Reinventing Youth Sports in Illinois

A Report from the Illinois Youth Sport Summit

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Introduction

Play and participation in sports at a young age can have the following benefits:

- Development of physical literacy and overall fitness level
- Reduced risk for obesity and cardiovascular diseases that result from sedentary habits
- Improved cognitive functioning and focus during class
- Learning to work with others (perhaps overcoming adversity)
- Development of interpersonal and communication skills
- Enhanced self-confidence and sense of self-worth
- Opportunities for shared experiences and social bonding
- Stronger commitment to active living as an adult

Therefore, no child should be denied access to sport and the opportunity to develop the physical, emotional, and social skills associated with playing sports. There is a host of reasons for the well-documented decline in sport participation and overall physical activity of children and adults. These can be reduced or eliminated entirely through appropriate reform of youth sport policies and practices.

The Illinois Youth Sport Summit was developed as a complement to the work being done by the Aspen Institute's Project Play, a national effort to reform youth sports. The National Summit on Youth Sports demonstrated that although it is widely agreed that policy action is needed, the solutions must be designed and implemented at local, regional, and state levels. Consequently, it is essential that state and local leaders become directly involved in planning and implementing the necessary changes.

On September 23, 2014 leaders in youth sport convened for a two-day policy summit to discuss the policies and practices that affect the design and delivery of youth sport programs throughout the state of Illinois. The unique format of the Summit combined expert knowledge with insight from leading practitioners in order to promote discussions relevant to those who design and implement youth sport programs. The ideas and concerns that emerged over the course of the Summit provide the foundation for the six realms of action presented in this white paper.

Although the issues and ideas here are consistent with challenges identified throughout the country, they derive from specific consideration of the geographic and political realities in the state of Illinois. The ideas to make the proposed reforms real are not exhaustive. They will continue to be refined and developed as new policies and practices are formulated and tested in the arenas of practice. The specific steps and details necessary to make each idea feasible and sustainable may vary by context.

Six Realms of Action

1. Design and Implement Child-Centered Programming

Why It Matters

Children differ in important ways from adults. Their cognitive, motor, and social skills are not merely less developed; they are qualitatively different. If the goal is to enable children to benefit from sport now, and to fully develop their potentials into adulthood, then it is essential to engage children in a manner that is cognitively, physically, and socially appropriate for their age. Child-centered programming requires an early focus on physical literacy, rather than sport competition per se, and it requires that instruction and game play be appropriately adapted. Time for free play and self-testing (sometimes without adult imposition) must be incorporated into practices, and until their teen years, children should be encouraged to try a range of different sports, rather than to specialize early. Sampling is beneficial because it promotes more complete muscle development and a full range of skills while increasing the likelihood that children will find an activity they enjoy. Research shows that this approach is not merely more satisfying for children (leading to sustained participation), it actually develops better athletes in the long-term (leading to elite success).

The earliest years of training should focus on physical literacy, which fosters each participant's ability to perform basic skills that will benefit their future performance in any physical pursuit, including sports. Examples include running, balancing, jumping, throwing, and climbing, as well as familiarity with unusual environments such as water, ice, snow, and sand. Starting with physical literacy as a foundation will result in attainment of the fundamental skills necessary for success in any sport. Sport training should mature along with children, becoming more targeted and serious as children age and develop. Children who experience age appropriate training and play, and for whom sport programming takes a long-term view of their development, are more likely to participate in sport and physical activity as adults. Adults who value sport and recreation are more likely to enroll their own children in similar activities, therefore creating a cycle that fosters a healthy and active population.

Because child-centered programming is more engaging and includes opportunities for youth to "be in charge," its benefits extend beyond the field. Research shows that unstructured free play increases creativity and confidence among youth participants – both on and off the field. Incorporation of free play into childhood sport experiences has been shown to enable more creative and effective athlete performance, and to establish a creative base that translates into better classroom and workplace performance. Child-centered programming is more likely to develop important social and cognitive skills among young people that extend into adulthood.

Challenges

Perhaps the greatest barrier to implementing child-centered programming is the simple fact that it looks different from the adult versions of sport with which we are most familiar. Training activities, communication styles, and social organization cannot follow the adult model and be effective. We recognize this in education settings; we do not organize an elementary school class in the same way that we organize a college-level course. Yet, we do precisely that in sport. We need to begin by accepting that the best youth sport programs may look quite different from the kind of training and competition we know.

Allowing some free play to become part of sport training may be particularly challenging for adults who feel that they know what is best for children. Indeed, free play can sometimes look like chaos. It may even look unproductive, as it is unlikely to consist of the drills and repetition we associate with sport training. Nevertheless, research shows that incorporating free play creates greater enjoyment and, ultimately, better sport performances.

Encouraging young people to sample a range of sports and different kinds of programs can also be challenging. Ambitious parents may not realize that early sport successes associated with early specialization are generally ephemeral. Program administrators may want to obtain early athlete commitment to a sport in order to build numbers and secure an ongoing stream of revenues.

Although there are programs that embrace principles of child-centered programming, it was clear from practitioners who attended the Summit that these features have sometimes been met with resistance from parents. The challenge is not merely to reach providers in order to redesign youth sport programs; the challenge is also to help parents see the value (and ultimate superiority) of child-centered programs.

Ideas to Make It Real

How to make it real with new programs:

- Create pre-sport physical literacy programs for pre-school children and children in the early grades of elementary school. Throughout the early years, foster basic skills for running, jumping, balancing, throwing, catching, and hitting. Introduce special environments (e.g., water, ice, snow, sand). Use games that emphasize these skills in order to make physical activity fun.
- Introduce sandlot nights at facilities where sport equipment is made available with minimal adult supervision (no parents, just staff for safety/liability purposes). Kids decide what they play and how they play it. These could take place at existing facilities (fields, parks, gyms, etc.) or on neighborhood streets or that are closed for that purpose.
- Diversify offerings by providing sports that may be new to participants, such as floorball, disc golf, team handball, water polo, badminton, cricket, or indoor versions of outdoor games.
- Take advantage of winter weather and offer a variety of snow and ice games (beyond skating and hockey), such as broomball, cross-country skiing, and sledding.

How to make it real within existing programs:

- Incorporate games and other sports into practice time. For example, to train dodging and quick acceleration, use tag.
- Use small-sided games (e.g., 3 v 3 soccer, walla rugby) so kids are more involved and active.
- Set aside time for free play where kids can invent games, self-organize, try new positions, and test skills and tricks. Let them do this with little or (better) no adult imposition.
- Reduce the number of players allowed for each team so that every kid gets to play as much as possible. Perhaps eliminate substitutes completely (as some programs have done successfully).
- Foster peer coaching during practice so that players take turns teaching each other.
- Use modified versions of the sport (rather than drills) as training tools. Let the game be the teacher. For example, put goals back-to-back to compel more lateral play, including more passing and dribbling. Or, for example, use skipping games to train runners to optimize hip extension and plantar flexion.

2. Manage Parents

Why It Matters

When you consider youth sport, it becomes clear that there are really two levels of consumer: children, and their parents or guardians. If the child is uninterested, they don't sign up or they participate reluctantly. If they are unsatisfied they don't return. However, a program that keeps kids interested and satisfied is only half the solution. Parents ultimately decide the programs, clubs, and activities in which their children enroll and participate. Parents bring to sport their own experiences, what media has taught them to expect from sport, and what they have heard from well-meaning (but often misinformed) friends and family. If what they see and experience in a program is inconsistent with their wants and expectations, they are likely to remove their children or not enroll them in the first place, even if that program is designed from a child-centered athlete development standpoint.

While parents generally make decisions and behave in a way that they believe is in the best of interest of their child, their expectations and subsequent actions are not always consistent with practices that produce positive experiences for youth. The matter of adult behavior at youth sport events has received a great deal of popular attention in recent years. Parent behavior affects not only their child, but every child involved, as well as other adults associated with the program. Therefore, it is necessary to manage both behavior and expectations of parents.

Challenges

What parents want is often not what is best. Even when they are well-meaning, they are so emotionally involved with their child that they can lose perspective. Immediate successes and disappointments are evaluated without adequate reference to the long-term development of their young athlete. This can lead to situations during practices and games in which parent behavior fosters a negative environment for both children and volunteers – discouraging both from future commitment to the sport. How administrators handle these situations is crucial for retention of participants and the long-term reputation of the program. Offending a parent could lead to the loss of a participant and negative word of mouth, but on the other hand, allowing negative behavior could damage program reputation and recruitment of new participants, as well as retention of existing players.

Ideas to Make It Real

Managing parent expectations:

- Provide a pre-program letter/flier that clearly states goals and objectives.
- Establish recognition systems for children that go beyond competitive outcomes. These could include such things as personal improvement, teaching others, and helping teammates.
- Use experts (scientists, elite coaches, athletes) to explain key elements of child-centered programming and help parents understand why youth sport programs can and do look different from adult versions of sport.
- Create legends and retell legends about successful athletes who played a lot of different sports. Include stories that describe unstructured and unsupervised play with friends.

Managing parent behavior:

- Require parents to sign a pre-season declaration of commitment to appropriate behavior.
- Have signage at training and competition sites that reminds parents of expected behaviors.
- Establish policies that specify consequences for adults who violate behavior standards.
- Schedule silent game days during which parents (and coaches) cannot talk.
- Share stories about children who have benefited from positive parental behavior, and children who have been hurt by poor parental behavior. Use existing resources (newsletters, meetings, social media, orientations, registration requirements) to disseminate and retell these stories.
- Design and implement a parent-training program that teaches how to behave in a way that fosters the best environment for children.
- Create a recognition system that rewards positive parent behavior.

3. Train Coaches to be Sport and Life Skill Mentors

Why It Matters

Youth sport coaches wear many hats. They teach the game and how to get better at it; they supervise children at play; they promote and reinforce desired behaviors and attitudes through rules and actions. The coaching a child receives is one of the most crucial determinants of his/her future commitment to sport. Research shows that it also determines whether the sport experience has a positive, negative, or no influence on their lives. A coach who is a mentor can be a positive influence for many years; a coach who seeks to win at all costs can do untold damage. The coaching a child receives affects their development as athletes and as people. It matters, then, that youth sport coaches know and use styles of instruction and communication that nurture positive outcomes from sport participation. Sport does not teach self-respect, teamwork, social competence, or any other value. Coaches do.

Challenges

Many youth coaches are volunteers, and only some have personal experience with the sport they volunteer to coach. With minimal knowledge and/or guidance, they make use of their own (often inaccurately remembered) experience, what they are told by friends and family, and what they have gleaned from media. As well-meaning as they may be, these are not sources that are likely to provide the knowledge or skills necessary to become an age-appropriate mentor. If sport is to deliver what we claim it can and should deliver, then coaches must be trained beyond mere knowledge of sport skills.

Such training may not be welcomed by youth sport coaches. It may seem unnecessary, it takes up time, and it may require a fee. This is particularly challenging when relying on volunteer coaches.

Some coach training programs are strong on sport skills, but weak on mentoring. They may ignore mentoring completely, or they may reduce it to simple platitudes. Further, since the necessary behaviors for effective mentoring change as children mature, coaches need to be taught age-appropriate styles.

Prestige creates a further challenge. There is more prestige for coaching older or more skilled athletes. Further, when parents coach, they want to move up the skill or age ladder along with their child. The result can be that the youngest athletes, for whom early mentoring is particularly crucial, obtain coaches who have the least experience.

Ideas to Make It Real

There are five distinct, yet related, strategies that can enhance the quality of youth sport coaches and the mentoring they provide. These can be tailored to specific contexts.

1. Create status for trained coaches. Recognize trained and in-training coaches. Use existing resources and events, such as newsletters, social media accounts, staff meetings, and end-of-season parties, to enable that recognition.
2. Incorporate coaching evaluation into programs. Use child-centered criteria – not just win/loss records. Partner with local colleges and universities to develop and implement evaluation. Make subsequent involvement contingent on evaluation.
3. Develop and provide accessible training. Review, recommend, and use existing online resources when appropriate. If needed, partner with local colleges and universities to develop specific training programs suitable to your organization. Schedule training sessions and workshops at convenient times. For example, while children are engaged in free play nights, provide opportunities for coaches and parents to learn about or receive training on child-centered program design, long-term athlete development (especially the American Development Model), and the effects of adult behaviors.
4. Increase the pool of available coaches by expanding how and where coaches are obtained. Look beyond parents of enrolled participants, and recruit former athletes (particularly college students and young adults) and retired persons to be coaches.
5. Require services as well as fees in contracts with elite sport providers that rent facility space. For example, elite sport providers could host a set of training sessions for coaches or run a workshop that demonstrates how to play and coach a sport that is unfamiliar to staff.

4. Creatively Develop and Manage Resources

Why It Matters

Many youth sport providers operate with insufficient money, facilities, equipment, and/or personnel. This can negatively affect program design and quality. It can force prices to be raised for participants, which can reduce or eliminate access for those who cannot afford the fees. When public providers feel compelled to offload youth sport delivery to for-profit providers, this problem can be exacerbated.

Access to sport and recreation is a proven attraction for residents and for businesses. Consequently, it is an important, albeit indirect, aspect of economic development. It is a service that enhances the quality of communities.

If poorly coordinated, multiple providers can render inefficient use of spaces, compete for the same clients, or create complicated transition points between programs that cause some young athletes to leave the system entirely. Because the ability to acquire new resources may be limited, it is essential to manage and repurpose the existing resources in a community in order to optimize the quality, quantity, and accessibility of youth sport programs.

Challenges

When there are multiple providers who rely on support from the same athletes and parents, it can become difficult to find shared needs. Competition among providers can hinder the cooperation necessary to identify common needs and share resources. This can result in inefficient use of existing resources, including equipment, facilities, coaches, administrators, and referees. It can make it difficult to mount a coordinated political agenda for facility development or improvement.

There is a chronic need for qualified volunteer coaches, officials, and administrators in youth sport. Often, providers have specific requirements for volunteers that may not transfer to other organizations.

Whether public or private, sport providers must pay their bills. This can work against youth sport and mass participation, as elite sport is better positioned to pay. Consequently, public and private sport services are sometimes replaced by for-profit programming that focuses on sport for current and future elites, rather than broadly delivered sport programs for all.

Ideas to Make It Real

Develop a "Play Inventory" of public, private, and school facilities that exist throughout the community. Include information about such matters as what organization controls access, how to contact them, hours of operation, and any associated fees. Also inventory programs and events that are available throughout the year. Make information widely available (in print and online). Make the database easy-to-use and enable searches by location, type of play space, sport, time, age group, and organization.

In addition to using the inventory as a marketing tool, use it as a policy development tool. More efficient and effective use of resources will be enabled if the inventory makes it possible to evaluate the ways that facilities are being used and not being used. It can also assist in identifying shared or competing needs among providers. The inventory can also identify facilities that can be repurposed to meet changing needs or inexpensively redeveloped to accommodate new youth sport programs.

Play Inventory

Parks
Playgrounds
Fields
Courts
Lakes
Rivers
Beaches
Trails
Gyms
Recreation centers
Courtyards
Pools
Splash pads
Ice rinks
Golf courses
Skate/bike parks

Depending on location, one way to manage resources is to share, either with other providers, or with neighboring communities. This can be done through shared use agreements and/or joint programming. When possible, work with other agencies to reduce redundant programming, and to create more complementary or innovative youth sport programming. Working together and sharing resources can be enhanced by cross promoting programs in order to reach new potential users, generate sponsorships, and streamline marketing costs.

There can rarely be too many volunteers. Coaches, officials, and administrators are always needed. Coordinate training services and opportunities, as well as any mandatory certification processes across sectors (schools, public, private, non-profit). Work with local universities and colleges to train coaches, officials, and administrators, and then create databases so that they can be paired with opportunities, and systems of recognition and rewards that incentivize them to take advantage of those opportunities.

Promote partnerships and cooperation among sport providers in order to enable resource acquisition. Fundraising, lobbying, and sponsorship solicitation are each accomplished more readily if donors, government officials, and sponsors see adequate scope and scale.

Many of our most successful sports are enabled by organizations run by users. These are simply a collection of interested individuals who come together to create and manage one or more youth sports. They may be based at a particular facility, or they may find facilities as needed. So, rather than relying on public servants or private entrepreneurs to deliver youth sport programs, encourage and facilitate self-sustaining social organizations to do so.

5. Build Status for Participatory (Not Just Elite) Youth Sport Programs

Why It Matters

At its best, youth sport is about more than winning and losing. Parents, children, and communities seek other benefits, such as positive personal development, the foundation for a lifetime of active living, and the quality of engagement that makes communities attractive places to live and work. When we ask our programs simply to create champions, we are asking too little of the sport that we provide. Youth sport renders its benefits as a consequence of quality participation, not the balance of wins over losses. Although elite sport has a place among the overall portfolio of experiences available through sport, it fails to fully deliver the benefits we ideally seek from youth sport because it is neither designed nor intended to foster mass participation. Yet, the benefits from youth sport to which we rightly aspire mandate mass participation. Opportunities to play for the shear joy of it and for what is learned in the process are essential components for any youth sport system. Recreational sport, whether offered privately or by public agencies, is crucial.

Challenges

Claims that "sport is fun" often serve to legitimize whatever sport is offered, and is often cited by parents as a reason that they enroll their children in sport programs. Yet, the sad reality is that fun has too often become secondary to excellence. We recognize this when we so often ask or hear others ask young athletes, "did you score?" or "did you win?" or "did you get first?" We send the message through our behaviors and through our media that sport is only about winning – that elite competition matters, but participating for other reasons – fun, learning, socializing – are secondary. The resulting challenge is that both adults and children can too easily come to feel that recreational sport is second-class, and therefore only for those who are "not good enough to play for real." This fosters a stigma that can make recreational sport unattractive to children and parents. This perception and stigma must be overcome.

Ideas to Make It Real

Recreational youth sport needs to be rebranded. Marketing communications should stress the social, emotional, and cognitive benefits it provides – both in the immediate experience and in the long term. There is a plethora of research documenting those benefits. Visual images (including stills, videos, and infographics) and stories should make those benefits tangible. Sell the values of recreational sport – not just as a competition venue, but as a place of joy, socializing, and learning.

There are a lot more sports than are played in school or seen on television, and new sports are cropping up all the time. Participation in sport does not require that every young athlete play one of the big six youth sports. If recreational sports are not merely replicas of what is offered elsewhere, then their value becomes unique. Attract participation by offering sports that are different, such as rugby, parkour, ultimate frisbee, kite boarding, or any of the other myriad sports that are finding their ways into the hearts of new players.

Adolescents who do not make their school team may still want to play. The mere fact that an athlete was not selected for a team does not demonstrate that they are unsuited to play. Michael Jordan is famous for telling people that he did not initially make his school basketball team. So, when demand allows, offer opportunities to play the same sports as those offered in school, but outside the school context. Empower adolescents to develop and organize these programs; research shows that the added responsibility and sense of achievement enhance their maturation and their commitment to sport.

Nearly all sport is social in character. Research demonstrates that a sense of community among those in a club or league is pivotal for the success of that club or league. So, make sure that recreational sports programs work to build a sense of community. Incorporate social activities that provide opportunities for parents and children to bond with each other before, during, and after the season.

6. Improve Programming for Traditionally Underserved Populations

Why It Matters

In any democratic society, the benefits of social institutions are expected to be widely available. If we expect youth sport to be a positive agency for socializing young people, then we are obliged to make sure that young people have access – even if their financial resources or physical capabilities are limited. Whether poor, disabled, or from an underrepresented ethnic group, no child should be denied access to sport and recreation. The benefits of youth sport accrue most fully when sport is inclusive.

Frankly, inclusion has pragmatic value, as well. Diversity increases the market base for youth sport, which can generate new resources and greater political clout. No less importantly, diversity provides an additionally useful basis for learning to appreciate differences. Thus, youth sport is best when it is widely available. It must, therefore, welcome participants from all social classes and ethnicities, and it should accommodate those with disabilities.

Underserved populations are underserved because when sport is offered, it is offered in a way that does not match the needs or wants of these populations. Identifying the barriers that prevent participation and designing programs that meet their needs and wants will allow sport organizations to grow participation and extend the related benefits to populations that may be most in need.

Challenges

Children who live in remote rural areas or dangerous urban neighborhoods may not have access to sport because:

- There is no safe and reliable transportation to get youth to a safe place to play
- Being outside is considered risky, and parents want to keep their children inside
- Gyms, clubs, recreation centers may charge fees that are too high for the most impoverished
- There are too few children to field a team or create a league
- Facilities are inadequate, derelict, or nonexistent
- Staff lack the necessary skills and/or resources to meet demand
- Volunteers are unavailable or unwilling

Children with disabilities may not have access to sport because:

- There are too few children with similar disabilities to enable appropriately adapted programs
- Existing facilities may not be ADA compliant
- Segregation of disabled athletes into separate programs stigmatizes them and reduces their access to resources
- Both families and staff are concerned about safety, risk management, and liability
- Staff and volunteers may lack skills required to work with athletes with specific disabilities

Ideas to Make It Real

In the inner city:

- Modify sports so they can be played inside when safety is a concern.
- Find untraditional places to play such as parking structures, abandoned lots, or rooftops.
- Partner with schools and coordinate direct transportation from school to sporting locations.
- Create a volunteer system via which high school students can provide community service by serving as coaches and referees for youth programs. (One incentive for students is that this kind of volunteer work reflects favorably in college applications.)
- Look for opportunities to work with Coach Across America or implement a similar system.
- Partner with non-sport community-based organizations (religious, social service, etc.) to increase access to volunteers and adult supervision.

In rural areas:

- Build alliances with religious, social service, and sport organizations to enable programming and increase facility access.
- Partner with organizations that already have strong memberships, and incorporate sport and play into their existing programming.
- When demand is small, use mixed gender teams to increase total participation numbers.
- Where available, use local universities and colleges to train and supervise high school students to design and deliver sport programs for young children.
- Simplify or modify rules so that a sport can be played with minimal equipment and/or fewer athletes.

Integration of disabled athletes:

- Do not only create separate programs for disabled youth, but also find ways to integrate these children into existing programs.
- Allow able-bodied athletes to compete in disabled sports (e.g., wheelchair basketball, wheelchair rugby) in order to fill out teams and promote social inclusion.
- Train coaches, administrators, and referees as needed to work with special populations.
- Utilize existing resources and funding opportunities to become more ADA compliant.
- Partner with organizations that work specifically with disabled youth to create programs, activities, and events that will meet the demands of individuals with special needs.
- Community-based sport providers can work with a local college or disability advocacy agency to evaluate current practices and programs in order to increase overall access and integration of disabled members.

The Future

At the conclusion of the Illinois Youth Sport Summit, an action plan was developed to improve the quality of youth sport in the state of Illinois. There was overwhelming support from practitioners to embrace the research and suggestions being presented. Participants at the Summit requested continuing guidance and support from the Department of Recreation, Sport and Tourism at the University of Illinois. As a result, the following steps will be taken to assist practitioners in developing the skills and resources needed to implement new programs, practices, and policies that will ultimately increase the diversity, attractiveness, and effectiveness of youth sport options in the state.

1. Create a website (http://rst.illinois.edu/youthsport/) that provides ideas and resources.
2. Bring together working groups to formulate and implement strategies and tactics.
3. Develop and deliver workshops to support recommended changes.
4. Design measurements to enable programs to be evaluated and to evaluate themselves with reference to child-centered goals.
5. Test and demonstrate strategies and tactics through application at both the organization and community level.
    a. Seek funding support (as a youth development activity)
    b. Evaluate

Lasting Legacy

The Illinois Youth Sport Initiative is an ongoing effort to promote and realize the ideas and reforms discussed at the Summit and presented in this paper. It seeks widespread commitment from parents, administrators, coaches, agencies, and organizations across the state to foster the best youth sport experience possible for the children of Illinois.

Reforms of the kinds identified here will ultimately result in better youth sport. Better youth sport will foster active lifestyles, and ultimately lead to more healthy and happy residents.

Illinois is the first state to partner fully with the Aspen Institute's Project Play. As pioneers in the process of youth sport development, Illinois will serve as a model for other states and regions.