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**Marilyn Price-Mitchell Ph.D.**

The Moment of Youth

## The Psychology of Youth Sports

When playing the game fosters positive outcomes for kids.

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If you're a parent or coach, you probably have an opinion about youth sports (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/sport-and-competition>). You might think that sports help children develop teamwork (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/teamwork>) skills, self-confidence (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/confidence>), resiliency, moral (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/ethics-and-morality>) character, and other personal strengths. Or you may see a dark side to youth sports, believing that young athletes develop aggressive traits like bullying (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/bullying>) and the need to dominate their opponents on and off the field.

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The proponents of youth sports often make blanket statements about the benefits of sports, leading

parents (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/parenting>) to believe that if Johnny or Susan doesn't make the team, they may not achieve [happiness](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/happiness) (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/happiness>) or develop positive strengths needed to succeed in life. Some believe the positive hype around youth sports is spread by adults who either blindly accept the notion that sports are good for all kids or who are in the business of developing high-performing athletes. In his recent book *[Until It Hurts: America's Obsession with Youth Sports and How It Harms Our Kids](http://www.untilithurts.com/)* (<http://www.untilithurts.com/>), Mark Hyman speaks about the adult takeover of kids' sports, suggesting they are negatively affecting the physical and mental well-being of children.

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The truth is that neither portrait of youth sports is completely correct. Research studies have been conducted with hundreds of thousands of children who participate in sports. Generally, these studies show that youth who participate in organized sports during middle and high school do better academically and are offered greater job prospects than children who do not partake in sports activities. However, nuances exist in these studies that are important for parents to understand. Like all studies that equate youth activities with success in life, it is imperative to look deeper to learn how these findings apply to your own children.

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### 3 Paths toward Positive Outcomes

Psychological studies on the value of youth sports offer broad insights into [child development](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/child-development) (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/child-development>) and often contradict one another. Since no one child is exactly like another, parents who understand the benefits and pitfalls of sports and who pay attention to the individual needs of their children are more likely to raise kids that thrive in life. Generally, studies indicate three important aspects of sports participation that affect positive youth development - intensity, continuity, and balance.





Source: 123RF

A combination of all three offers the greatest benefits to kids.

### **Intensity**

The amount of time children spend doing sports each week is particularly important to whether they receive positive developmental outcomes from their participation. Kids who spend more time in sports activities have greater benefits than youth who participate at lower levels or not at all. With greater time commitment, children develop better mastery of skills and superior knowledge of tactics and strategy. This can lead to the development of strategic thinking which is helpful in all aspects of life, including the ability

to find and excel in the job market. No one can tell you how many hours of sports per week is the perfect amount. The important learning is that children who make a commitment to regular practice receive greater developmental benefits.

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### **Continuity**

The stability and duration of how children participate across their adolescent years is also important. Studies suggest that intermittent participation during the middle and high school years is not as

beneficial as continuous dedication. Making a commitment over time facilitates the likelihood that children will overcome challenges and obstacles in their performance. They also have greater opportunities to interact with teammates, learning to cope with the interpersonal challenges of working with others. This is an important aspect of developing initiative, an internal strength (<http://rootsofaction.com/blog/initiative-children-adolescents/>) that lasts a lifetime.

## Balance

Perhaps the most important of the three aspects of youth sports participation is to achieve a balance between sports and other activities. Studies show that greater developmental outcomes are attained by children who spend time in activities other than their dominant sports pursuits. It is not necessarily the numbers of activities in which youth participate but rather that they have outlets beyond sports. For example, one study found youth who participated in sports and school clubs had lower rates of depression (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/depression>) than kids who focused exclusively on sports. Other studies suggest that children who participate in activities that present real-world challenges, like volunteering in their communities, achieve greater developmental benefits. These activities encourage youth to develop a civic identity (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/identity>) and see a world beyond a game of winning and losing.

## The Dilemma and Solutions



The three factors that contribute to youth development present dilemmas for families. The decision to play sports with the intensity and continuity required to be highly successful (and possibly earn a college scholarship) must be made with long and short-term consequences in mind.

To pursue a sport at the expense of other out-of-school-time activities may not be as developmentally positive for youth. Yet often, the decision to focus on one sport exclusively is fueled by a strong commitment to that activity, one that brings joy and satisfaction to a teenager's life. It may also be fueled by the needs of parents whose lives revolve around coaching (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/coaching>) or the internal satisfaction of seeing their child achieve on the playing field. Whatever the reasons, sports can place a high demand on young people's time and energy, leading to the kinds of negative effects described by Hyman.

Before jumping into a fulltime schedule of youth sports, families should weigh the positive and negative aspects of sports and assess the benefits to their children. A particularly good read for parents is Shane Murphy's *The Cheers and the Tears: A Healthy Alternative to the Dark Side of Youth Sports* ([http://www.amazon.com/Cheers-Tears-Healthy-Alternative-Sports/dp/0787940372/ref=sr\\_1\\_11?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1310333510&sr=1-11](http://www.amazon.com/Cheers-Tears-Healthy-Alternative-Sports/dp/0787940372/ref=sr_1_11?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1310333510&sr=1-11)). Murphy is a sport psychologist and the president of the Division of Exercise and Sport Psychology of the American Psychological Association.

For those wishing to take a deeper dive into the debates among scholars, youth advocates, and sports practitioners concerning the role of sports in children's lives, Margaret Gatz's book *Paradoxes of Youth and Sport* ([http://www.amazon.com/Paradoxes-Youth-Culture-Social-Relations/dp/0791453243/ref=pd\\_sim\\_b\\_3](http://www.amazon.com/Paradoxes-Youth-Culture-Social-Relations/dp/0791453243/ref=pd_sim_b_3)) is a must read. Gatz explores the critical issues in the sports debate, including youth development; violence; and racial, gender (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/gender>), and class inequities.

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## Author

Marilyn Price-Mitchell, PhD, (<http://www.mpricemitchell.com/>) is the author of *Tomorrow's Change Makers: Reclaiming the Power of Citizenship for a New Generation* (<http://amzn.to/1hBFEJR>). A developmental psychologist and researcher, she works at the intersection of positive youth development and education (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/education>).



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Helping teens believe in themselves



**Marilyn Price-Mitchell, Ph.D.**, is a developmental psychologist and researcher in the field of positive youth development and youth civic engagement.

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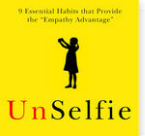




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