leadership embraced the American Development Model (ADM), a potentially game-changing initiative to “unify national governing bodies and community



KIDS NEED A NEW
MEASURE OF
SUCCESS: PERSONAL
IMPROVEMENT

programs in keeping Americans active in sport longer.” The model combines sport, play, education, and health through a five-stage pathway based on a child’s growing capacities. The first principle is a commitment to fun, as kids define it at each age level.⁴³ Parents tend to assume that skills are best developed in full-size, organized games. But on a field or court of 16 to 22 players, and with just one ball,

a child only gets so many touches. ADM encourages training sessions where lots of balls can be used and foundational motor skills can be developed more easily in low-pressure environments. The philosophy holds the prospect of making room for the late bloomer, given the early emphasis on individual development over team achievement. Baseball Canada began to see participation rise in 2006, when it moved to a model in which kids get colored hats for reaching developmental milestones.⁴⁴

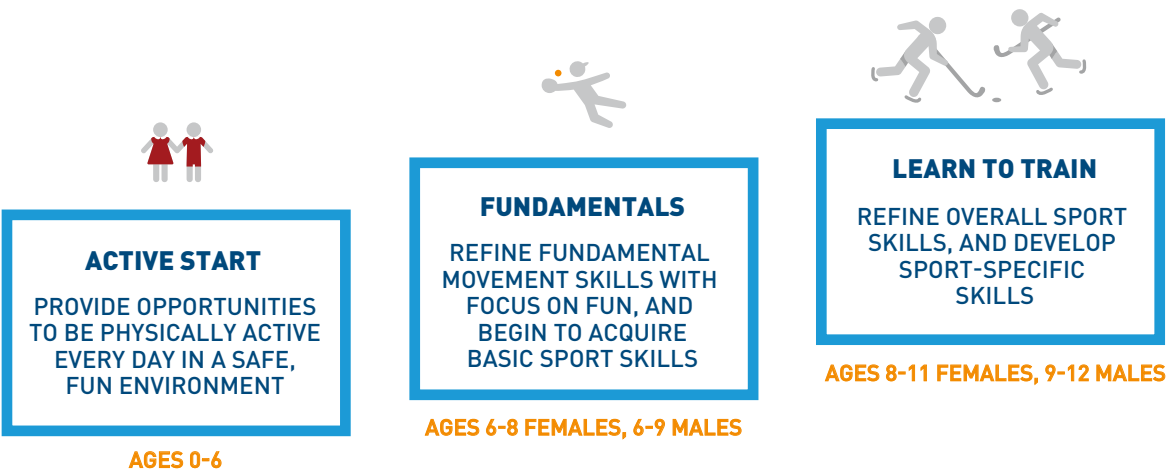
Since the USOC’s announcement, all 48 affiliated sport national governing bodies—from USA Swimming to USA Table Tennis—have endorsed ADM. Now, the heavier lift: developing ADM plans tailored for each sport, pushing awareness into the grassroots, and adjusting policies and competition structures that align with the model. That, and ensuring underserved communities have access to the same resources.

IDEAS //

	Professional Leagues:	Drive reform at the youth level, as the National Hockey League has done with ADM through an annual \$4 million gift to USA Hockey. Also, create PSAs highlighting the role of free play and physical literacy in the development of admired athletes.
	National Governing Bodies:	Commit to annual goals based on participation growth. Add a pediatrician or health professional to the board to sync policies with medical recommendations. Give local administrators tools to design and evaluate programs.
	U.S. Olympic Committee:	Encourage affiliates to promote the American Development Model and other child-first policies through funding criteria or other incentives.
	Coaches:	Don’t cut kids—add teams where possible by shrinking rosters. Grow practice-to-game ratios. Dedicate time to developing fundamental movement skills. Provide quality, individualized feedback based on progress made in those skills.
	Camps, Private Clubs:	Remove the word “elite” and all related terms from marketing materials to parents. No child qualifies as elite before growing into their body.

“All children should be encouraged to participate in sports at a level consistent with their abilities and interests.”
– Statement from summary of key recommendations by health/medical groups, for Project Play

Fig. 12
HOW TO BUILD AN ATHLETE FOR LIFE
USA HOCKEY’S FIRST THREE STAGES OF AMERICAN DEVELOPMENT MODEL



FINDING SUCCESS //

USA Hockey pioneered ADM, introducing the model in 2011 to stem attrition—43 percent of kids were quitting the sport by age 9—and develop more skilled players. Coach and parent education on best practices at each age group were pushed down the pipeline. Bodychecking and national championships were eliminated at the 12-and-under age level. A 3:1 practice-to-game ratio was promoted, and the pucks were made lighter. Clubs were asked to play 4 vs. 4 cross-ice at the youngest age groups, allowing more kids on the ice at a lower cost to families. A 2014 study found ADM delivered physical activity and skill instruction to 60 percent more kids. Hockey is now one of the few team sports with rising participation.⁴⁵



CHALLENGE // WELL-MEANING BUT UNTRAINED VOLUNTEERS

THE PLAY // TRAIN ALL COACHES

Coaches are the delivery mechanism for quality sport programming. They determine how much exercise occurs during practice. Research aggregated by the President's Council on Fitness, Sports & Nutrition shows that good coaches also lower kids' anxiety levels and lift their self-esteem.⁴⁶ They help boys and girls enjoy the sport. They can make an athlete for life—or wreck enthusiasm for sport altogether.

Trained coaches do best. One study found that only 5 percent of kids who played for trained coaches quit the sport the next year; the attrition rate was 26 percent otherwise.⁴⁷ But since grade schools got out of organized youth sports in the 1930s, recreational youth sports have relied on volunteers—few of whom have or receive the training that a Project Play roundtable of coaching experts identified as essential to delivering an early positive experience. Of the 6.5 million youth coaches, fewer

than 1 in 5 are trained in effective motivational technique—how to communicate well with kids—and only 1 in 3 say they have been trained in sport skills or tactics.⁴⁸

A GOOD COACH SEES THE POTENTIAL IN EVERY CHILD

Parents want better coaching for their children. In a nationally representative espnW/Aspen Institute Project Play survey, more than 60 percent of parents of children ages 18 and under identified the “quality or behavior” of coaches as a “big concern.” This underscores the need to create a national plan around coaching, with a special focus on girls and children from low-income families. A top official for the YMCA of the USA echoed this, saying his organization's most pressing need is more trained coaches.⁴⁹

Other countries recognize the value of trained coaches in growing participation. In the United Kingdom, the youth-coaching culture has been transformed through the introduction of a training framework. Canadian sport bodies now embrace a sport-for-life curriculum for coaches. In the United States, coaching leaders worry that requiring training will chase off volunteers. But just the opposite has happened with USA Hockey. The key, experts tell Project Play, is easy-to-use training tools, like online video demonstrations of techniques.⁵⁰

Whether by mandates or incentives, the time has come to greatly increase the number of credentialed coaches in the United States. The minimum ask: training in 1) coaching philosophy on how to work with kids, 2) best practices in the areas of physical literacy and sport skills, and 3) basic safety.⁵¹

IDEAS //



Community Recreation Groups: Actively recruit more mothers as coaches. Offer “women-only” coaching clinics, co-coaching arrangements, and plug-and-play practice plans to ease the transition. Allocate a minimum number of board spots to women.



Colleges: Give the 100,000-plus athletes who cycle out of NCAA campuses each year the tools to become effective community coaches. They already know skills and tactics in 24 sports. Teach them how to work with kids.

High School Coaches:

Connect your athletes with youth programs and get them qualified to serve as assistant coaches. Kids respond to teens, who can bridge age and cultural gaps.



National Sport Organizations: Create or endorse online tools that deliver training in the key coaching competencies in working with kids from all backgrounds. Make the tools free to every youth-serving organization.



Corporations:

Incent youth sport providers to mandate best-in-class coach training courses by offering steep discounts on equipment—or whatever you sell. Cover the cost of background checks by offering goods in online barter pools.

Fig. 13

WHAT KIDS WANT FROM A COACH THE ANSWERS THEY GAVE RESEARCHERS

1. RESPECT AND ENCOURAGEMENT
2. POSITIVE ROLE MODEL
3. CLEAR, CONSISTENT COMMUNICATION
4. KNOWLEDGE OF SPORT
5. SOMEONE WHO LISTENS

*Adults who work with kids
should know these fundamentals.*

“There are lots of volunteers who want to do this. It’s not like we have to convince them. The bad news is they don’t have access to the information they need, to be able to coach in a positive and age-appropriate manner.”

– Janet Carter, Executive Director, Coaching Corps

FINDING SUCCESS //

Only 25 percent of youth coaches in the United States are women.⁵² But at Coaching Corps in California, it’s 47 percent—women are seen as critical agents in mentoring and as role models for girls, especially those in immigrant communities. To recruit women, Coaching Corps forges partnerships with universities, some of which provide students with college credit for participating in leadership training and volunteering as coaches.



8

CHALLENGE // SAFETY CONCERNS AMONG PARENTS

THE PLAY // EMPHASIZE PREVENTION

Among the many issues facing youth sports, injury risks trouble parents the most. The espnW/Aspen Institute Project Play survey showed that 9 out of 10 parents have safety concerns—and half of those describe safety as a major concern. Both mothers and fathers said that concussions are the most worrisome and one-quarter of parents have considered keeping a child from playing because of that. Football, by far, gave parents the most cause for concern.⁵³

Their worries are understandable. Football has the highest rate of concussion in high school sports,⁵⁴ and it's up there with hockey at the youth level.⁵⁵ Players as young as age 7 take head hits akin to a car crash: in excess of 80 g's, according to Virginia Tech researchers. Most hits are milder, but brains at that age are developing. Kids' necks are weak and their heads are large relative to the rest of their body. Kids also suffer longer than adults do from concussions, and may never fully recover.

Football is not the only sport with challenges, and concussion is not

the only safety issue that leaders need to address. Parents want their children in venues that provide both physical and emotional safety,⁵⁶ free of bullying and all forms of abuse. While pre-participation exams cannot detect every risk factor—such as congenital narrowing of the spinal

CONCUSSION RISKS ARE NOW A BARRIER TO PARTICIPATION

cord that can place a child at greater risk of paralysis—they need to be as comprehensive as possible, covering cardiac and joint issues, and conducted by qualified health professionals. These evaluations are especially important for children from low-income families as that may be the only time a child interacts with the health-care system all year.

Still, concussion has emerged as the most formidable of safety-related barriers to participation. One in five parents is most concerned about soccer, in which the concussion rate is twice that for girls than boys. But

the unease has also spilled into lacrosse, field hockey, basketball, snowboarding, skiing, and other sports. Every three minutes, a child is seen in an emergency room for a sports-related concussion.⁵⁷ No less unnerving is the discovery that the repetitive, smaller, undetected impacts athletes endure, called sub-concussive blows,⁵⁸ also may impair brain function.

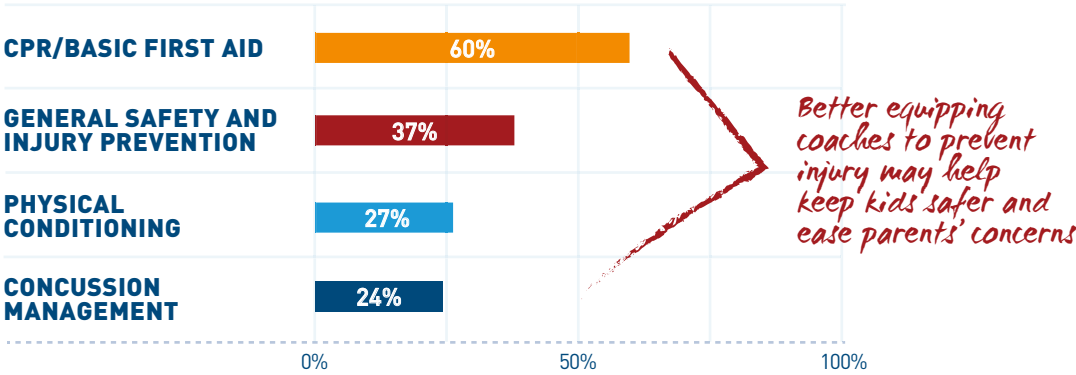
In 2014, President Obama hosted the first-ever White House summit on youth sports concussions, where much of the focus was on identifying and treating brain injuries. The conversation needs to shift to prevention strategies. Youth sport organizations should err on the side of caution—and ultimately participation—and embrace policies that eliminate or greatly reduce head contact at the 12-and-under level. Rules changes have been shown to lower injury rates, the National Academy of Sciences has noted.⁵⁹

Parents need to know that sports will produce a positive health outcome. And children deserve nothing less.

IDEAS //

	Collision Sports:	Recommend noncollision forms of play for 12-and-under kids, as USA Rugby does with its flag-based programs. As football's John Madden has suggested, teach kids to solve problems with their hands and feet, then introduce full contact.
	Middle Schools:	Don't just drop sports considered dangerous; provide options and add low-injury (and low-cost) sports, like ultimate frisbee.
	Foundations:	Fund the creation of a tool that compares injury and physical activity rates across sports, so parents can make informed decisions for their children. Also, set grant criteria that promote health and safety.
	City Recreation Boards:	Use your control over access to public fields and facilities to ensure that organized leagues have trained all coaches on safety topics. Exercise the power of the permit to create local standards.
	Federal Policymakers:	Act on the National Academy of Sciences recommendation and create a national surveillance system to track sports-related concussions. It will inform decisions made about rules, coaching techniques, and equipment.

Fig. 14
HEALTH, SAFETY PROTECTIONS ARE LACKING
YOUTH COACHES WHO SAY THEY ARE TRAINED IN KEY AREAS



"I would ban heading. Because it hurts. I don't think it's necessary before age 14, at all."

– Julie Foudy, former captain of the U.S. national soccer team

FINDING SUCCESS //

Research is driving the agenda in the area of safety, prompting critical rules changes. In 2012, after Virginia Tech published results of its study measuring head impacts, the national office of the oldest youth football organization, Pop Warner, restricted contact drills to no more than one-third of practice time, its first-ever limit placed on teams. Later research found the limit reduced head impacts by half—to 158 per player for the season. If all youth football programs across the United States honor that limit, it could prevent as many as 150 million head hits a year among the more than 1 million children who play, according to researcher Stefan Duma.⁶⁰



A CALL FOR LEADERSHIP //

LET’S LOOK AHEAD TO THE YEAR 2030. Imagine all children in America having access to an early positive experience in sports. Most know not just the camaraderie of a team, or the feeling of a game-winning shot, but have developed the physical literacy, including love of game, to remain active into adolescence and beyond. They have experienced all of the benefits—physical, social, emotional, cognitive—available to people who simply move their bodies on a regular basis. Now, imagine the benefits to communities everywhere, given the role of sports for kids in producing active adults and healthy lives. Imagine cities that are more vibrant and more cohesive, and greener with more parks and other recreation spaces.

This is the promise of Project Play. It’s also the imperative.

Take a look at the chart on the right. Does this look like a sustainable future for our nation? Obesity is just one challenge we face with an inactive populace. Left unchecked, health-care spending could reach 20 percent of U.S. gross domestic product by 2030, according to one analysis. How exactly are we going to compete in the global marketplace, with employers and the public sector picking up much of those costs?

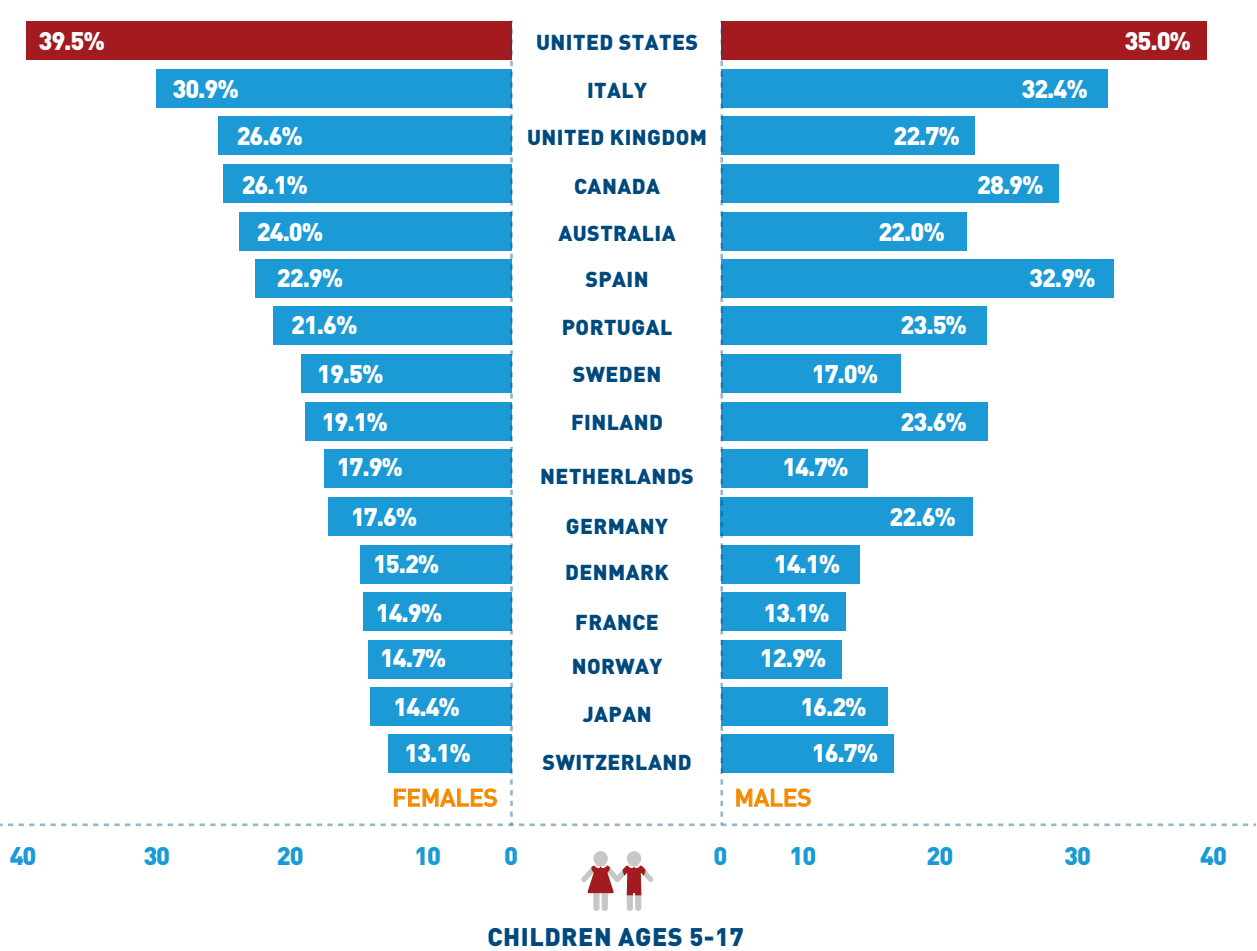
Sport does not exist in a vacuum. We need to bring sport into the health conversation and health into the sport conversation. We need to connect the silos in this disjointed space, where, unlike just about every other nation, we do not have a sports ministry or commission or other national-level entity to coordinate sport development for the public good.

Project Play offers a conceptual framework that helps stakeholders from across sectors understand how they can work together to serve the interests of children, communities, and public health. We hope the strategies and ideas contained in this playbook inspire organizations and individuals to take meaningful actions. At the same time, we recognize that so much more can get done with a commitment to collective impact. As the Stanford Social Innovation Review has observed, large-scale social movements—systems change—require broad cross-sector collaboration.

TURN THE PAGE IF YOU WANT TO HELP TURN THIS REPORT INTO A MOVEMENT.

Fig. 15

THE RACE WE DON'T WANT TO WIN PREVALENCE OF OVERWEIGHT/OBESE CHILDREN IN 16 PEER COUNTRIES



COLLECTIVE IMPACT DEPENDS ON FIVE CONDITIONS.

1. COMMON AGENDA: Every movement needs a vision shared by all stakeholders. We hope this report helps create that vision by aligning the interests of various sectors, starting with the two historical competing interests within sports: those who aim to expand access to sport for the sake of child development and those more focused on improving elite-level athletic performance at the teenage and adult levels. We can achieve both outcomes, creating a holistic, integrated sport system that does not operate at cross-purposes. We need to aspire to do both, while serving the larger health needs of the nation.

Not every group is going to agree with each strategy or idea in this report, or the individual mission of other entities engaged in the process, and that's OK. More important is that stakeholders begin moving toward a socially inclusive model of Sport for All, Play for Life communities, with a fundamental understanding of what all children ages 12 and under need to get and stay engaged in activity that leads to physical literacy.

2. SHARED MEASUREMENT SYSTEM: Every common agenda needs a way of measuring success. Government data are lacking among preteens engaged in sports. But we do have the SFIA annual household survey capturing participation rates by sport, age group, gender, income level and other relevant criteria. There's value in that. The data help inform the sport bodies that create key policies and practices, and their leaders can all see benefits if more kids get and stay involved in sports.

Ideally, we would also see the development of tools that could measure the quality of a sport experience, including the physical literacy and health benefits derived. Some sports simply provide more physical activity than others. In 2013, 28.3 percent of children ages 6 to 12 were engaged in high-calorie-burning activities at least three times a week, according to SFIA. Ambitious target goals could be set through 2030, with the ultimate goal being sport for all that helps kids lead active, healthy lives.

Leaders of each sport and organization should set their own vision-level goals, and their own metrics, that people can rally around. The era of big data in youth sports needs to begin now.

3. MUTUALLY REINFORCING ACTIVITIES: Though youth sport is a fragmented space and largely organized at the community level, most of the providers of opportunities affiliate under governing bodies or trade associations. Stakeholders need to work together in a manner that recognizes and leverages the respective assets and expertise of each group. Every organization at the intersection of sport and health has its role, and can take meaningful action. It's just a matter of knowing where an organization's strengths lie in supporting the holistic vision.

Our advice: Define your interests broadly. Get out of your silos. Create partnerships.

4. CONTINUOUS COMMUNICATION: Project Play has provided a venue for leaders from disparate sectors to share ideas, create a common language, and collaborate on issues of mutual interest. Events spawned working groups to develop a plan around physical literacy, as well as more targeted strategies for underserved populations. The work on the latter will continue through our partner, the Clinton Health Matters Initiative, which will develop messaging strategies, a clearinghouse for best practices, and a research agenda to further address the needs of five populations: children from low-income families, girls, first generation and Native Americans, kids with physical and intellectual disabilities, and children who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning (LGBTQ).

Additional in-person and digital communications on the full range of opportunities explored in the Project Play report will be necessary to develop trust, discover resources, and forge partnerships. The Aspen Institute will continue to assist as an independent convener, a facilitator of dialogue that identifies opportunities to take action. Among other activities, the program will host a Project Play Summit in February 2015, then gather leaders again a year later to measure progress, celebrate successes, and identify gaps.

"THE BEST WAY TO PREDICT THE FUTURE IS TO CREATE IT"

— Peter Drucker, management guru

5. BACKBONE SUPPORT ORGANIZATION(S): All social movements benefit from having an organization that wakes up each morning with the responsibility to advance the collective effort. Otherwise, even the most engaged leaders of stakeholder groups can lose focus.

One model that has worked well at a regional level is the LA84 Foundation. Spawned with surplus funds from the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles, the foundation uses its \$160 million endowment to do many of the things that Project Play has identified as important. It trains coaches, conducts research, convenes leaders, creates community partnerships, and makes sports affordable for underserved populations. The \$4 million it distributes in grants annually has been used to drive best practices and safety reforms.

A national foundation could take on some or all of those functions, within a mission of growing participation. One idea offered at a Project Play roundtable was to focus such a foundation on setting coaching standards, a model the United Kingdom used to improve the quality of community sports over the past decade. The foundation could also work with the U.S. Olympic Committee to meet the requirements established under the Amateur Sports Act to support research and encourage opportunities for women, minorities, and athletes with disabilities. It could help federal agencies coordinate the funding of existing grants tied to physical activity, using criteria consistent with program design we know will attract and retain children.

A lot could be done if more funding was available. But where could that come from? In most other countries, it comes from the government. In Canada, the sports ministry has helped a group of academics and sport leaders come together to reshape the nation's sport system based on the concepts of physical literacy and sport for life. The Australian Sports Commission also gets dedicated funding. In Scandinavian countries, which have the highest sport participation rates in the world, designated sport entities get a share of the profits from national lotteries and legalized sports gambling. Scandinavian policies make it such that placing a bet on professional sports supports grassroots sports.

In the coming years, the U.S. sports industry will evolve and grow. New revenue streams will emerge. Sport leaders would be wise to look for opportunities to support a not-for-profit entity that will ultimately support their business interests. One idea floated at a Project Play roundtable is the creation of a "1% for Play" effort, modeled on the "1% for the Planet" initiative created by outdoor industry leaders in 2002. Since then, 1% for the Planet has become a global movement, with more than 1,200 member companies donating at least 1 percent of annual sales—at a whole-company, brand, or product-line level—to initiatives that sustain the environment. So far, it's generated \$100 million in support. Imagine the impact on sport and play in the United States with a similar effort.

Still, it's important to remember that youth sports are primarily a bottom-up exercise. Parents make most of the decisions. It is essential to empower them to demand child-first policies and practices as well as a menu of options to engage all kids. A backbone organization could help coordinate those resources; so could local or state organizations that share a mission of helping stakeholders deliver universal access to quality sports.

Reimagining youth sports in America is just the first step in building Sport for All, Play for Life communities. The century-old model of school sports begs for a re-look as well, given falling participation among teens and emerging questions about the role of collision sports within the educational mission. The recreational options available to adults also need attention, given that sport participation rates dive dramatically as soon as teens cycle out of the school varsity.

The first opportunity, though, is getting it right for kids ages 12 and under.

THE FUTURE OF YOUTH SPORTS IN AMERICA—AND THE HEALTH OF THE NEXT GENERATION—IS UP FOR GRABS.

WHAT WILL IT BE?



WHAT YOU CAN DO //

ALL OF OUR IDEAS TO SUPPORT THE STRATEGIES, PLUS A FEW MORE, IN ONE PLACE:



COMMUNITY RECREATION GROUPS PARTICIPATION CREATES SUSTAINABILITY

- Use program evaluation tools that can help measure whether quality experiences are being delivered to children. Develop programs and pricing models that encourage multi-sport play through age 12, and promote them as “smart development.”
- Survey kids to capture their feedback, and share data with coaches and the sport board so they can adjust policies and practices. Make room on the board for an athlete or two, just like national sport governing bodies do.
- Actively recruit more mothers as coaches. Offer “women-only” coaching clinics, co-coaching arrangements, and plug-and-play practice plans to ease the transition. Allocate a minimum number of board spots to women.
- Coaches: Don’t cut kids—add teams where possible by shrinking rosters. Grow practice-to-game ratios. Dedicate time to developing fundamental movement skills. Provide quality, individualized feedback based on progress made in those skills.
- Parks and Recreation: Re-create the sandlot experience by carving out time at fields and gyms during prime hours each week for pickup play. Provide equipment and loose supervision, then turn the space over to kids.
- After-school Programs: Dedicate time to casual play within the formal commitments that already have been made by leading organizations to promote daily physical activity.
- Faith-Based Groups: Help solve sport transportation barriers, which are especially acute in rural and urban areas. Churches, synagogues, etc. often have networks, resources that can be tapped, as well as indoor and outdoor spaces for activities.
- Camps, Private Clubs: Remove the word “elite” and all related terms from marketing materials to parents. No child qualifies as elite before growing into their body.



NATIONAL SPORT ORGANIZATIONS KIDS ARE YOUR FUTURE

- Professional leagues: Drive reform at the youth level, as the National Hockey League has done with ADM through an annual \$4 million gift to USA Hockey. Also, create PSAs highlighting the role of free play and physical literacy in the development of admired athletes.
- National Governing Bodies: Commit to annual goals based on participation growth. Add a pediatrician or health professional to the board to sync policies with medical recommendations. Give local administrators tools to design and evaluate programs.
- U.S. Olympic Committee: Encourage affiliates to promote the American Development Model and other child-first policies through funding criteria or other incentives.
- Create pilots for model partnerships with after-school programs in underserved areas to introduce youth to less traditional Olympic sports like team handball or table tennis. They’ll grow your pipeline.
- Hire diversity officers to develop efforts to engage underserved kids. If you’re a national sport governing body, encourage state associations to share club revenues from wealthier programs with those that serve families who need subsidies. Appeal to local foundations for help.
- Create or endorse online tools that deliver training in the key coaching competencies in working with kids from all backgrounds. Make the tools free to every youth-serving organization.
- Collision Sports: Recommend noncollision forms of play for 12-and-under kids, as USA Rugby does with its flag-based programs. As football’s John Madden has suggested, teach kids to solve problems with their hands and feet, then introduce full contact.



POLICYMAKERS & CIVIC LEADERS THRIVING COMMUNITIES, ENGAGED CITIZENS

- Dedicate a share of local taxes to parks and recreation that stands apart from the annual budget process, as parks-rich Chicago has done through a percentage of property taxes (\$164 per home/year on average).
- Foster the creation of “asset models” that assemble strengths of communities into new combinations, new structures of opportunity, and new sources of income and control.
- City Recreation Boards: Use your control over access to public fields and facilities to ensure that organized leagues have trained all coaches on safety topics. Exercise the power of the permit to create local standards.
- Mayors: Recreate the sandlot experience by carving out time at fields and gyms during prime hours each week for pickup play. Provide equipment and loose supervision, and turn the space over to kids.
- Federal Policymakers: Act on the National Academy of Sciences recommendation and create a national surveillance system to track sports-related concussions. It will inform decisions made about rules, coaching techniques, and equipment.
- Coordinate the funding of existing federal and state grants tied to physical activity, using criteria consistent with program design that we know will attract and retain children.

WHAT YOU CAN DO // CONTINUED



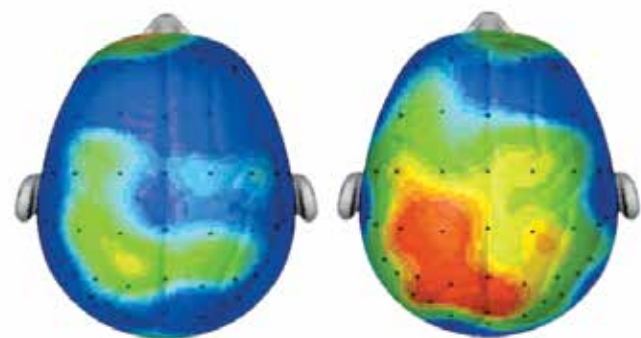
EDUCATION

ACTIVE KIDS DO BETTER

- Schools: Commit to providing recess; kids can accumulate up to 40 percent of their total daily physical activity during recess. As is, one-third of third graders do not get the recommended 20 minutes of daily recess, with students in communities of color getting less than others.
- Schools: Offer daily physical education, an obvious venue for promoting physical literacy. Bring back intramurals. Add alternative sports that tap into cultural interests, such as double dutch and netball.
- Schools: Grow efforts to open up your facilities during the non-school hours to community sport groups, through shared use agreements. Make better use of customizable templates. Set terms for use consistent with principles described in the Project Play report.
- Middle Schools: Don't just drop sports considered dangerous; provide options and replace them with low-injury (and low-cost) sports, like ultimate frisbee.
- High School Coaches: Connect your athletes with youth programs, get them qualified to serve as assistant coaches. Kids respond to teens, who can bridge age and cultural gaps.
- Colleges: Give the 100,000-plus athletes who cycle out of NCAA campuses each year the tools to become effective community coaches. They already know skills and tactics in 24 sports. Teach them how to work with kids. Also, be a steward of best practices in youth sports by conducting and disseminating key research.
- Researchers: Create tools to evaluate program success based on factors such as fun, diversity, participation and retention rates, and the development of skills that foster physical literacy. Wins and losses shouldn't be the prevailing metric.

Fig. 16

MOVE BODY, ACTIVATE BRAIN WHAT MRI SCANS TELL US*



AFTER SITTING QUIETLY AFTER 20-MINUTE WALK

* Schools cut recess (and P.E.) to their own detriment. Even if kids aren't running, they're winning. Above are composites of MRI brain scans of 20 students taking the same test, as measured by University of Illinois researcher Dr. Chuck Hillman. The red sections represent highest amount of neuro-electric activity.



PARENTS

HAPPIER, HEALTHIER CHILDREN

- Be active. Research shows that the most active kids have the most active parents. The more sports you try, the more they will try.
- Ask your children about their goals and preferences in sports, then design their activities accordingly. Redefine success on their terms. At the same time, know the odds against your child playing at the college or pro level, and commit to making athletes for life.
- Advocate for children other than your own. Join a local sport board and promote inclusive policies such as delaying the start of travel teams, adding fee waivers for low-income families, and committing to equal playing time through age 12.
- Create safe spaces for kids to play through group play dates. Each parent takes turns, providing supervision for one hour at a park or a street.



PUBLIC HEALTH

SPORT AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY ARE PREVENTIVE MEDICINE

- Pediatricians: Establish communication channels with PE teachers who see kids and have access to fitness data. Help them create tailored "exercise prescriptions" that connect kids with local sport options.
- Hospitals: Include the availability of local sport facilities in your Community Health Needs Assessment report that is required under the Affordable Care Act. Public health agencies should do the same.
- Foundations: Develop opportunities around Social Impact Bonds, a new approach to funding that has shown promise in other sectors. Identify ways that health-promoting sport can be used to justify investments.
- Foundations: Fund the creation of a tool that compares injury and physical activity rates across sports, so parents can make informed decisions for their children. Also, set grant criteria that promote health and safety.

WHAT YOU CAN DO // CONTINUED



BUSINESS & INDUSTRY

IT'S GOOD BUSINESS TO INVEST IN KIDS

- Local Business: Support the occasional closing of downtown streets for cycling, 3-on-3 basketball festivals, and other community sports and physical activities. Build athletic facilities near schools, offer free use in the 3-5 p.m. slot in exchange for city tax abatements.
- Business: Recognize that surveys of 6- to 12-year-olds say many want to swim, bike, hike, and run more; help connect urban kids with outdoor activities. Incent employees to volunteer, supervise.
- Business: Identify struggling leagues and teams to support by using crowdfunding tools on the Internet that make it easy. Don't wait for local programs to find you.
- Corporations: Incent youth sport providers to mandate best-in-class coach training courses by offering steep discounts on equipment—or whatever you sell. Cover the cost of background checks by offering goods in online barter pools.
- Insurance: Create incentives for families to engage in health-promoting sport activity.



TECH & MEDIA

YOUTH SPORTS IS RIPE FOR DISRUPTION; SO BE DISRUPTIVE

- Tech: Develop a simple Internet or smartphone app to conduct attitude surveys of children, parents, and others that can be offered to schools and community groups for free. Allow for some customization of questions and offer the survey in Spanish and other languages.
- Tech: Create a digital platform that allows users to find nearby sites for sport activity. Ideally, allow crowdsourcing with quality measures. Integrate with Internet maps.
- Media, Video Game Companies: Share what you know about reaching and engaging children; package the insights and make them public. Help youth sport providers tailor their programming.
- Spanish-Language Media: Support an integrated PSA campaign designed to reach mothers. Research shows Hispanic girls want to play, but their moms, especially first-generation immigrants, need to be convinced sports will help them in life.

FIND MORE IDEAS, AND SHARE YOURS, AT WWW.PROJECTPLAY.US





A WORD ABOUT TERMINOLOGY //

How we define, for purposes of this report, certain key terms:

Sports	All forms of physical activity which, through organized or casual play, aim to express or improve physical fitness and mental well-being. Participants may be motivated by internal or external rewards, and competition may be with others or themselves (personal challenge).
Athlete	Anyone who has a body.
Organized sport	Rule-governed and externally structured physical activities involving competition or challenges that call for specific physical skills and strategies to achieve goals.
Casual sport	Informal physical activities created and controlled by participants so they fit immediate circumstances and express the interests of a particular group.
Team sports	Refers to the 24 sports that the Sports & Fitness Industry Association (SFIA) identifies in its work (baseball, basketball, cheerleading, field hockey, flag football, touch football, tackle football, gymnastics, ice hockey, lacrosse, paintball, roller hockey, rugby, indoor soccer, outdoor soccer, fast-pitch softball, slow-pitch softball, competitive swimming, track and field, ultimate frisbee, beach volleyball, court volleyball, grass volleyball, wrestling). These sports dominate the sport activity of children ages 6-12, according to SFIA.
Core participation	SFIA term that captures the number of people who regularly participate in a particular physical activity, in both organized and unstructured play.
Play	Relatively spontaneous, expressive, and unstructured physical activities created for the immediate pleasure of participants. “Deliberate play” means sport activities loosely monitored by children or adults.
Physical literacy	The ability, confidence, and desire to be physically active for life. See fuller definition as related to sports on page 8.
Sport specialization	Intensive, year-round training in a single sport at the exclusion of other sports.
Underserved communities	Those that have little or no access to benefit from programs, support, services, opportunities, resources, etc. that meet community members’ needs, wants, and/or interests.



PROCESS AND METHODOLOGY //

Project Play convened leaders and collected insights at a launch summit in April 2013 as well as through nine roundtables, one televised town hall, and several panel discussions. The Sports & Society Program expresses its deepest appreciation to the more than 250 leaders — from President Clinton to Olympic athletes, public health visionaries to local sport practitioners — who shared insights at our events. [Please see a complete list of participants on our website: www.ProjectPlay.us.](http://www.ProjectPlay.us)

The lead author of this report is Tom Farrey, executive director of the Aspen Institute Sports & Society Program. He is also author of the book (ESPN), *Game On: The All-American Race to Make Champions of Our Children*. Providing editorial support is Risa Isard, program coordinator, Sports & Society Program.

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ABOUT THE ASPEN INSTITUTE

The Aspen Institute is an educational and policy studies organization based in Washington, DC. Its mission is to foster leadership based on enduring values and to provide a nonpartisan venue for dealing with critical issues.

www.AspenInstitute.org

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The mission of the Aspen Institute Sports & Society Program is to convene leaders, facilitate dialogue and inspire solutions that help sports serve the public interest, with a focus on the development of healthy children and communities. The program provides a venue for thought leadership where knowledge can be deepened and breakthrough strategies explored on a range of issues.

www.SportsAndSociety.org

ABOUT PROJECT PLAY

An initiative of the Sports & Society Program, Project Play is a multi-stage effort to provide the thought leadership to build Sport for All, Play for Life communities that foster a culture of health.

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