chapter

5

(Ron Chapple/Taxi/Gettty Images)

Sports and Children

Are organized programmes worth the effort?

Somewhere along the way we developed a mistrust of idle time. Children became an investment; it cost money to join the classes and courses and sports that are supposed to turn them into well-rounded little human beings. It took adult time to drive and wait, and, well, if you have to be there anyway, you may as well get involved. Time is money, money is time. And if the child is the investment, what, then, is the return on that investment? Certificates, badges, trophies—perhaps even a professional career. There is simply no time for play in such a serious undertaking.

—Roy MacGregor, author, *The Seven AM Practice: Stories of Family Life* (1996)

Unless we pay attention to poverty-stricken children, our culture will fall apart. We already see the beginning of it. If we are not careful, the children who have never played games will inherit the earth, and that will be a joyless earth.

—Les McDonald, president of the International Triathlon Union

Online Learning Centre Resources

Visit *Sports in Society's* Online Learning Centre at **www.mcgrawhill.ca/college/coakley** for additional information and study material for this chapter.

When, how, and to what end children play sports are issues that concern families, neighbourhoods, communities, and even national and international organizations. When sociologists study these issues, they focus on how children's experiences vary with the types of programmes or settings in which they play sports and with the cultural contexts in which they play. Since the early 1970s, the research done by sociologists and others has had a strong impact on the ways people think about and even organize youth sports. Parents, coaches, and programme administrators today are much more aware of the questions and issues that they must consider when evaluating organized youth sport programmes. Many of these people have used research findings to create and change organized programmes to better serve the interests of children.

This chapter deals with five major topics:

1. The origin and development of organized youth sports
2. Problems in adult-organized youth sports, and "made in Canada" solutions
3. Children in high-performance sports
4. Commonly asked sociological questions about youth sports, including
   - When are children ready to play organized competitive sports?
   - What are the dynamics of family relationships in connection with organized youth sports?
   - How do social factors influence youth sport experiences?
5. Trends in children's sports today, and recommendations for change

Throughout the chapter, the underlying question that guides our discussion is this: is there sufficent evidence to show that organized youth sports are worth all the time, money, and effort put into them? We asked this question as our children moved through childhood, and we continue to ask it as we talk with parents and work with coaches and policymakers who have made extensive commitments to youth sports.

ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF ORGANIZED YOUTH SPORTS

The way youth sports developed in anglophone Canada is quite similar to Britain and other countries in the Commonwealth (e.g., Australia), and to the United States. However, the development of youth sports in parts of Quebec was quite different. Also, ice hockey, particularly with the influence of the National Hockey League (NHL), has had a fairly distinct pattern of development. Canada has also led the way in efforts to resolve some widely recognized problems in adult-organized sports for children.

Modern organized sports emerged in British Public (private) Schools during the second quarter of the nineteenth century, where they became a mandatory aspect of character training (see chapter 14). By the last decade of the nineteenth century, organized sports and physical activity began to spread beyond the elite schools to inner-city children and youth. With no compulsory secondary education for poor children, this period of increasing urbanization and industrialization in Canadian cities led to the labelling of unemployed male working-class youth as a social problem. Working on the assumption that "the Devil makes work for idle hands," ministers, who had often been educated at private schools, began to establish programmes of sports and physical activity under the tenets of the "social gospel" (Howell and Lindsay, 1981).

Church leagues and the YMCA were followed by other organizations (the Boy Scouts, the Catholic Youth Organization, ethnic community clubs) that attempted to combine sports and physical activity with aspects of character and moral training. Unlike the upper-class youth who originally participated in school organized activities, and who were expected to be the future leaders in industry, the military, and the professions, character training for inner-city youth meant "respect for authority, punctuality, and the acceptance of external discipline. The virtues of following rules were explicitly emphasized, but

there were few opportunities for the self-organization and leadership [as] in the private schools" (Hall, A., et al., 1991, p. 197). Critical sociologists refer to this as a social control response, since it was developed to deal with a perceived *social problem*; some still view aspects of organized youth sports (e.g., "midnight basketball") as a form of social control (Andrews and Pitter, 1997).

By World War II, adult-organized youth sports in the form of urban playground leagues and junior ice hockey were fairly well established in anglophone Canada. In more rural areas of Quebec, the influence of the Catholic clergy resulted in a different pattern of development. Anglophones ran most of the major sport organizations in Canada, and the francophone Quebec clergy felt that anglo-controlled sports could lead to assimilation for Quebec youth,[1] especially loss of language and religion. However, sports were much too attractive to young boys to be banned, so the clergy created a separate sport system with more emphasis on pleasure and participation than power and performance. The influence of the clergy was less pronounced in the larger urban areas of Quebec, and youth participation in power and performance sports was well established (Bellefleur, 1986, 1997; Harvey, 1988). This situation in rural Quebec lasted until the Quiet Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s.

There were exceptions to these patterns of development, but this was the general cultural context in which organized youth sport programmes were developed after World War II. As the first wave of the Baby Boom generation moved through childhood during the 1950s and 1960s, organized youth sports grew dramatically. Parents entered the scene, eager to have the characters of their sons built through organized competitive sports. Fathers became coaches, managers, and league administrators. Mothers did laundry and became chauffeurs and fast-food cooks, so that their sons were always ready for practices and games.

Most programmes were for boys eight to fourteen years old and emphasized competition as preparation for future occupational success. Until the 1970s, girls' interests in sports were largely ignored. Girls were relegated to arena seats and bleachers during their brothers' games. Then the women's movement, the fitness movement, and government legislation prohibiting sex discrimination all came together to stimulate the development of new sport programmes for girls (see chapter 8). During the 1980s, these programmes grew rapidly to the point that, in some sports, girls had nearly as many opportunities as boys. However, their participation rates have remained lower than rates for boys—for reasons we discuss later in this chapter (and in chapter 8).

Participation in organized youth sports is now an accepted part of the process of growing up in Canada, especially among the middle and upper classes, where family and community resources enable adults to sponsor, organize, and administer many programmes for their children. Parents now encourage both sons and daughters to participate in sports. Some parents may question the merits of programmes in which winning seems to be more important than overall child development, while other parents look for the win-oriented programmes, hoping their children will become the winners. Some parents also encourage their children to engage in noncompetitive physical activities outside of organized programmes, and many children participate in these activities as alternatives to adult-supervised organized sports. Social scientists have begun to study alternative sports, which have become increasingly popular in the lives of children in many countries around the world (Beal, 1999; Midol and Broyer, 1995; Rinehart, 1998).

[1] Assimilation and social control are also considered, by critical sociologists, to be a part of the motivation for introducing organized sports to youth in First Nations and immigrant communities (see chapter 9).

Organized Sports and Changes Related to Society, Family, and Childhood

Beginning in the 1950s, an increasing amount of children's free time and sport participation has occurred in organized programmes supervised by adults (Adler and Adler, 1998). This astonishing growth is related to a whole series of changes that have occurred in Canadian society, in Canadian families and relationships between parents and their children, and in Canadian sports since World War II. For example, in Canadian society:

- The return of troops from the various theatres of war led to the Baby Boom, and a large population of young people in Canada from the late 1940s through the 1960s. This was complemented by a significant increase in immigration during this period (Donnelly, 2000, p. 170);
- The housing needs of young families led to a massive growth in the development of suburbs, and suburbs—with their new sport and recreation facilities—became one of the major sites of adult-organized youth involvement (Donnelly, 2000, p. 170);
- There was a period "of unprecedented prosperity in Canada," and that prosperity was used in the provision of sport and recreation facilities in the new suburbs and in urban areas (Hall, A., et al., 1991, p. 198).

In terms of family life and parent-child relations, there were other significant changes that are especially relevant for the growth of adult-organized youth sports.

First, the return of (primarily male) troops led to restructuring of work, with jobs that had been carried out by women during the war being reclaimed by men. While this helped create what was considered the "typical" family (working father, stay-at-home mother, children), it was also connected with the new interest in child development (cf., Dr. Spock), and created, for middle-class and more affluent working-class families, available time for volunteer work, which often involved children's (especially boys') activities (Donnelly, 2000. p. 170).[2]

Second, the number of families with both parents working outside the home has increased dramatically, especially since the early 1970s. This created a growing demand for organized and adult-supervised after-school and summertime programmes.[3] Organized sports are especially popular among the activities provided in these programmes, because many parents think that sports offer their children opportunities to simultaneously have fun, learn adult values, and acquire skills valued in their peer groups. In many cases in Canada, parents were more involved in the lives of their children during this period because they were concerned about giving children opportunities that had not been available during their own childhoods—in Europe during the War, or in Canada during the Depression. They promoted social mobility for their children in various ways, from education to sports (Hall, A., et al., 1991, p. 198-99).

Third, since the early 1980s, there have been significant changes in what it means to be a "good parent." Good parents, in the minds of many people today, are those who can account for the whereabouts and behaviour of their children twenty-four hours a day. This expectation

---

[2] This 1950s–60s period of the "typical" family was short-lived for some, and non-existent for many others. However, it was enshrined by a number of U.S. television series (also seen in Canada). The growth of the women's movement in the late 1960s and 1970s, combined with changes in the economy that made it more difficult for families to thrive on a single income, led to the end of this era of the "typical" family. Note also that Spock's *Baby and Child Care* was first published in 1945 and, despite many imitators, had sold 28 million copies by 1977.

[3] In a recent trend in some communities, martial arts academies have made arrangements to pick up children directly from school and to drive them to the *dojo* for lessons. This service frees parents from an additional chauffeuring responsibility.

is a new component of parenting ideology. In recent years it has led many parents to seek organized, adult-supervised programmes for their children because they emphasize the control and leadership of adult coaches, have predictable schedules, and provide parents with measurable indicators of their children's accomplishments. When their children succeed, parents can make the claim that they are meeting their responsibilities.

Fourth, there has been a growing belief that informal, child-controlled activities often provide occasions for children to cause trouble. In its extreme form, this belief leads adults to view children as threats to social order. Many adults see organized sports as ideal activities for social control, keeping active children constructively occupied, out of trouble, and under the control of adults.

Fifth, many parents have come to see the world outside the home as a dangerous place for children. They regard organized sports as safe alternatives to hanging out or playing informal activities away from home. This belief is so strong that it often persists in the face of information about coercive coaching methods, the predatory behaviour of some coaches (Connelly, 1999; Donnelly and Sparks, 1997), and occasionally high injury rates in organized youth sports (Lyman et al., 1998; Micheli, 1990).

Sixth, an increasingly educated population of parents developed a growing belief in the value of sports for health and physical fitness, and adopted the elite private school belief that sports promoted the development of important values, attitudes, and habits that would carry over into other aspects of children's lives (Hall, A., et al., 1991, p. 188). Both parents and educators developed an increasing belief in the benefits of coaching and teaching for more rapid development of skill and for safety (and as a necessity to reach the high-performance or professional levels of sports). They were supported in this by "conventional wisdom in psychology, spread not only through schools but through the popular media and self-help books, [which] emphasized the benefits of an early introduction to skill development and learning" (Hall, A., et al., 1991, p. 200).

Seventh, sports also changed during this period. High-performance sports became increasingly sophisticated and high profile, and professional sports became a major part of the entertainment industry.

The visibility of high-performance and professional sports increased people's awareness of organized sports as a part of culture. As children watch sports on television, listen to parents and friends talk about sports, and hear about the wealth and fame of popular athletes, they often become interested in playing the sports that others define as official and important. For this reason, organized sports with expert, adult coaches become attractive to many children. When children say they want to be gymnasts or soccer players, parents often look for the nearest organized programme. Therefore, organized youth sports are popular because children enjoy them and see them as activities that will gain them acceptance from peers and parents alike.

Taken together, these seven changes in society, in family and childhood, and in sports, account for much of the increased popularity of organized youth sports. Furthermore, these changes help us to understand why parents are willing to invest so many family resources into the organized sport participation of their children. Many of these programmes are quite expensive. The amount of money that parents spend on participation fees, equipment, and other things defined as necessary in many programmes has skyrocketed in recent years (Ferguson, 1999). For example, when Jay Coakley and his students interviewed the parents of elite youth hockey players who had traveled to Colorado for a major tournament in the late 1990s, they discovered that the families had spent at least US$5,000 and up to nearly US$20,000 per year to support their sons' hockey participation. As they discussed their expenses for fees, equipment, travel, and other things, many of

them shook their heads and said, "I can't believe we're spending this much, but we are."

These seven changes also help us explain other forms of parental commitment to organized sports. When children participate in these programmes, parents often become personal chauffeurs and support personnel. They serve as coaches, referees, and umpires. They launder uniforms, keep track of equipment, prepare special meals, alter work and holiday schedules, and sit in bad weather and stuffy or cold sport facilities to watch their children.

One of the negative consequences of some of these changes is that parents in working-class and lower-income households may be defined as irresponsible or careless parents because they are unable to pay the financial price for controlling their children, as wealthier parents do. Furthermore, they are not as likely to have the time and other resources needed to participate in and provide the labour for organized sport programmes. (See chapter 10 for data on sport participation and social class.) In this way, organized sports for children become linked to ideological and political issues and to debates about "family values" in the society at large.

PROBLEMS IN ADULT-ORGANIZED YOUTH SPORTS AND "MADE IN CANADA" SOLUTIONS

The growth of adult-organized children's sports in Canada between the 1970s and the 1990s—estimated at approximately 2 million children in 1978 and 2.5 million in 1991—initially coincided with an important period of social criticism. Social movements such as the women's movement, the civil rights movement, and the anti-[Vietnam] war movement adopted an anti-authoritarian stance which involved critiques of the military, education, government, and even sports. Recognition that children's sports were being run by adults in a particularly joyless way, often in exactly the same authoritarian manner as adult high-performance and professional sports, made children's sports a target of criticism. In democratic terms, there was also a recognition that if there were positive aspects of participation in sports—ranging from benefits to physical and mental health to the pleasures of participation—then such benefits should be available to all children.

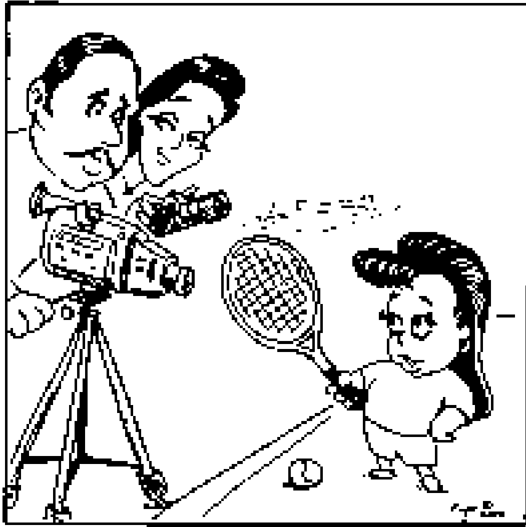
Michael Smith, who taught at York University, identified four assumptions that appeared to dominate children's organized programmes in the early 1970s (1975, p. ix-x):

- Children play sports to entertain adults.
- Games and sports for kids must be organized and controlled by adults if they are to be of real value.
- Kids are miniature adults.
- The real value in sports lies in learning to be a winner, people can be divided into winners and losers, and sport[s are vehicles] to make sure you (or your kids) end up in the right group.

Each of these four assumptions is considered in more detail here, together with the steps taken in Canada in an attempt to solve the issues. It is striking, however, to note the extent to which many of these issues persist over a quarter of a century later.

Assumption 1: Children Play Sports to Entertain Adults

This is an ongoing issue and is clearly a double-edged sword. In our ongoing research, many young athletes that we have talked with expect their parents to attend every game or competition, and feel disappointed or neglected if they are not there. However, a few told us that they are sometimes embarrassed by one or both of their parents, who yell at them and at referees, coaches, and other players, especially when the parents say inappropriate things. A few others told us that the constant presence of one or more parents, even at practices, became a problem as they grew older and wanted to have time with



"Have you ever considered that maybe I'd like this to remain a repressed childhood memory?"

Many children who play sports do not enjoy videotapes of their games, meets, and matches. They would rather remember their experiences in their own terms. Too often, the tapes are used to identify mistakes and make youth sports more important than children want them to be.

friends away from their parents. And others noted that their parents (one or both) were hypercritical or judgmental, and used their presence at competitions, and sometimes practices, to generate a list of mistakes made by the athlete, which would all be pointed out to the athletes on their way home.

Why do parents attend their children's games? Certainly, practices are sometimes seen as a "babysitting" opportunity by parents, who may use them to carry out some errands or chores, but attendance at community and club-level games and competitions has become a ritual.[4] By attending, parents are able to demonstrate to other parents and to their children that they are "good" parents (see preceding section on new demands on parents) who are prepared to support their children's activities and spend "quality time" with their children. They are also able to "look out" for their children, to ensure their safety and protect them from potential unfairness (see the section, "Major Trends in Youth Sports Today," later in this chapter). Most will cheer for their children and/or their child's team, and they have the opportunity to socialize with other parents. There is nothing wrong with this behaviour—it is a social occasion for parents who meet in the bleachers or the stands, or line their lawn chairs along the touch line, but it is not necessarily entertaining. There may be little pleasure or excitement in watching the ninth game of "beehive" soccer for the season, although most parents agree that the children "look cute."

But while there are positive and supportive aspects to the behaviour, there are also some mixed messages being sent, and some alternatives to consider.

First, in a society increasingly concerned about sedentary behaviour, the messages implicit in parents sitting down to watch their children play are significant. Is participation just for children? This is less an issue for parents who do participate in sports, and/or who spend time playing with their children. Parents' games, or parents' exercise programmes (e.g., a brisk hike around the playing fields) during the children's game may be healthy alternatives for organizers of children's sports to consider.

Second, watching your child is supportive, but it is not necessarily "quality time" since there is little time to interact. A recent report from the American Academy of Pediatrics provides an estimate that "by the time they are six years old, the average child will have spent more time watching television than they will talking to their fathers during their entire lifetimes" (Kesterton, 2002, p. A24). We have heard both positive and negative reports from young athletes about "quality time." Looking back, some see the time

[4] This is less the case for interschool sports, which are often played during working hours.

spent with one or both parents travelling to and from competitions, or in informal practices and pick-up games together, as enormously rich, fun, and rewarding time. Others grew to dread those times, which they remember as endlessly directive and judgmental.

Third, we wonder how children would feel if their parents were always present, sitting in lawn chairs around the school playground at recess, or standing at the back of the classroom. Time spent with children is extremely important; time spent watching children while they are doing something else may be less so, and some parents are now beginning to question whether they should be at every possible occasion in their children's lives.

Sometimes I think that by being so involved in our kids' sports, we dilute their experience. After all, it's not *their* win, it's *our* win. Do all the valuable lessons—losing, striking out, missing the winning shot—have the same impact when Mom and Dad are there to immediately say it's okay?…As parents, we know that at some point we need to make it *their* game, *their* recital, *their* grades. If we share every element of their lives, we're cheating them out of part of it.…As hard as it is to risk missing her first home run, or not being there to comfort him after the missed foul shot, at some point we need to take ourselves out of their ball game. Because that is what good parents do.

—(Keri, 2000, p. 55)

Assumption 2: Games and Sports for Kids Must Be Organized and Controlled by Adults If They Are to Be of Real Value

Adults have a number of appropriate concerns about children's informal and/or unsupervised play. They are concerned about safety and want to protect children from bullying and accidents (see section, "Major Trends in Youth Sports Today," later in this chapter). They are concerned about instruction—that children will learn sport skills in an appropriate and safe manner. (After all, who would want their children to learn to swim without supervision and instruction?) And they hope that their children will receive messages about character development as a result of their participation.

However, since the early 1970s, many critics of adult-organized sports for children have agreed with Bill L'Heureux, then a professor at the University of Western Ontario: "The only problem with kids' sports is adults." Two major solutions to this problem have usually been offered: *ban the adults* or *educate the adults*, although other alternatives have also been recommended.

Proposals to *ban adults* from children's games may be traced to Devereaux (1976), and to a somewhat romanticized view of children's play that does not take into account the fact that supervision and guidance may sometimes be appropriate and necessary. Devereaux's film, *Two Ball Games* (1976), provides a direct and unfavourable comparison between an informal game of baseball in a public park and a Little League game. His argument, that adult involvement removes both fun and important educational experiences from children's play, was widely supported. Jay Coakley, who has carried out the most systematic comparison between the two variations of children's sports (see the Reflect on Sports box, "Different Experiences: Informal Player-Controlled Sports versus Organized, Adult-Controlled Sports," pp. 137–138) points out that each has advantages and disadvantages.

Apart from pick-up ball hockey and basketball games played in driveways and neighbourhood streets and playgrounds, there seem to be fewer and fewer opportunities for children to interact, learn, and play sports in contexts other

than those directly supervised by adults. These opportunities have become increasingly rare, at least for middle-class children, since the 1970s (cf., Elkind, 1981), with one very obvious exception: so-called "alternative sports."

Alternative sports also trace their origins to the democratizing movements of the 1960s and 1970s. They emerged as "new games" (e.g., earth ball) in the U.S. (cf., Fluegelman, 1976) and as "cooperative games" (e.g., parachute games) in Canada (Orlick, 1978), countercultural alternatives to what were seen as the damaging effects of competition. Many of these activities have become a standard part of the physical education curriculum in elementary schools in Canada, and are often played in camps and daycare centres. Other alternative sports were adapted, created, or developed by teenagers and young adults: surfing, ultimate Frisbee, freestyle skiing, skateboarding, and, more recently, windsurfing, snowboarding, and mountain biking. "The playful and expressive qualities of these activities were accentuated precisely because the dominant sport forms lacked such characteristics and seemed overly rationalized, technologized, and bureaucratized" (Donnelly, 1988, p. 74). Of course, some of these activities have lost some of their original "alternative" meaning and have been incorporated, at least in part, by the dominant sport forms they originally opposed (e.g., snowboarding at the Olympic Games). But, for the most part, they retain the characteristics of informal, player-controlled games—action, personal involvement, and the opportunity to reaffirm friendships. (See the section on alternative sports in "Major Trends in Youth Sports Today," later in this chapter.)

The majority of children enjoy their participation in adult-organized sports, and proposals to ban adults were never pursued. However, the problems remained, and proposals to educate adults came to be seen as a more realistic alternative to banning adults. In addition to the points made above about when it is appropriate to have adult supervision and instruction, it also became apparent that the structures of adult-organized children's sports were too well-established to dismantle them easily. Once this was recognized, academics, educators, and other policymakers set about devising ways of providing appropriate information to adults involved in youth sport programmes. It should be pointed out that Canada was among the first countries to formally recognize that problems existed, and to start to develop policies and procedures for their resolution. Several national conferences in the 1970s began to identify problems with adult-organized youth sports, and made a number of recommendations about adult involvement (Orlick and Botterill, 1975, pp. 161–63, 173–75).

One of the most significant "made in Canada" solutions was the development of coaching education. The Coaching Association of Canada (CAC) was formed in 1971 during a significant period of development in Canadian sports as the country geared up to host the 1976 Montreal Olympic Games. Its establishment coincided with the emerging critique of children's organized sport programmes, and the CAC, with its mission to "enhance the experiences of all Canadian athletes through quality coaching" (www.coach.ca), was seen as a key to resolving some of the problems. The National Coaching Certification Programme (NCCP), started by the CAC in 1974, established five levels of accomplishment in coaching—Level 1 (novice) to Level 5 (national)—and provided training programmes at each level based on theoretical, technical, and practical elements of coaching. For the purposes of children's sports, the parent volunteers who formed the backbone of children's organized sports programmes, were encouraged to achieve at least NCCP Level 1 certification. After struggling with a number of grandparenting issues (e.g., should a coach who has been coaching for fifteen years be obliged to take a novice coaching course), the certification became more and more accepted, recommendations to enrol for the courses became stronger,

and holding NCCP Level 1 has now become mandatory for volunteer coaches in many youth sport organizations. Certification, especially if the course is well run, ensures that coaches have at least a minimal knowledge about medical, physiological, psychological, and social issues regarding child development and participation. Some coaches return to their old habits once they have achieved certification, and attempts to evaluate or mandate continuing education for coaches in a volunteer system are quite problematic. However, anecdotal reports suggest that the increasing numbers of women coaches in children's sport programmes are benefiting more than males from the certification programmes.

Various programmes and publications were developed to further the education of parents and coaches: for example, Taylor's *How to Be an Effective Coach* (1975); Orlick and Botterill's widely read *Every Kid Can Win* (1975); the Canadian Council on Children and Youth's extremely popular pamphlet and poster series, "Fair Play Codes for Children in Sport" (1979), which listed appropriate behaviour for all involved in children's sports—parents, coaches, officials, spectators, and players; Spink's *Give Your Kids a Sporting Chance* (1988); and the Bylsmas' *So Your Son Wants to Play in the NHL?* (1998), which attempted to bring a note of caution to parents with NHL ambitions for their sons. However, there have also been a number of books during this same period of time that have a somewhat different educational purpose: to teach parents how to turn their children into professional or Olympic athletes (e.g., Bompa, 2000; Duran, 2002; Petkevich, 1989).

The second most significant "made in Canada" solution to educating adults, and resolving some of the issues involved in adult-organized sports for children, was the re-invention of "house leagues." Although minor hockey had been organized before the 1970s into house leagues and the more elite "travel leagues," the house leagues became a target of criticism in the early 1970s. Conducting what was called "change agent research," Dick Moriarty and Jim Duthie at the University of Windsor videotaped parents and coaches at house-league hockey games, then interviewed those parents and coaches about the values of youth sports and confronted them with the often contradictory videotape evidence. At the same time, they began to identify what we now call "best practices" to ensure that children have quality experiences in youth sports: making sure that teams were created with relatively equal levels of skill (i.e., make sure that one or two teams do not draft all the best players), ensuring that all players have approximately equal amounts of playing time (recognizing that all parents pay the same registration fee to have their children play in a league, and that children do not learn skills when they are sitting on the bench), and encouraging leagues to begin to emphasize skill development and to de-emphasize the outcome of games.

The Windsor and Essex County Leagues in southwestern Ontario began to introduce these changes in hockey, and the changes slowly began to spread across Canada and to other sports. Baseball, basketball, lacrosse, and soccer introduced this new concept of house leagues, emphasizing enjoyment and activity for young players. The change has not been a complete success. Anecdotal evidence suggests that some house-league coaches attempt to manipulate the player draft or give their best players more playing time (especially during playoffs and finals), and our observations of house-league parents suggests that some do not behave as well as might be expected. However, in general, the changes have greatly improved the involvement and experience of less-talented players, and the philosophy has even spread to individual sports. There are now many recreational programmes in swimming, skating, martial arts, gymnastics, and so on, which encourage skill learning and fun rather than competition.

Another "made in Canada" solution to educating adults emerged during the 1980s when there was a massive decline in participation by

boys in hockey. Between 1983 and 1989, boys' registration declined 17.4 percent.[5] The decline was even more marked in Quebec where registrations dropped by 47 percent between 1974 and 1990, from a high of 111,960 to a low of 57,340 (Scanlan, 2002). While there were many reasons for the decline (e.g., the cost of hockey, demographic changes in Canadian society), a growing concern of parents was violence and the related fear of injury.[6] The response in Quebec was to begin to introduce "fair play" leagues (leagues that reward fair play, by awarding additional points for fewer penalties, and punish illegal play) and non-contact leagues. These forms of hockey have also spread across Canada. The solution to this issue started with "educated" parents, concerned about their children's safety, but led to the education of other parents and adults involved in organizing youth hockey. The safety issues have also led to concerns about skill development—especially recognition of the declining number of Canadian players in the NHL, and the fact that few Canadian players are among the scoring leaders in the NHL. The Open Ice Summit, chaired by Wayne Gretzky in Toronto in 1998, addressed the issue of practice time versus competition, and its recommendations are slowly leading to more emphasis on skill development in minor hockey.

Little leagues too often make little men out of little boys.
—Dick Beddoes, sportswriter, TV Ontario's *Speaking Out* (1978)

Finally, and most recently, adults who organize sports in Canada (and especially hockey) have had to respond to two major child sexual abuse crises: the Graham James case and the Maple Leaf Gardens scandal (sexual abuse and sexual harassment in sports are discussed in more detail in chapter 7). Police checks and a number of educational programmes (e.g., STOP, "Speak Out," and "Respect" programmes) have been developed in response to this problem.

Educating the adults is an ongoing issue in children's sports programmes. The steps that have been taken in Canada have helped to ameliorate some of the problems, but anyone who follows children's sports is aware that we have a long way to go. A number of children's sport organizations have introduced parent education programmes, have encouraged parents to sign agreements and charters regarding their behaviour, and have even gone so far as to ban parents from hockey arenas, figure skating practices, and so on. But still there are problems. In hockey, 10,000 referees quit every year in Canada (one-third the total number of referees), partly as a result of the abuse received from parents, coaches, and players.[7]

Assumption 3: Kids Are Miniature Adults

Problems occur when adults fail to take into account that the athletes involved at this level of sports are children. Some problems are associated with the fact that children are smaller and not as strong as adults; others result when adults fail to consider children's stage of cognitive and physical development. Many of these problems are addressed in the upcoming section on "Children in High-Performance Sports," but two points are worth considering here.

[5] A small part of this loss was taken up by girls, whose registration in hockey increased 400 percent between 1989 and 1999 (from 10,000 to 40,000).

[6] The 1974 McMurtry Report in Ontario highlighted the growing concerns about violence in the game. As a result of all of these changes, and because of a massive increase in girls' participation, soccer passed hockey as the sport with the highest participation rate in Canada in 1990 (Scanlan, 2002).

[7] In Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, "[T]he dropout rate among officials is . . . one third of the national average," as a result of the introduction of a fair play league (Scanlan, 2002, p. 256).

First, how are children treated during their participation? Is there enough quality practice time to develop the skills necessary to participate? (Does hockey have too many competitions and too little practice? Does diving have too much practice and not enough competitions?) Do referees see educating children about the rules of the game (written and unwritten) as a part of their duties? Do league and sport administrators try to deal fairly with children with regard to transfers, sanctions, appeals, and so on, while also having to deal with their parents? Do coaches see it as their task to yell criticism about the mistakes young players invariably make, or to be supportive and explain how mistakes can be rectified? And do parents know that it is inappropriate to yell the same types of things at children's games as they do at Calgary Stampeders or Montreal Canadiens games?

Second, when children are playing, are the equipment and rules adapted to their age and ability levels? Are they playing with a small-size soccer ball or basketball? Is the net lower and the basket bigger than it is for adults in basketball? Are goalies in hockey and soccer expected to protect the same size goals as adults? Is the playing area smaller to encourage more action and involvement? Many creative changes in equipment and playing areas have been made for children, but more need to be made. With regard to rules, are children playing by the same rules as adults, and is this appropriate? The answer will vary depending on the sport and the level of competition, and some sports have been more creative than others here. For example, baseball created T-ball to overcome the problem of young children pitching and hitting pitched balls, introduced pitching machines into games, and is currently working on a number of modified and more active forms of baseball to attract participants at a time of declining registrations in the sport.[8]

[8] These issues of adaptation can be controversial, and some adults argue that children need to play with full-size equipment and formal rules in order to become used to them.

Assumption 4: The Real Value in Sports Lies in Learning to Be a Winner, People Can Be Divided into Winners and Losers, and Sport[s Are Vehicles] to Make Sure You (or Your Kids) End Up in the Right Group

Michael Smith's final assumption points to a struggle that is still alive in the field of children's sports and physical activity. On one side of the struggle, there are those, often educators, who advocate children's involvement in a variety of healthy forms of physical activity because of the established mental, physical, and social benefits that result. They advocate both competitive and non-competitive forms of activity, but sometimes emphasize the non-competitive and cooperative forms of activity because of the social benefits of cooperation (cf., Kohn, 1992). They also point out the "exclusive" nature of competition and the disturbing dropout rate in many competitive organized sports. As Canadian sport psychologists Terry Orlick of the University of Ottawa and Cal Botterill of the University of Winnipeg point out: "It's ridiculous to promote participation on the one hand, and then to cut interested individuals from the team, or to in any way limit their participation" (1975, p. 17). If children are being cut from programmes because of their lack of size or skills (instead of being taught those skills), and no alternatives are available, participation is reduced.

On the other side of the struggle, there are those who support the view that "people can be divided into winners and losers" and who want their children to participate in organized competitive sports because they believe it will give them a competitive advantage in life. Primary school teachers often hear from such parents advocating this view when they attempt to run cooperative educational programmes in their classrooms; and some analysts have argued that the growth in community sports, especially for younger males, occurred precisely because professional educators tended to discourage or de-emphasize competition in primary schools, and

to play down the intensity of interschool competitions in high school.

Both sides in this struggle have seen some successes and failures. On the participation side, the development of house leagues and the widespread use of cooperative games have helped to promote participation; and interschool sports have, in general, managed to maintain an emphasis on participation and education rather than just competition. However, in the mid-1970s, many municipal Parks and Recreation Departments in Canada stopped organizing competitive sport programmes, ostensibly because of the criticism of and problems in such programmes, but cutting them was also a cost-saving move for municipalities. The loss of these low-cost opportunities to participate (which still exist in a number of U.S. cities) forced non-school-organized competitive sports for children into the non-profit and private sectors, where it became more difficult to control the problems that existed. Organized competitive sport programmes emphasizing competition are now an important part of most communities in Canada, and the introduction of house leagues has resulted in the provision of a wide range of participation and competition opportunities. But the problems outlined above still exist at the competitive levels—poor coaching, problem parents, high injury rates, and so on. As noted in the Reflect on Sports box, "Informal, Player-Controlled Sports versus Organized, Adult-Controlled Sports" on pp. 137–138, children themselves often de-emphasize competition, both in alternative sports and in other informal, player-controlled sports.

CHILDREN IN HIGH-PERFORMANCE SPORTS

At the Montreal Olympic Games in 1976, a tiny 14-year-old Romanian gymnast named Nadia Comaneci completed a number of amazing routines and was awarded the first ("perfect") scores of 10.0 ever recorded in the sport. She, and the large number of medals that were won by East German athletes, drew attention in the West to the sport system that had been developed in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. Doug Gilbert (1976), a sportswriter for the *Montreal Gazette*, described the system:

- Early exposure of children to physical education and a wide range of physical activities
- A broad base of participants in sports and physical activity
- Early identification of athletic talent
- Intensive and specialized training for those identified

East European and Cuban success in Montreal, combined with Canada's hurt pride as the first Olympic host not to win a gold medal and other political factors, triggered interest in the new system. Sport scientists began to conduct research into talent prediction and early specialization in sports, and sport organizations began to recruit younger and younger athletes. The early success of the female gymnasts, and victories for young female athletes in sports such as figure skating and swimming, provided an additional incentive for early involvement and specialization. Such a system was not completely new to Canada since it existed to some extent in hockey, but early intensive involvement was new to most other sports, and problems began to emerge.

By the early 1980s, commentators such as Hart Cantelon of Queen's University (1981) were beginning to identify the new participants as "child athletic workers," and their participation as "child labour," and as a social problem. Following Cantelon's lead, in 1985, Peter Donnelly began collecting data on these problems. He conducted a series of retrospective interviews with retired high-performance athletes in Canada. The 45 former athletes (16 male, 29 female) represented a variety of sports and claimed to have had successful careers; all had intensive involvement in the sport during their childhood and adolescence; all were given every opportunity to address both positive and negative aspects of their careers; and

each spent approximately ten times more time on the negative than the positive.

They reported a variety of problems that they connected directly to their early intensive involvement and specialization. These included:

- Family concerns—problems such as sibling rivalry and parental pressure
- Social relationships—missed important occasions and experiences during childhood and adolescence
- Coach-athlete relationships—authoritarian and abusive (emotional, physical, sexual) relationships, especially in male coach/female athlete relationships
- Educational concerns—any achievements were earned in spite of the sport and school systems, not because of them
- Physical and psychological problems—injuries, stress, and burnout
- Drug and dietary problems—some experiences of drug use, widespread concern about eating disorders
- Retirement—widespread adjustment difficulties, especially when retirement was not voluntary

These findings have been confirmed by additional informal interviews in Canada (including athletes who had heard or read about the research and approached Donnelly with their own stories) and other countries that adopted the early involvement and specialization model, and have been supplemented by reports in more popular sources (e.g., Ryan, 1995).

Donnelly also asked the former athletes whether they would repeat their careers (10 percent said no, and 65 percent gave a qualified yes—knowing what they know now) and whether they would permit their own children to become involved in intensive training in their sport (40 percent said no, and the 60 percent who said yes suggested that their experiences and knowledge would help them to protect their own children from the problems and provide them with a more positive experience).

Last summer I was skating five hours a day, five days a week. I really wanted to try something else. I just . . . got sick of it. My parents . . . felt bad because I'd spent so much time and money on it.

—Megan, age 13, Grosse Point Woods, MI (1999)

As a result of these types of critiques, and especially following an intensive period of criticism about the U.S. women's gymnastics team (their youth, tiny bodies, and stress fractures gave rise to numerous concerns about eating disorders) following the 1992 Barcelona Olympic Games, three sport organizations made rule changes. The Women's Tennis Association (WTA) raised the age for turning professional to sixteen because of the well-publicized burnout of young players such as Tracy Austin, Jennifer Capriati, and Andrea Jaeger; and both women's gymnastics and women's figure skating organizations raised the minimum age for international competition to sixteen. However, we argue that the new age limits are only token changes, and, particularly in gymnastics and figure skating, they have done little to resolve the problems, and may even have made them worse. Extending the age of international competition without changing judging criteria, or introducing any regulations about health, nutrition, or bone density, just forces adolescent girls to attempt to maintain a pre-pubescent body type until they are even older.

Canadian children from all backgrounds, but now most commonly from the middle classes, who have shown talent in hockey, swimming, figure skating, tennis, gymnastics, and so on—all the sports that are invested in an early specialization developmental track—may experience the types of problems outlined above. Gabriela Tymowski, of the University of New Brunswick, has also begun to recognize these problems in recent research (2001a, 2001b). Solving the problems created by early intensive involvement and

REFLECT ON SPORTS — Solving the Problems in Children's High-Performance Sports

There are four possible resolutions to the challenges involved in nurturing the talent of highly talented children *and* assuring their all-round healthy development. Treat the problems as:

- An educational issue
- A children's rights issue
- A child labour issue
- A child welfare issue

Each of these has both advantages and disadvantages in attempting to resolve the problems for children in high-performance sports.

1. *Education:* This approach involves the education of all those adults involved in the lives of elite child athletes about child development issues and maintaining a balance in children's lives. Education is the approach most favoured by sport organizations: it is their response to the widespread criticism of problems in their sports (of which they are well aware), but education is also a response that they are able to control. It also slows the pace of any changes, thus allowing the status quo, with which all those involved (except the children and their parents) are familiar, to continue. Education is a slow process with which to affect social change. Thus, while education is necessary, it does not resolve the problems currently being experienced by many young people in the system. However, education has brought about some changes. For example, the Canadian women's gymnastics team now boasts that it is the oldest, tallest, and heaviest team in world competition, and that that is preferable to winning medals with "anorexic children."
2. *Children's rights:* The children's rights approach forms a bridge between the educational and the following legal responses to the problems. Pat Galasso, who was dean of physical education at the University of Windsor during the period of "change agent research" noted previously, produced one of the first children's rights charters in sports. He proposed (1988, pp. 334–36) that children in sports should have:
   - The right to self-determination
   - The right to knowledge
   - The right to be protected from abuse
   - The right to try out for a team or position
   - The right to have properly qualified instruction and leadership
   - The right to be involved in an environment where opportunity for the development of self-respect, and to be treated with respect, is imperative

   While these rights are not exclusive to high-performance sports, enjoyment of these rights would mean a significant change in the structure of sports at that level. Charters only have moral rather than legal standing and therefore are related more to education and political will. However, the International Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) does provide a legally binding constraint on signatory governments (including Canada and 187 other nations). At least eighteen of the forty-one articles in the convention touch on issues related to sport and physical activity participation, and identify rights that are occasionally or routinely violated in children's high-performance sports (Kidd and Donnelly, 1999). The convention provides a legal means to address violations, and convention challenges remain an unexplored approach in pursuing children's rights in sports.
3. *Child labour:* Several Canadian researchers have argued that children's involvement in high-performance sports is a child labour issue, and that the protections invoked by the laws governing workers and the workplace should be available to young athletes. For example, Beamish and Borowy (1988) argued that the agreement between athletes who qualify for the Athlete Assistance Programme and Sport Canada has all of the characteristics of a labour contract. Bart McGuire, CEO of the WTA, acknowledged the concerns about some young professionals: "If you have both parents who have given up their jobs and are living off the earnings of a player on the tour, the pressure gets

Continued

REFLECT ON SPORTS: Solving the Problems in Children's High-Performance Sports continued

to be a concern.…Implicit in the relationship is the fact that if you don't practice for a few days, we don't eat" (cited by Brunt, 1999, p. S1). Since a number of adults (e.g., coaches, medical staff) may depend on the labour and income of young athletes for their livelihood, they may have more of a vested interest in the athlete's performance than in his/her healthy development. However, while children may be earning incomes, and playing in highly work-like environments, the legal system has been slow to adapt to the rapid changes that have occurred in sports, and this is still an area in which it is possible for authorities to deny that children are working. Thus, there are few protections in the form of limits on training time or the number of competitions, enforcement of the time that athletes devote to compulsory education, securing and investing their incomes, or access to health and safety regulations that govern workers and employers in the workplace.

4. *Child welfare:* Another possible legal avenue to pursue is child welfare laws, which have been described as more discretionary than child labour laws. As Tenebaum noted, "When we can reasonably foresee that others will be affected by our actions the law says that we owe them a "duty of care" in terms of how we ought to behave..." (1996, p. 25). This "duty of care" is considerably higher for children because of their special need for attention and protection. Child welfare laws are intended to protect children from physical harm, negligence, sexual molestation, emotional harm, and abuse, and to ensure that they receive appropriate medical care. All of these protections have been violated in the case of children in high-performance sports. However, the agencies intended to ensure child welfare are usually so overworked with respect to, for example, child abuse, that they are not likely to be eager to investigate complaints involving sports.

From the four possible approaches to resolving the problems for children in high-performance sports, only the educational approach is currently in play—backed up to some extent by growing criticism of the problems and the moral force of children's rights. Perhaps the threat of legal action, internationally as a convention challenge, or provincially in terms of child labour or child welfare violations, would be enough to speed up the changes being brought about by education. However, that seems unlikely while adults continue to profit from child athletes, and more direct legal action may be necessary.

We think that it is probably best not to think of these as choices, but as a four-pronged attack on the problems. We also think that national sport organizations need to begin to make special provisions for children who are involved in high-performance sports. *What do you think?*

---

specialization raises a question of balance. (See the Reflect on Sports box, "Solving the Problems in Children's High-Performance Sports," above.) But that balance is difficult when we consider all of the adults who may have a vested interest in a child's success in sports—parents, coaches, sport administrators, educators, sport scientists, sports medicine staff, agents, and even media personnel (Donnelly, 1997). For some of these individuals, their careers and incomes may depend on a child's success, and there are even cases of parents who have taken out a second mortgage in order to finance their talented child's sport development. Parents, coaches, and other interested parties are concerned that an overemphasis on the child having a "normal" life may lead to failure to fully develop his/her talent (and miss a chance at the Olympics and/or a career as a highly paid professional athlete), but it is apparent that an overemphasis on the talent can also lead to a variety of

problems, from exploitation to burnout. It is precisely this lack of balance that led Donnelly (1993) to suggest that Canadian national team athletes were the survivors, rather than the products, of our high-performance development system, and that we had to find a way to stop "sacrific[ing] children on the altar of international and professional sport success" (p. 120).

SOCIOLOGICAL QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUTH SPORTS

When Are Children Ready to Play Organized Competitive Sports?

Parents ask readiness questions often. They wonder: should they sign their three-year-olds up for T-ball teams, put their five-year-olds on swim teams, and let their eight-year-olds participate in provincial skating competitions? Some want to give their children an early start on an imagined path to athletic glory; others do not want their children to fall behind peers in skills development; still others just want their children to have healthy fun and feel good about their bodies.

Answers to readiness questions are available in the various sub-disciplines of physical education and kinesiology, motor learning, exercise physiology, psychology, and sociology. When sociologists respond to readiness questions, their answers often reflect interactionist research carried out by those concerned with social development during childhood. This work suggests that at about eight years of age children begin to develop the cognitive and social abilities they need to fully understand the complex social relationships involved in most competitive sports. These abilities are not fully developed until about twelve years of age for most children.

Anyone who has ever watched two teams of seven-year-old soccer players knows about these developmental issues. Most children younger than twelve play what we call "beehive soccer": after the opening kick, there are twenty bodies and forty legs surrounding the ball, and they follow the ball around the playing field like a swarm of bees following its queen. Everyone is out of position, and all the players usually stay that way for the entire game. Meanwhile, the coaches and parents loudly plead with them to "Stay in position!" and "Get back where you belong!"

However, determining where you belong in most sports is difficult. Positions change, depending on the placement of teammates and opponents relative to the location of the ball. Understanding the concept of position requires the ability to do three things simultaneously: (1) mentally visualize the ever-changing placements of teammates and opponents over the entire field, (2) assess their relationships to each other and to the ball, and (3) then decide where you belong. The ability to think through these three things and accurately determine where you should be on the field develops gradually in connection with social experience and individual maturation.

Parents and coaches often are frustrated when children fail to understand positions and follow strategies. When adults do not know about cognitive and social development during childhood, they may accuse preteen children who are out of position of not thinking or trying hard enough, or of having a bad attitude. This frustrates children who *are* thinking and trying as best they can at their stage of development. Their attitude is *not* the issue.

"Beehive soccer" and its equivalents in other sports can be avoided in two ways. *First*, the actual games children play can be altered to focus on skills and expression, rather than competition and team strategies. In other words, games can be revised to fit the children's needs and abilities (Morris and Stiehl, 1989; Orlick, 1978; Torbert, 2000). This is a preferred strategy. *Second*, children can be systematically conditioned to respond in certain ways to certain situations during competitive games and matches. This requires practices during which coaches create various game situations and then have each player rehearse individual tactical responses to each

situation. Doing this with every player for even a few basic strategies is very tedious. It may win games, but it is not a preferred strategy, because it often destroys much of the action and personal involvement that children value in sports. When action is destroyed, it causes some children to wonder if sports are worth their time and effort.

Children are not born with the ability to compete or cooperate with others, nor are they born able to mentally visualize complex sets of social relationships between teammates and opponents. They must learn these things, and the learning depends on a combination of social experience and the development of abstract thinking and interpersonal abilities. This learning cannot be forced. It occurs only as children move from a stage in which they see the world from their own limited viewpoint to a stage in which they can see the world from third-party perspectives. A third-party perspective is one that goes beyond their own views and the view of any other person they know (Donnelly, 2002). Third-party perspectives gradually emerge between the ages of eight and twelve years in most children. Therefore, organized sports for preteens should be controlled in ways that accommodate this gradually emerging ability; the highest emphasis should be on developing physical skills and basic cooperation. After all, children must learn to cooperate before they can compete with one another in positive ways. If they do not know how to cooperate, competitions can become nasty and brutish.

Finally, those of us who ask the question "When should children play organized competitive sports?" generally live in cultures in which scientific approaches to childhood development are popular, and people have the time and resources to organize children's activities. Youth sports are a luxury. They cost money and take time; therefore, many people cannot afford them. This is true even in wealthy countries among families with few resources. Many children around the world simply include movement and physical play in their lives as they learn how to be boys or girls in their cultures and learn to fit into class and occupational structures. When to begin organized sports is not an issue for them or their parents. How, where, when, and what they play are seriously constrained by the material conditions of their lives. As we think about organized youth sports, it is important to be aware of poverty within and between societies.

What Are the Dynamics of Family Relationships in Connection with Organized Youth Sports?

Organized youth sports require time, money, and organizational skills, and these usually come from parents. Therefore, playing organized sports is often a family affair; however, few sociologists have carried out research on how youth sport participation affects family relationships.

Anecdotal information indicates that youth sports serve as sites for bringing family members together in supportive ways. However, problems do occur. Parents may act in ways that damage their relationships with their children, and they may become so emotionally involved with sports that they put pressure on their children or fail to see that their children perceive their encouragement as pressure. When children feel pressure in either of these forms, they face a triple dilemma: (1) if they quit sports, they fear that the parents may withdraw support and attention; (2) if they play sports but do not perform well, they fear the parents will criticize them; (3) if they perform well, they fear they will be treated like "little pros" instead of children.

Studies by Coakley (2001), Donnelly (1993), and Kay (2000) all highlight the stresses experienced by parents and siblings in families where at least one of the children is involved in sports at a high-performance level. When a great deal of the family's time and resources are directed to the sport participation of one individual, it can become all-consuming, and Kay (2001) noted that, in the U.K., the divorce rate in such families was higher than the national average.

There is an interesting parental division of labour associated with youth sports. Mothers provide a wide range of off-the-field support, while fathers do the coaching and league administration. (M. MacNeill)

Organized youth sports have an impact on families and family relationships in other ways as well. Studies by Janet Chafetz and Joe Kotarba (1999) in the United States and Shona Thompson (1999a,b) in Australia highlight the fact that organized sport programmes for children could not exist without the volunteer labour of parents, especially mothers. Their research shows that mothers drive children to practices and games, fix meals at convenient times, launder dirty training clothes and uniforms, and make sure equipment is ready. Mothers raise funds for teams and leagues. They purchase, prepare, and serve food during road trips and at postgame get-togethers. They form and serve on committees that supervise off-the-field social activities and make phone calls about schedules and schedule changes. They manage the activities of brothers and sisters who do not play in the programmes, and they provide emotional support for their child-athletes when they play poorly or when coaches or fathers criticize how they play. Fathers also provide labour, but it is devoted primarily to on-the-field and administrative matters, such as coaching, field maintenance, and league administration (although mothers increasingly are taking on these tasks as well).

The analysis in both these studies focuses on the extent to which parent labour in organized youth sports reproduces a gendered division of labour in the family and the community, as well as in the minds of the children, especially the boys who play organized sports. The studies highlight the labour of mothers because this topic has been widely ignored by many who study sports in society. It is now important to build on this research and delve more deeply into the family dynamics that exist in connection with youth sports.

How Do Social Factors Influence Youth Sport Experiences?

Children make choices about playing sports, but they have little control over the context in which they make their choices. Many factors, including parents, peers, and the general social

and cultural context in which they live, influence the alternatives from which they choose and how they define and give meaning to their choices. For example, children from low-income, inner-city backgrounds generally have fewer sport participation opportunities than other children have. Children with able bodies have more opportunities and receive more encouragement to play sports than do children with a disability. Choosing to play a contact sport, such as football, is seen by most people around the world to be more appropriate for boys than for girls. Boys who want to figure skate generally do not receive the same encouragement from peers as girls receive. When African Canadian boys choose to play certain sports, many people in Canada are more likely to identify them in terms of their sport participation than in terms of their other characteristics, such as academic achievements.

None of these statements is earthshaking. People know these things. They know that, as children make sport choices and give meaning to their sport experiences, they and the people around them are influenced by the prevailing cultural beliefs about age, gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity, ability and disability, and social class. This is how social forces influence youth sport experiences.

For example, research shows that sport choices and experiences are influenced by dominant definitions of gender in society. These definitions influence early childhood experiences when it comes to physical activities (White et al., 1992). In the United States, research has shown that fathers play with their sons more often and in more physically active ways than they play with their daughters. Furthermore, the physical activity messages that most young boys receive differ from the messages many young girls receive, both inside and outside family settings (Beal, 1994; Greendorfer, 1993; Hargreaves, 1994; Hasbrook, 1999; Lenskyj, 1986; Nelson, 1991).

One of the results of these messages is that, before most children take their first physical education class or play their first organized sport, they have clear ideas about their physical skills and potential. Boys are more likely to see themselves as being physically skilled than girls are, even though measurable gender differences in actual skill levels are small or nonexistent (Nelson, 1990, p. 9). Boys are more likely than girls to *think* they are better than they actually are when it comes to sport skills. This has an effect on their self-confidence and their willingness to use and test their bodies in active ways and voluntarily participate in physical activities. Girls learn to minimize the physical space they occupy, sexualize their bodies through modifying their appearance and movement, and accept the notion that boys are physically superior to them. At the same time, boys learn to present themselves as physically big and strong, to act in ways that claim physical space around them, and to expect to exert power and control over girls (Hasbrook, 1999; Hasbrook and Harris, 1999).

Physical self-concepts come to be connected with gender because many people expect different levels of sport-related skills from girls and boys. Gender-related expectations may be one of the reasons boys' ball games often dominate the space on elementary school playgrounds and in other public places. This pattern extends through the life course—just observe the extent to which young men appropriate space for themselves on the open playing fields of most Canadian campuses. Of course, many people actively discourage such gender-based patterns, but it is often difficult to change them, because they are deeply rooted in the culture as a whole.

The influence of social forces on youth sports has been identified in many studies. Research by Ingham and Dewar (1999) shows how dominant ideas about masculinity influence the meanings that boys give to their experiences in a youth hockey programme. Jay Coakley's research shows how dominant ideas about ethnicity and social class influence the funding and programme orientations of youth sport programmes in minority areas in inner cities and in white sub-

urban areas in the U.S. (Coakley, 2002). Howard Nixon (2000) discusses the exclusion and the participation barriers faced by children with certain disabilities, and he outlines the complex and contentious issues surrounding the segregation and integration of people with disabilities in sport competitions. As we read these studies, it is important to focus on the experiences of children rather than simply look for differences by gender, ethnicity, ability, and social class. As we see how experiences vary, we learn how social forces interact with each other and influence children's lives on and off the playing field.

MAJOR TRENDS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

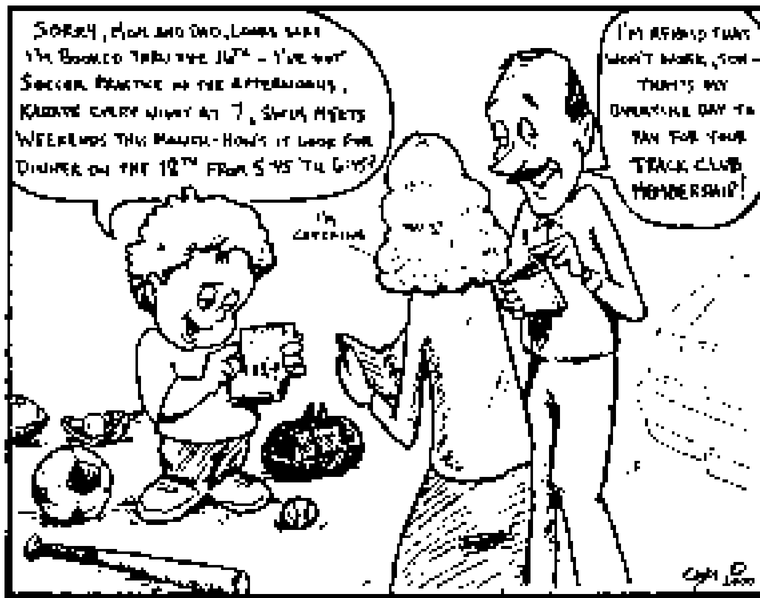
Major Trends in Youth Sports Today

In addition to their growing popularity, youth sports are changing in at least four other socially significant ways. *First*, organized programmes have become increasingly privatized. This means that more youth sports today are sponsored by private, non-profit, and commercial organizations, or are increasingly subject to user fees. *Second*, organized programmes are increasingly likely to emphasize the "performance ethic." This means that participants in youth sports, even in house leagues and low-key recreational programmes, are encouraged to evaluate their experiences in terms of developing technical skills and progressing to higher personal levels of achievement in one or more sports. *Third*, participation in so-called alternative sports has increased. This means that many young people prefer unstructured, participant-controlled sports, such as skateboarding, in-line skating, snowboarding, BMX biking, and various other physical activities that have local or regional relevance for children. *Fourth*, there seems to be an increasing culture of caution surrounding youth sports and physical activity, with increased supervision and surveillance, legislation in the face of concerns about injuries, sexual abuse, and other safety concerns.

These four trends have an impact on who participates in organized youth sports and what kinds of experiences children have when they do participate.

Privatization and User Fees in Organized Programmes Privatization, and the introduction of user fees, are interesting and sometimes alarming trends in youth sports today. While organized sports and physical activity have become more popular, there has been a decline in the number of publicly funded programmes with free and open participation policies. When local governments face budget crises, various social services, including recreation programmes, often are cut back. In the face of cutbacks, local parks and recreation departments and other public agencies sometimes have tried to maintain physical activity and instructional programmes by imposing participation fees to cover expenses. There are now user fees in interschool sport programmes as government cutbacks have also affected education budgets.

As noted previously, municipal Parks and Recreation Departments in Canada stopped organizing youth sport leagues in the mid-1970s, in part as a cost-saving measure. The remaining programmes of physical activity and instruction (e.g., skating and swimming) were increasingly subject to user fees, and there is now evidence of declining participation. For example, in a recent amalgamation of Toronto into a mega-city, the former city of Toronto, which had no user fees, joined with five municipalities that all had different user fees. This fee conflict was resolved into a single reduced-fee structure. The consequence was an increase in the number of participants in the other municipalities (indicating that there was probably a demand for the services, but that the higher user fees were preventing children and adults from participating) and a reduction in participants in the former city of Toronto (indicating that the introduction of user fees was a barrier to participation).



When children have schedules that are full of organized youth sports, they have little time to be with their parents. The irony is that many parents spend more time making it possible for their children to play sports than they spend with their children.

When municipalities no longer provided youth sport leagues, community non-profit organizations (e.g., the Burlington Youth Soccer Association) began to offer them. All involved fees, although commercial sponsors from the community and favourable public facility rental rates often helped to keep the fees fairly low. However, fees do depend on the cost of the activity, and how much travel and competition teams are involved in. Thus, a "travel team" in hockey usually involves significant costs for the parents of children involved—not just in terms of equipment and ice time but also with travel and tournament costs. In many parts of Canada, it appears that only middle-class children are now able to participate easily at the higher levels of hockey.

Commercial sport providers also have entered the youth sport scene in growing numbers. In Canada, these often take the form of private clubs for skiing, skating, golf, and other sports, or summer sport specialist camps providing intensive training in a sport. The camps are often owned by celebrity athletes and coaches, and are usually run on a commercial (for profit) basis. The private commercial programmes are usually selective and exclusive, and they provide few opportunities for children from low-income households. The technical instruction in these programmes is very good, and they provide children from wealthier families with many opportunities to develop skills. Through these commercial programmes, parents with enough money even hire private coaches for their children at rates of $35–$150 per hour.

At least two negative consequences are associated with this trend. *First*, privatized youth sports and recreation reproduce the economic and ethnic inequalities that exist in the larger society. Unlike public programmes, they depend on money paid by participants. Low-income and

single-parent families often do not have the money to pay fees. This, in turn, accentuates various forms of ethnic segregation and exclusion, as well as social class divisions, in communities. *Second*, as public parks and recreation departments cease to offer programmes, they often become brokers of public parks for private, commercial, and non-profit, organized sport programmes. The private programmes that use public parks may not have commitments to gender equity and affirmative action, which are mandated in public programmes. If 83 percent of the participants in these programmes are boys, and 17 percent are girls, as was the case in Los Angeles in the late 1990s, what can be done to prevent the taxpayers from indirectly funding the perpetuation of gender inequity? (See the B.C. human rights case in chapter 8, p. 229). As you can see, there are a number of challenges associated with privatization.

Emphasis on the Performance Ethic The performance ethic has become increasingly important in many organized youth sport programmes. This means performance becomes a measured outcome and an indicator of the quality of the sport experience. *Fun* in these programmes comes to be defined in terms of becoming a better athlete, becoming more competitive, and being promoted into more highly skilled training categories. Often, the categories have names that identify skill levels, so there may be gold, silver, and bronze groups to indicate where a child is placed in the programme. Many parents find this attractive because it enables them to judge their child's progress and to feel that they are meeting their parental expectations (see the quote from MacGregor on the first page of this chapter).

Private programmes generally emphasize the performance ethic to a greater degree than do non-profit programmes, and they often market themselves as "centers of athletic excellence." Such an approach attracts parents willing to pay high membership, participation, and instructional fees. Another way to sell a private programme to parents who can afford the cost is to highlight successful athletes and coaches who have trained or worked in the programme.

Parents of physically skilled children often are attracted to organized programmes emphasizing the performance ethic. They sometimes define fees and equipment expenses, which can be shockingly high, as *investments* in their children's future. They are concerned with skill development, and, as their children grow older, they use performance-oriented programmes as sources of information about scholarships, as well as networks for contacting coaches and sport organizations. They approach their children's sport participation in a rational manner and see clear connections between childhood sport participation and future development, educational opportunities, and success in adult life. Of course, the application of the performance ethic is not limited to organized sports; it exerts influence across a range of organized children's activities (Mannon, 1997). Childhood in some societies has been changed from an age of exploration and freedom to an age of preparation and controlled learning. Children's sports reflect this trend.

Increased Interest in Alternative Sports As organized programmes have become increasingly exclusive, structured, performance oriented, and elitist, some young people have sought alternatives, which allow them to engage freely in physical activities on their own terms. Because organized youth sports are the most visible settings for children's sport participation, these unstructured and participant-controlled activities are referred to as alternative sports—alternatives, that is, to organized sports. Alternative sports encompass an infinite array of physical activities done individually or with groups. Their popularity is based, in part, on children's reactions against the highly structured character of adult-controlled, organized sports (see Beal, 1995).

When we observe children in many of these activities, we are regularly amazed by the physical skills they have developed without adult

coaches and scheduled practices and contests. Although we are concerned about injury rates and about the sexism so common in the social dynamics of these activities, we are impressed by the discipline and dedication of children who seek challenges apart from adult-controlled sport settings, and by the cooperation shown as they help each other, applaud each other's successes, and give advice to each other as they develop their skills.

This trend of participation in alternative sports is so widespread that media companies and other large corporations that sell things to children have invented competitive forms of these sports and present advertising images that highlight risk and the "extreme" challenges associated with some of the activities. They have sponsored events, such as the X Games, that provide exposure and material support for those who are willing to display their skills in a televised competitive format that is, or at least appears to be, highly organized and structured. Although the participants in these events are teens and young adults, many of the spectators are children. We suspect that children use the images from these media events to inform what they do when they play these sports, but we need research on this issue. So far, adult intervention in these activities has been limited to the provision of facilities such as skateboard parks and occasional words of advice regarding safety. Will the future bring adult skateboard coaches and organized programmes for participation? We would bet on it, but we are also sure that children will always seek opportunities to play sports on their own terms.

The Culture of Caution We often claim that play and sports are where children learn to take risks, have adventures, and generally prepare in a relatively safe way for the world that they will enter as adults. And, as we argue in subsequent chapters, those risks—particularly the risk of injury—are still there. But, in a rather contradictory way, there is growing evidence of increasing concern about safety of children, and a growing distrust of those whom parents pay and/or entrust to look after them. This involves growing surveillance—hidden cameras in children's nurseries to monitor the babysitter or nanny, "black boxes" in cars to check the location and driving behaviour of teenage children, webcams in nurseries and daycare centres to monitor child care, and parental presence at all games and practices to monitor children's safety and coaches' behaviours.

It also involves other concerns about safety, and about lawsuits. The Children's Society and the Children's Play Council in the U.K. recently surveyed children to find out what types of behaviour were being controlled in schools and playgrounds. Their findings (www.the-childrens-society.org.uk) were startling. For example:

- Yo-yos were banned from school playgrounds because they may cause injury.
- Tag and running games were banned in case children fell over.
- In one school, handstands were banned because one student had injured her elbow doing a handstand.
- Children were prevented from picking wildflowers at a kindergarten because they may pick up germs from the ground.
- One school banned the use of a climbing frame in case children fell.

Playgrounds in Toronto, and in some British cities, have been closed because the equipment does not meet new safety standards, and, in this time of tax cuts and restricted municipal budgets, this equipment is not immediately replaced. A research report prepared by Professor David Ball for the Play Safety Forum in the U.K. ("Playgrounds: Risks, Benefits and Choices"—www.the-childrens-society.org.uk) calls for a balance between safety and some controlled risk and excitement: "Play provision is first and foremost for children and if it is not exciting and attractive to them, then it will fail, no matter how 'safe' it is."

REFLECT ON SPORTS

Different Experiences: Informal Player-Controlled Sports versus Organized, Adult-Controlled Sports

Jay Coakley and his students have observed children in sports, and interviewed the participants, since the 1970s. They found (Coakley, 1983) that the experiences are quite different depending on the type of organization:

- Sports informally organized and controlled by the players tend to be "action-centred."
- Sports formally organized and controlled by adults tend to be "rule-centred."

INFORMAL, PLAYER-CONTROLLED SPORTS

Players in informal and pick-up games of all kinds are interested in four things:

1. Action, especially action leading to scoring
2. Personal involvement in the action
3. A challenging and exciting experience (e.g., a close score in a competitive game)
4. Opportunities to reaffirm friendships during games

Games usually had two to twelve players who usually knew each other from previous games. Usually, they formed teams quickly using skill differences and friendship patterns. Starting games, and keeping them going and full of action, was a complex operation and depended on how good the players were at managing interpersonal relationships and making effective decisions.

While rules were similar to formal game rules, there were many modifications to maximize action, scoring, and personal involvement while keeping the scores close. For example, basketball free throws were eliminated, there were no yardage penalties in football, soccer throw-ins were limited, and pitchers moved close enough to batters for them to be able to hit the ball. The games usually had very high scores.

Personal involvement was maximized with clever rule qualifications, such as imposing handicaps on highly skilled players, permitting "do-overs" and other chances for less skilled players, and having every player eligible to receive a pass in football. Children almost always claimed that the biggest source of fun in their games was hitting, catching, kicking, scoring, and any other form of action in which they were personally involved, and which kept the scores close.

Players tolerated a great variety of performance styles and moves, and even joking around and ignoring rules, so long as these did not interfere with the action. Older and more skilled players were involved in settling disputes, and arguments were usually handled in creative ways. Friendships were reaffirmed as children played together often, and they became more skilled at solving conflicts.

A word of caution: Problems in informal games do occur. Bigger and stronger children may exploit or even bully smaller and weaker ones, girls may be patronized or dismissed if they try to play with boys, and those excluded from games often feel rejected by their peers. Limited availability of play space or equipment can also cause problems.

FORMAL, ADULT-CONTROLLED SPORTS

Even though children still value action and personal involvement in formal sports, they are more likely to be serious and concerned with performance quality and game results. Action, personal involvement, and behaviour are strictly regulated by formal rules enforced by adults—coaches, managers, referees, scorekeepers, timekeepers, and so on. Children are also concerned with formal positions, and are likely to refer to themselves by their position—left winger, right fielder, goalie, and so on. Coaches and spectators continually emphasize the importance of these by encouraging children to "stay in position."

Playing time is often determined by a player's level of skill, and those spending more time on the bench may be bored or less interested in the game. Adult control also decreases the number of arguments and overt hostility between players, and more conflict has been observed between adults than between players on the same team. There were also fewer displays of affection among players, making it difficult to determine which players were friends.

Continued

REFLECT ON SPORTS
Different Experiences: Informal Player-Controlled Sports versus Organized, Adult-Controlled Sports continued

Rules standardize competition and control player behaviour. Their enforcement regularly causes breaks in the action that are not usually resented by the players (unless it is a penalty against their team). Adults usually apply the rules universally, seldom making exceptions even when there are differences in players' abilities and characteristics, and when the sanctions do not have an effect on game action or outcome. Games are played until the end regardless of quality of play or player satisfaction. Rules applied by coaches restrict players' freedom, but compliance is high.

Children in organized sports want to win, but are not usually obsessed by winning. Skilled players and those on successful teams are more concerned with winning. Most players want to have fun, but all know their win-loss records and league standings. Status on teams is largely based on coaches' assessments of players' skills. Status also leads to more playing time, which is highly valued, and more latitude during games.

ANALYZING THE DIFFERENCES

Which of these experiences is more valuable in the development of children? The answer is important to both the children involved and the adults who invest so much time, money, and energy into organized sports. Each experience makes different contributions to the lives of children, and people generally overrate the contributions of participation in organized sports and underrate the contributions of participation in informal sports (Schultz, 1999).

Informal sports clearly require creativity and interpersonal and decision-making skills. "The most important part of [informal sports] is learning how to set up the game, choose sides, agree with your peers, make compromises, figure out answers, [and] submit to self-directed rulings so that the game can continue" (Koppett, 1994, p. 294). They provide experiences involving cooperation, planning, organizing, negotiating, problem solving, flexibility, and improvisation (Adler and Adler, 1998). We do not know how much of this learning carries over to other settings, but we can assume that children are influenced by their experiences.

Organized sports demand that children be able to manage their relationships with adult authority figures. They learn the rules and strategies of culturally significant activities, and they may gain status that carries over to the rest of their lives. They see bureaucracy and hierarchy in action, and become acquainted with forms of rule-governed teamwork and adult models of work and achievement (Adler and Adler, 1998).

However, it is possible that too much participation in organized sports may lead children to view the world in passive terms, as something that is given rather than something people create. If this is true, we think that children may grow up thinking they are powerless to change the world in which they live. *What do you think?*

Jay Teitel, a Toronto freelance writer, has pointed out some early indications of a culture of caution in youth sports. The unintended consequence of well-meaning parent and coach behaviour, according to Teitel, is a situation in which adults now play and children do not: "Abducting play is only the first part of our crime; holding play hostage, and then returning it to kids in adulterated form, is the second part" (1999, p. 56). Teitel goes on to state: "We're so concerned about our children's emotional safety, their 'feeling good about themselves,' that on at least a certain middle-class level, we've gutted play by taking the risk out of it. We've created a vogue for games without winners, games closely supervised to make sure that there is no gloating or bullying—a moratorium on competition in general" (Teitel, 1999, p. 59).

When children are involved in informal, player-controlled sports and alternative sports, they take risks and create excitement, but adults often have legitimate concerns about safety. It will take some creative thinking, and perhaps a return to an old view that sometimes children hurt themselves during play, and it is often nobody's fault, in order to produce a balance between the culture of risk and the culture of caution.

Recommendations for Changing Children's Sports

In previous sections, we have examined how problems appear as adults become involved in organized sports for children, and how people in Canada have attempted to deal with the problems. We have also looked at the special problems presented by the early involvement and specialization model of involving children in high-performance sports, and outlined some possible solutions. In this final section, we return to the issue of resolving problems, making recommendations for both informal and adult-organized sports, and return to the issue of education with recommendations for coaching certification programmes.

Changing Informal and Alternative Sports Informal and participant-controlled alternative sports are unique because they are not controlled directly by adults. In fact, many children opt for such sports, because they want to avoid the organized structures of adult-controlled teams and programmes. However, it is possible for adults to become indirectly involved in ways that increase the safety of these sports and that maximize children's opportunities to participate in them.

This means that, instead of passing laws to suppress sports such as skateboarding or BMXing, adults should work with young people to provide safe settings for them to create their own activities. If adults do not become supportive of new informal and alternative sport forms, their children will use the extreme models of the X Games, Gravity Games, and other made-for-TV spectacles as primary sources of inspiration. The challenge for adults is to be supportive and to provide subtle guidance without being controlling. Children need their own space in which to be creative and expressive while they play sports. They show this all the time in their behaviour in informal, participant-controlled sports, and in alternative sports, where they engage in creative and cooperative ways. Adult guidance can be helpful in making that space as safe as possible and by making it open to as many children as possible, boys and girls as well as children from various ethnic and social class backgrounds.

We could call this the "life guard" model of supervision, or the "school recess" model of supervision. In both cases, a responsible adult is there to ensure safety, prevent bullying, and mediate disputes if called on, but not to direct the activity.[9] Competitive sports could be run on this model, which is, in many ways, a revival of a past model. In the 1920s, in the state of New York, Frederick Rand Rogers insisted that teachers and other adults should remain in the bleachers during school sports. He argued that the players could not learn to make decisions if adults always made them (Kidd, 1997, p. 128).

Changing Organized Sports There are a wide variety of organized sport programmes for children. This is especially true in countries that have no centralized state authority through which youth programmes are funded, controlled, and administered. Programmes vary

[9] Such activity can be very creative. At a primary school in southern Ontario recently, a teacher on recess duty noticed children playing an unusual new game. When she asked what it was, she was informed that they were playing Quidditch (a game from the Harry Potter stories). Although the original game involves broomsticks and flying, these children had created a terrestrial form of the game without adult involvement.

from one sport to another, from community to community, and from league to league. However, those in charge could improve conditions in most programmes, maximizing positive experiences and minimizing negative experiences for participants. This is true in other parts of the world as well as in North America.

In making recommendations for change, most people agree that organized programmes should meet the needs of the children who participate in them. This means that the children themselves are a valuable source of information, which adults can use as they organize and administer youth sports. If children seek fun in their own games by emphasizing action, involvement, close scores, and friendships, it makes sense that organized programmes also should emphasize them. The following recommendations are based on this assumption.

INCREASING ACTION Children emphasize *action* in their own games. Much activity occurs around the scoring area, and scoring is usually so frequent that it is difficult to keep personal performance statistics. Organized sports, although they do contain action, emphasize rules to promote order, standardized conditions, and predictability. The strategy of many organized teams is to prevent action, rather than stimulate it. Parents and coaches sometimes describe high-scoring games as undisciplined free-for-alls caused by poor defensive play. The desired strategy in the minds of many adults is to stop action: to strike out the batter (baseball and softball), to stall the game when you are in the lead (soccer and basketball), and to use a safe running play for a 4-yard gain (football). These tactics may win some games, but they limit the most exciting aspects of any game: action and scoring.

It is usually easy to increase action and scoring in organized sports, as long as adults do not view game models as sacred and unchangeable. Bigger baskets, goalies who are encouraged to play out, smaller playing areas, and fewer rules are ways to increase action. Why not make all players eligible to receive passes and carry the ball in football, and use a 6-foot basket in a half-court basketball game? Many adults resist changes they think will alter game models—that is, the models used in elite, adult sports. They want children to play "the real thing," even though adults are prepared to make all kinds of modifications in their own recreational and pick-up games to achieve the following aspects of play. They forget that children are more interested in having fun than in playing as some adults do.

INCREASING PERSONAL INVOLVEMENT Children do not sit on the bench in informal games. They use rule qualifications and handicap systems to maximize their involvement and to promote action. Smaller or less skilled players may not contribute to the action as much as others do, but they play the whole game. If they are treated badly or excluded, they leave without being branded as quitters, or given lectures on commitment by their parents.

In organized games, playing time is often seriously limited for all but the most skilled players, and the substitution process is a constant source of problems for the coach and pressure for the players. Specialization by position further restricts the range of involvement. When ten-year-olds describe themselves as goalies, left defensive tackles, centre fielders, or left wingers, it is a sure sign that the range of personal involvement is limited.

Coaches and other leaders could extend personal involvement in organized sport programmes by rotating players to different positions and by coordinating group substitutions with opposing teams. They could alter team size to allow more players on the field, or they could reduce rosters so that there were more teams with fewer subs. Batting lineups for baseball and softball could include all team members, regardless of which ones were playing the nine or ten positions in the field. In ice hockey, the games could be played across the width of the

rink and portable dividers and lightweight goals could be used; this would allow three times as many teams to compete at the same time. In basketball, the first-string teams could play a half-court game at one basket, while the second-string teams played each other at the other basket. A combined score could determine the winner. These and many other similar changes would increase personal involvement.

CREATING CLOSE SCORES "Good games" are those for which the outcomes are in doubt until the last play; double overtime games are the best. Lopsided scores destroy the excitement of competition. Children realize this, so they keep their informal games close.[10] Since motivation partially depends on how people perceive their chances for success, a close game usually keeps players motivated and satisfied. Just like adults who use handicaps to keep the competition interesting in bowling, golf, and other sports, children adjust their games to keep them close.

In organized games, lopsided scores are common and team records are often very uneven. Keeping players motivated under these circumstances is difficult. Coaches are forced to appeal to pride and respect to keep children motivated in the face of lopsided scores and long, losing seasons. Ironically, coaches also urge their teams and players to take big leads during games. This makes no sense.

Adults who control organized youth sports are usually hesitant to make changes affecting the outcomes of games, but they might consider some possibilities. For example, they could encourage close scores by altering team rosters or by using handicap systems during games. The underdog could be given an advantage, such as extra players or the right to use four downs, five outs, or a bigger goal. Numerous changes could keep games close; however, when game models are viewed as unchangeable, possible changes are never even discussed.

MAINTAINING FRIENDSHIPS When children play informal and alternative sports, the reaffirmation of friendships is important. Friendships influence the ways in which teams are chosen and the dynamics of the problem-solving processes during games. Organized sports may provide useful contexts for making friends, but players need more opportunities to nurture relationships with teammates and with children on other teams.

Coaches and managers could ask groups of players in organized sports to plan game strategies or coach practice sessions. They could encourage players to talk with opponents, help them when they were knocked down, and congratulate them when they did something commendable. Too often, relationships between opposing players are cold and impersonal. Players should learn that games have a human component, which they can recognize during play. Most important, players should be expected to enforce most of the rules themselves during games. Through self-enforcement, they would learn why rules are necessary, how to take responsibility for their behaviour, and how collective action depends on taking other people and the expectations of others into consideration. Many people argue that self-enforcement would never work (although it does work in tennis)—however, if organized programmes do not teach young people how to cooperate to the extent needed to play games with their friends, then those programmes are not worth our time and effort.

Other changes are also needed. For example, Shane Murphy (1999), a psychologist who has worked with many athletes and families in his clinical practice, suggests that programmes include education for all participants, including parents, coaches, and players. The National Association for Youth Sports in the United States

---

[10]Close scores may be sacrificed when close friends want to be on the same team; playing with friends is sometimes more important than having evenly balanced teams.

also advocates and runs educational programmes for parents and coaches. Murphy also suggests involving children in decisions about youth sport programmes, designing programmes to teach life skills as well as sport skills, and using social goals to inform the philosophies of organized programmes. Finally, he suggests developing and enforcing codes of conduct for parents, coaches, and players. While codes of conduct have been introduced by a number of sport programmes in Canada, their enforcement is often inconsistent, or non-existent.

PROSPECTS FOR CHANGE Many organized youth sport programmes have made changes that reflect a concern for the needs and well-being of children. In fact, there are many excellent models for thinking about and making changes in youth sports (Chalip and Green, 1998; Morris and Stiehl, 1989; Murphy, 1999; Torbert, 2000). However, the approach most often used to guide changes in youth sport programmes is grounded in a functionalist theoretical perspective (see chapter 2). In other words, adults are most concerned with changes that will increase efficiency and organization in youth sports, and that will increase the skill levels of child-athletes. Thus, we see more training programmes for coaches, more formal rules regulating the behaviour of parents and spectators, and more rules for what is expected from players and coaches. There are more promotional brochures and advertising in the local media, more emphasis on the performance ethic, and more tournaments, playoffs, and championships.

As organized youth sports become increasingly affiliated with national organizations and sport governing bodies, the chance that these bodies will consider critical changes in game models and the structure of youth sports becomes increasingly remote. Changes occasionally may be considered at local levels, but even local sport programmes are not likely to change official game models or programme structures. Such changes would threaten the relationships of local programmes with the influential provincial and national organizations.

"How many times have I told you to practise your basketball before you even think about homework?"

The fame and fortune of some professional athletes may encourage some parents to overemphasize youth sports in the lives of their children. Might this turn young athletes into "child workers"?

Changes are also slow to come because many adults who administer and support organized sport programmes have vested interests in keeping them as they are. They know the programmes are not perfect, but they are afraid changes in them will eliminate many of the good things they have accomplished in the past. In fact, one of the few triggers for progressive change seems to be a drastic decline in youth registrations in a sport, as noted previously with regard to hockey in Quebec, and as is currently occurring in youth baseball.

COACHING EDUCATION AS A MEANS OF PRODUCING CHANGES Earlier in this chapter, we wrote about the National Coaching Certification Programme as one of the "made in

Canada" solutions to the problems that were recognized in youth sports. The NCCP provides coaches with information on how to (1) deal with young people responsively and safely and (2) be more effective in organizing their practices and in teaching skills to young people. Most coaching education programmes emphasize putting athletes' needs ahead of winning, but none of them teaches coaches how to critically assess the sport programmes in which they work with young people. None presents information on how to make structural changes in the programmes themselves or on how to create alternatives to existing programmes. Even with two former NHL players as assistant coaches, Arnold (2002) notes the difficulties involved in introducing progressive changes to the way that they coached one minor hockey team in Peterborough, Ontario. Coaching education materials generally are based on the functionalist assumption that existing sport programmes are pretty good, but they could be better if coaches were to use more applied sport science as they work with child athletes.

Although coaching education is important, we worry that they foster what we might call a "technoscience approach" to youth sports. A technoscience approach emphasizes issues of control and skill development, rather than an overall understanding of young people as human beings. If this happens, coaches are defined as "sport efficiency experts," rather than teachers who provide young people with opportunities to become autonomous and responsible decision makers who control their own lives.

At this point, the NCCP has made a contribution to responsible coaching in youth sport programmes. But, as we examine coaching education and critically assess its place at all levels of sports, it would be good to remember that the former East Germany had one of the most efficient and highly respected coaching education programmes in the world. However, its programme was based on a technoscience approach, and did little to contribute to the overall development of young people as human beings. The East German experience reminds us that, without critical self-reflection, the application of sport science knowledge to coaching will not necessarily make youth sports or the world any better. If coaching education were informed by critical self-reflection, it could lead to many positive changes in sport programmes for people of all ages.

SUMMARY

ARE ORGANIZED YOUTH SPORT PROGRAMMES WORTH THE EFFORT?

Children in all societies participate in various forms of movement and physical activity. For the most part, these activities take place in informal settings and are characterized by freedom and spontaneity. However, they do not occur in social and cultural vacuums. In fact, the forms and dynamics of children's physical activities are connected indirectly with larger socialization processes, through which participants learn how to be girls and boys and learn about the systems of social relations and cultural beliefs that exist in their families, communities, and nation-states. These processes vary from society to society and across cultural settings within societies.

While movement and physical activities exist in all cultures, organized youth sports are a luxury. They require resources and discretionary time among children and adults. They exist only when children are not required to work and only when there is a widespread belief in society that experiences during childhood influence a person's development and character. Youth sports have a unique history in every society where they exist. However, in all societies they have been constructed to emphasize experiences and to teach values defined as important in the society as a whole.

The growth of organized sports in North America and much of Europe is associated with the changes in the family that occurred during

the last half of the twentieth century. Many parents now see organized sports as important extensions of their control over their children and as settings in which their children gain important developmental experiences.

In Canada, academics and some individuals involved in sports began to recognize quite early that adult-organized sport programmes for children leads to a number of problems resulting from the particular set of values that have come to be associated with them: that children's play is entertainment for adults, that only games organized and controlled by adults are of any value, that children are miniature adults, and that the real value of sport lies in learning to be a winner. We discuss a number of "made in Canada" attempts to resolve these problems: the development of house leagues, the introduction of a coaching education programme for volunteers in youth sports, the development of "fair play" leagues in hockey, and the introduction of child protection schemes. Developments in high-performance sports for children since the mid-1970s provide even more reason for concern, and, although there have been attempts to resolve some problems—for example, eating disorders—change has been very slow because some adults stand to profit from the status quo. Solutions in the form of education, children's rights, child labour laws, and child welfare laws are all examined.

Research in the sociology of sport can be used to answer many of the commonly asked questions about youth sports. Studies guided by symbolic interactionism help us understand that, prior to eight years old, children do not have the developmental abilities needed to understand the social dynamics of organized competitive sports, especially team sports in which complex strategies are used. Such abilities do not become fully developed until at least twelve years of age in most children. Studies guided primarily by feminist theories have begun to describe and explain some of the family dynamics associated with organized youth sports, especially in terms of how they affect family relationships, family schedules, and the lives of mothers and fathers. Studies often guided by a range of critical theories illustrate how social factors influence youth sport experiences, including the participation choices available to children and the meanings given to various sport experiences.

Major trends in youth sports today include increased privatization of, and user fees for, organized programmes, a growing emphasis on the performance ethic in most programmes, and growing evidence of a culture of caution that limits the excitement and occasional risks associated with children's play and sport experiences. In response to these trends, some children have turned to informal and alternative sports, including the highly visible extreme versions of alternative sports.

Children's sport experiences vary with levels of formal organization and with the extent to which they are participant-controlled or adult-controlled. The dynamics of sport participation, as well as what children may learn from their experiences, are different in informal games than they are in organized youth sport programmes. It is likely that involvement across a range of participation settings is important in the developmental experiences of children.

Recommendations for changing children's sports can be formulated by using the characteristics of children's informal games as a guide. This would call for changes in the structure and organization of many youth sport programmes. These changes would emphasize increased action and involvement among all participants. They also would emphasize changes to keep game scores close and to give children opportunities to formulate and nurture friendships with teammates and opponents.

The prospects for change in organized youth sport programmes are inhibited by the vested interests of many adults in programmes as they are currently organized. Coaching education programmes could facilitate changes if they were to deal with youth sports in more critical terms.

Of course, no programme can guarantee that it will make children into models of virtue, but those who organize programmes can change them to minimize problems. This means that organized sport programmes for children *are* worth the effort—when the adults controlling them put the children's interests ahead of the programmes' organizational needs and their own needs to gain status through their association with child athletes.

SUGGESTED READINGS

Adler, Patricia A., and Peter Adler. 1998. *Peer power: Preadolescent culture and identity.* New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press (the authors collected data over eight years on the lives of children in an upper-middle-class town; excellent information about how play, informal games, recreational activities, and organized sports fit into the social lives of children).

Arnold, E. 2002. *Whose puck is it anyway?: A season with a minor novice team.* Toronto: McClelland & Stewart (documents one season with the minor novice AAA Peterborough Petes, coached by the author and assisted by two former NHL players, Greg Millen and Steve Larmer; the coaches emphasized fun, equal ice time, and opportunities to play all positions; not all of the parents were happy, but the players and coaches had fun, and this is an entertaining account).

Bylsma, D., and J. Bylsma. 2000. *So you want to play in the NHL: A guide for young players.* Chicago: McGraw-Hill/Contemporary Books.

Bylsma, D., and J. Bylsma. 1998. *So your son wants to play in the NHL.* Toronto: McClelland & Stewart (these two books are by authors John Bylsma and his son Dan Bylsma, who plays for the Anaheim Mighty Ducks; one is directed at parents and the other at young players; while recognizing the dream of playing in the NHL, the authors also provide a great deal of useful advice about keeping ambition in proportion and emphasizing child and youth development rather than just developing a hockey player).

Cahill, B. R., and A. J. Pearl, eds. 1993. *Intensive participation in children's sports.* Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics (articles by Coakley and Donnelly provide sociological analyses of issues associated with children playing high-performance sports; articles by Gould and Weiss are also informative from a psychological perspective).

Coakley, J., and P. Donnelly, eds. 1999. *Inside sports.* London: Routledge (this collection includes accessible articles on sport experiences; articles by Hasbrook, Ingham and Dewar, and Chafetz and Kotarba deal directly with youth sports).

DeKnop, P., B. Skirstad, L.-M. Engstrom, and M. Weiss, eds. 1996. *Worldwide trends in youth sport.* Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics (background material on comparative research; excellent information about youth sports in twenty countries; summarizes research on youth sports in terms of global patterns, trends, problems, and policies).

Fine, G. A. 1987. *With the boys: Little League baseball and preadolescent culture.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press (a classic study of youth sports for boys; in-depth qualitative data on eleven-year-old boys illustrates how boys create their own ways of experiencing organized sports).

Rinehart, R., and S. Sydnor, eds. 2003. *To the Extreme: Alternative sports, inside and out.* Albany: State University of New York at Albany Press (twenty-five articles by scholars and noted athletes in alternative sports; articles do not focus on children, but they capture the spirit and experiences that attract many children to alternative, action, and extreme sports).

Ryan, J. 1995. *Little girls in pretty boxes: The making and breaking of elite gymnasts and figure skating.* New York: Doubleday (a timely, in-depth journalistic account and exposé of the lives of U.S. girls and young women in elite gymnastics and figure skating).

Thompson, S. 1999. *Mother's taxi: Sport and women's labor.* Albany, NY: State University of New York Press (deals with one of the more under-researched areas in the sociology of sport—the ways in which women's work and domestic labour facilitates their children's [and husbands'] sport participation).

WEBSITE RESOURCES

Note: Websites often change. The following URLs were current when this book was printed. Please check our website (www.mcgrawhill.ca/college/coakley) for updates and additions.

www.canadianhockey.ca (the official website of the Canadian Hockey Association includes the very insightful—and funny—"Relax, It's Just a Game" series of television and radio commercials)

www.lboro.ac.uk/departments/sses/institutes/iys/pages/about.html (site for the Institute of Youth Sport at Loughborough University in the U.K.; focuses on bringing together research from a variety of disciplines on issues related to youth participation and performance.

http://ed-web3.educ.msu.edu/ysi (site for The Institute for the Study of Youth Sports at Michigan State University; the institute sponsors research on the benefits and detriments of participation in youth sports, produces educational materials, and provides educational programmes for coaches, officials, administrators, and parents; useful links to other sites)

www.nays.org (site for the National Alliance for Youth Sports, a nonprofit organization with the goal of making sports safe and positive; links to other youth sport sites)

www.sportsparenting.org/csp (site for the Center for Sports Parenting, a Web-based program that offers immediate and practical guidance to parents, coaches, educators, administrators, officials, and others involved in youth sports)

www.momsteam.com (information at this parents' site is designed to create a safer, saner, less stressful, and more inclusive youth sports experience; it is directed at mothers of children in organized youth sport programmes)

www.sportinsociety.org/uys.html (site for the Urban Youth Sports Program of the Center for the Study of Sport in Society; focuses on issues in Boston, but it provides a useful conceptual model for what might be done in other cities to overcome barriers that limit youth sport participation and to increase opportunities for healthy development)

www.youth-sports.com (general site for information, advice, and instructional products for parents, coaches, and children involved in youth sports)