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23 October 2006
Sports in Society
Position Paper #1

Position Paper #1: Youth Sports

As participation in youth sports has become the norm for America's youth, the way in which sports are administered has become an ethical issue for society to consider. The main dilemma to take into account is whether children would be better off if they were simply allowed to pursue athletic development on their own, absent of adult influence, or if this adult presence is indeed beneficial to the growth and maturation of America's youth. In reality, youth sport would be better served when under adult supervision and when administered by a youth sport league, compared to simply administered by the young athletes themselves.

The development of youth sports in American society has been an ongoing process since the beginning of the 20th century. Prior to the idea of any adult involvement in youth sports, children found time for their respective sports on their own terms, letting games unfold in the sandlot or backyard, with no formal obligation or supervision. The process began with social agencies, such as the YMCA or boy scouts, sponsoring youth athletics. When we think of modern youth sports, we turn our attention to Little League baseball or Pop Warner football, advents that came to be known in the 1950s. These organizations encompass the idea of adult-controlled, heavily supervised youth sports.

An organized youth sports league benefits from the structure that a sandlot-based "league" would not have. It seems that much of the focus on youth sports participation is the challenge of physically getting children to their scheduled practices and games.

Although this is a challenge for families, priority is given to such activities due to this structure. In an unstructured, backyard game, parents would have the inclination to assessing priority to other activities, such as academic or non-physical activities. While sports participation would occur on some levels if it were to spontaneously occur, there would not be a strict, prearranged plan for sport activities. As a result, children would not be able to experience the concrete benefits that sports participation offers.

One of the major benefits of sports participation in general would be that athletic involvement promotes healthy living. A key aspect of childhood development is the importance of regular exercise. While randomly running around the park after a football provides spontaneous movement, a regular sports schedule provides essential physical activity. In addition, even less-qualified coaches focus on the conditioning aspect of athletics. Not only does this improve performance in their respective sports, in provides opportunities for strength and endurance enhancement, the building of strong bones and muscles, reduces anxiety and also increases general self-esteem. By promoting an adult-controlled approach, physical and mental health is superior to when children take the initiative in their backyard games.

In addition to providing health benefits to youth sports participants, the social aspects that organized athletics promote are outrageous. Firstly, children learn to manage authority. Even among the youngest age groups, coaches decide who plays where and when. Children are expected to fulfill their designated roles, and to do the best they are capable. By experiencing authority from non-parental figures early in life, children will have a framework for managing authority in later years, in academic and professional life.

Another social concept that sports participation encourages is the nature of competition. In an organized setting and in contests against other children who are not as much as acquaintances, youth learn the nature of defeat and the joys of winning. In a non-organized setting, competition is emphasized, but formal winning and losing is not. While there are virtually no consequences of a loss in the sandlot other than a long walk home, a loss in an organized sport carries other implications, such as playoff hopes and the desire to compete above and beyond the regular season. A loss that destroys an opportunity for further competition can be traumatic for a young athlete. Learning coping mechanisms and thought processes for this type of unfortunate situation will prove to be beneficial for similar applications in later academic endeavors and in other life applications.

Youth sports participation also encourages moral and ethical development. For one, those that participate in an organized sports setting are less than likely to get into trouble in other situations. Sports promote teamwork and appropriate decision making, which in turn discourage problematic behavior. This is only possible in an organized setting because these concepts begin with an adult figure. The scenario works in both directions; those previously troubled can seek a second chance in athletics and a necessary mentor in a coach. Lastly, organized sports allow parents to know exactly the whereabouts of their children. In an informal setting, time is relative and more opportunities for deviance arise without parental involvement.

Of course, there are negative aspects of adult-controlled youth athletics. Although sports participation among America's youth has increased substantially in recent years, it is a common misconception that the increase in participation is strictly

due to zealous parents that stress overtraining, the pursuit of college athletic scholarships and a "win at all costs" mindset. While these perfectionist ideas do in fact exist in American culture, the increased participation is due to the above known benefits of participation. In addition, youth sports are still controlled in some capacity by parents who have never played nor coached the sports they encourage their children to play. Their encouragement simply resides in the benefits that participation in organized sports provokes. For those that only see organized sports as overzealous parents putting undue pressure on their children, this certainly is not a reason to disengage children from these benefits.

In summary, participation in organized sports provides structure for encouraging the benefits of physical exercise, acceptable social skills, as well as ethical and moral decision making. If children and parents relied on spontaneous competition in the backyard rather than on organized, adult-controlled sports, many benefits of sport participation would be absent. Looking to the future, it seems that we as a society have become acquainted with this idea of structured youth athletics. The image of broken car windows as a result of a sharply hit line drive into the street is parting ways with American society.