

KEY COMPONENTS OF ESTABLISHING AN EFFECTIVE AND PRODUCTIVE YOUTH  
SPORTS PROGRAM FOR ALL YOUTH PARTICIPANTS

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## Key Components of Establishing an Effective and Productive Youth Sports Program for All Youth Participants

Imagine a world where parents can send their children to a practice with full comfort that there is a positive influence and learning skills that will benefit them for years to come. Youth sports programs are established all around the world, but are we utilizing them as a “vehicle for positive youth development initiatives”? (Agnew & Pill, 2016, p.4) ESPN authors, Bruce Kelley and Carl Carchia (2013), informs us that there were around 21.5 million kids from the age of six to seventeen that participated in team sports in 2013; this statistic should not merely be seen as a number, but should be seen as 21.5 million opportunities for positive impact. This perspective is that of an effective youth league administrator when forming a sports program solely for youth. Hedstrom and Gould (2004) admitted that gauging overall youth participation patterns is difficult, but they did find that about 35% of children drop out of sport each year. When establishing an effective youth sport league, we must consider what our goals are, what type of program is desired, and what is the desired outcome for the youth participants. According to *The Role of Youth Sports in American Culture* written by Seefeldt et al. (1993), youth sports programs have been “divided into six different categories: agency-sponsored, national youth service organizations, club sports, recreation programs, intramural programs, and interscholastic programs” (p. 3). These youth sports programs all serve youth within the community, but have a broad range of priorities that effect how the leagues are created and implemented.

Seefeldt et al. defines *youth sports* as an athletic program that provides “a systemic sequence of practices and contests for children and youth” (1993, p. 3). This definition identifies the foundation of every youth sports program, but it does not define what an effective youth sports program is nor does it recognize the potential skills and attributes that transcend into the

youth participant's future. When defining what an effective youth sports program looks like, one must take into consideration what the word "effective" means. Merriam-Webster (2018) dictionary defines "effective" as "producing a decided, decisive, or desired effect"; therefore, an effective youth sports program is subjective, dependent on the desired outcome (n.d.).

According to my research, there are multiple common components throughout many effective youth sports programs, such as having quality adult leadership, being child-centered, requiring proper training for coaches and officials, ensuring a safe playing environment, and emphasizing age-appropriate modifications (NAYS, 2017; Lench; Brustad, 1992; Holt, 2008; & Seefeldt V, Ewing, M., & Walk, S.) These different components are included in the National Alliance for Youth Sports organization (NAYS), which provides a Standards for all youth sports programs to follow in order to ensure a quality experience for all youth.

NAYS is a nonprofit organization that was established in 1981; the main focus of this organization is to educate, equip, and empower adults so all youth sport participants are able to enjoy the "lifelong benefits of sports" (The National Alliance for Youth Sports, 2018, p.2). In 1987, members of the Certified Youth Sports Administration (CYSA) Leadership Team convened and partook in a comprehensive review and analysis of the variety of topics that affect how youth sports programs are delivered which evolved into the National Standards for Youth Sports. As the years progressed, these Standards transformed to eventually cover four core areas that should be important to all youth sports program administrators; these standards "serve as a blueprint for how recreational youth sports providers can meet the needs of all their participants" (National Standards for Youth Sports, 2017, p. 2). Each Core Area delineates standards regarding professional youth sports administrators, volunteers, and parents in order to "ensure safe, positive, and child-centered experiences." (The National Alliance for Youth Sports, 2018).

Youth sports create many opportunities for children to not only improve their fundamental motor skills and appreciation for fitness, but there are other possible benefits such as social and emotional growth (Hedstrom & Gould, 2004; Seefeldt et al., 1993). In the 2018 Participation Report that is conducted by the Physical Activity's Council's annual study tracking sports, fitness, and recreation participation in the US found Generation Z, the youth of today, has become more active than the generations preceding them. With this in mind, we need to continue to evolve the quality of youth sports programs as our youth changes while abiding by the strong foundation that NAYS has outlined. There is an abundance of essential components to implementing a productive and effective youth sports program, but the three most important components are organization and structure, quality of adult leadership, and being child-centered.

### **The National Standards for Youth Sports**

The National Alliance for Youth Sports (NAYS) is a nonprofit organization that focuses its efforts on educating, equipping, and empowering adults so all youth sport participants are able to enjoy the “lifelong benefits of sports” (2017, p.2). Their mission “is to educate, equip, and empower youth sports leaders, volunteers, and parents so all children can enjoy the lifelong benefits of sports” and their vision is “a future where all youth sports coaches, parents, officials, and administrators are educated and all children have access to safe and positive sports experiences” (National Alliance for Youth Sports, 2018, p.1-2). NAYS believes that a youth sports program reflects the entire community and is not something that one should just “hope” will be successful; this organization values every child’s physical and mental well-being and they aspire to help all adults fully understand their exact roles and responsibilities within any youth sports program (National Alliance for Youth Sports, 2018). This nonprofit organization

aids the transition from youth sports solely focusing on sport to emphasizing the growth of the whole child.

NAYS, originally known as National Youth Sports Coaches Association (NYCSA), has grown and evolved since Fred Engh founded this association in 1981. NYCSA's primary focus was merely educating volunteer coaches on the importance of meeting the needs of each child as well as being aware of the wide range of responsibilities that come along with being a coach. In 1987, NYCSA brought together forty-six youth sport experts that developed the original National Standards for Youth Sports, which fixated on providing parents directions to follow when developing, and conducting youth sports programs (National Standards for Youth Sports, 2017). Six years later, the NYCSA organization evolved into NAYS, acknowledging coaches are not the only element that needs to improve to provide the youth participants with the optimal experience. After years of expansion, NAYS gathered over 200 youth sports professionals in 2008 to review and update the Standards. The Standards transformed to encompass four Core Areas of youth sport, Child Centered Policies and Procedures, Volunteers, Parents, and Safe Playing Environment, as well as adding sections that explained how the Standards specifically impact professional youth sport administrators, volunteers, and parents. The updated Standards established a blueprint of the major components of having an effective youth sports program (National Alliance for Youth Sports, 2018).

NAYS' Core Areas lay out a foundation for program administrators to follow in order to ensure that the sport setting is "safe, positive, and child-centered" (National Standards for Youth Sports, 2017, p. 2).

**Core Area #1: Child Centered Policies and Procedures.** This core area states that a trend has been set for youth sports to be modeled after programs that use the rules, skill expectations, and

competitive requirements that replicate the attributes of an adult sport experience. Youth sport leaders must take the initiative by designing and administering a program that focus on the well-being of each child and allow children from all backgrounds to have positive life experience through sport.

**Core Area #2: Volunteers.** This core area recognizes that volunteers are essential in order to run a successful and effective youth sports program. It emphasizes the importance of a thorough screening process in order to ensure the safety and well-being of all youth participants.

Programs administrators need to have a descriptive outline pertaining to the job responsibilities for all volunteers; volunteers should know and enforce the program's policies and procedures and strive to abide by the mission and vision.

**Core Area #3: Parents.** This core area emphasizes that parents are a key component for the kids to have a positive and fun experience. Parents need to assume an active, caring, and positive role in order to help make their child's sporting experience enjoyable; they should be knowledgeable regarding the rules and policies within not only the sport, but also the program.

**Area #4: Safe Playing Environment.** This core area addresses the importance for a safe playing environment. The nature of sports entails of a variety of risks that youth sports programs need to be aware of and ought to be proactive. Inspecting facilities for safety hazards should occur prior to any activity. Youth sports programs should also establish policies and procedures for any emergency ranging that include medical, weather, or any other type of emergent situation.

The 200 youth sports professionals also added three additional sections to the NAYS Standards in order to identify how exactly these standards effect three groups, the professional youth sport administrators, volunteers, and the parents. The Standards affect the professional

youth sport administrators by providing guidance in order to help offer a safe and positive experience where all children will be able to learn new skills and have fun. They address diverse topics and provide policies and support to ensure a successful sports program. It is important for volunteers to be aware of these standards because they are of “paramount importance” with the implementation of the youth sports program; the standards describe what being involved in youth sports entails as well as informing volunteers that they are crucial to the “delivery of every youth sport experience” (National Standards for Youth Sport, 2017, p.2). Finally, it is crucial for parents to be aware of the Standards so that they can choose a program that is best fit for their child. This section emphasizes that these sport programs should provide their child with valuable life skills as well as fostering a healthy lifestyle; parents need to be diligent and enroll their child in a program that abides by the Standards (National Standards for Youth Sport, 2017).

### **Organization and Structure**

One component that is relevant for all types of programming is having effective organization. The NAYS Standards address this element of youth sports programming in the first three Core Areas, but is specifically broken down in Core Area #1. The first standard in Core Area #1 states that youth sports programs need a written mission statement that determines the purpose and goals of the organization. (National Alliance for Youth Sports, 2018). The mission and vision clarify to all persons the program’s priorities. When implementing the Spurs Youth Basketball League (SYBL) for the Boys and Girls Club of San Antonio (BGCSA), my first priority was to create a mission statement that encompassed both the BGCSA and the SYBL mission statements. Integrating both organization’s mission statements together allowed the leaders and participants within the league to know what the focus for the league was. The mission for the BGCSA’s 2018 SYBL is:

The mission for this league is to maintain and display high ethical and moral standards on and off the court. We aspire to not only help youth grow in the game of basketball, but also help mold them into good human beings that will make positive choices, stay drug free, and show respect to all (Taramona, p. 4).

The multiple parts of Standard two identify specific guidelines that enforce the importance of diversification with respect to age and participation numbers. The variables that should be considered when adapting the guidelines are focus, practice/games, scores/standings, coaches, and competitive/tournament play; each of these guidelines help create an age-specific, youth-friendly program to provide participants with the optimal youth sport experience (National Alliance for Youth Sports, 2018). Differentiation is another important aspect to organization; children's motor skill development differ depending on their ages as well as their sport experience. As any youth sport handbook, The BGCSA/Spurs Drug Free League: 2018 Youth Winter Basketball Bylaws included the game adaptations that occur depending on the age group that is playing. A perfect example of this is the height of the rim; players under the age of eight will have more difficulty making a basket at ten feet tall compared to players that are fourteen years old (Taramona, p.5). This differentiation allows for growth within the sport-specific skills as well as developing the child in a holistic manner by increasing their self-confidence.

The third standard that NAYS provides under Core Area #1 is that any youth sports program should have established policies and procedures to ensure consistency; establishing these policies and procedures also ensure that all participants are aware of the program's expectations. The book *Organizational Behavior in Education: Adaptive Leadership and School Reform* by Owens and Valesky (2007) discussed multiple organizational perspectives, specifically the bureaucratic approach. This approach emphasizes five different mechanisms that



are crucial to having efficient structure any organization; the third mechanism is “develop clear written rules and procedures to set standards and guide actions” (p.113). Along with having a mission and vision, a program needs to set standards and expectations to achieve cohesiveness by allowing all persons involved. Walter Podilchak (1983) reinforces this idea by identifying that sports clearly create “its own structure by expression of the rules, while simultaneously being organized on rational, bureaucratic models” (p. 16). Sports league administrators should have the rules, policies, and procedures established in order to ensure that each child is receiving the best sport experience possible.

Proficient communication to coaches, parents, and players is crucial in order to reinforce the organization and structure of the youth sports program. According to Owens and Valesky (2007), establishing and maintaining adequate vertical communication (communication occurring up and down the program’s hierarchy) is imperative for information to be “clearly and quickly transmitted” to all participants (p. 113). The NAYS’ Standards also identify the importance of communication in Core Area #3- Standards 1, 6, 7, 9, and 10. These standards state that orientation meetings are needed in order to cover “the youth sports philosophy, program goals, expected behaviors and responsibilities, and sport specific information,” parents familiarizing themselves with the rules and sport specific information, as well as allowing parents to have the opportunity to voice their opinion regarding their child’s experience (p.6). NAYS also discusses that volunteers should have clear communication regarding the program’s purpose and their duties and responsibilities (National Standards for Youth Sports, 2017). When trying to re-establish the nature of organization and structure within BGCSA sports, it was essential to establish and communicate the updated rules, expectations, policies and procedures

for the sports program. All of these factors affect the way that the sports program runs during a league's timeframe.

### **Quality of Adult Involvement and Leadership**

Quality adult involvement and leadership is a key indicator of the youth sport program's success; adults have the power to shape the child's experience in a positive or negative manner (How Significant is the Role of Parents and Coaches in Youth Sport, 2017). Seefeldt, Ewing, and Walk (1993) consider the quality of adult leadership within youth sports as one of the most crucial factors for participant retention. These authors state effective adult leadership must include overall knowledge of the sport, be an effective leader, and must make a concerted effort to understand the players beyond the physical component (Overview of Youth Sport Programs in the United States). There are numerous opportunities for adults to be involved in executing a youth sports program, but parents and coaches are believed to be the most important (How Significant is the Role of Parents and Coaches in Youth Sport, 2017).

The quality of coaching is a crucial factor when evaluating the success of a youth sports program. Coaches are leaders that have their feet-on-the-ground and are interacting with kids throughout every practice and competition; youth sport coaches typically have diverse experience and abilities that can range from being an inexperienced volunteer to a highly skilled, paid coach (Hedstrom & Gould, 2004). Despite the coaching background, their responsibilities do not vary. Coaches are to teach new skills, manage practices, give feedback, recognize efforts, and to establish a positive relationship with each of their players (The Role of Parents and Coaches in Sport, 2017). Youth sport program administrators need to ask themselves "how can we prepare coaches to ensure that youth participants are having an optimal experience?" Providing training opportunities is the most effective way to guarantee that coaches are properly

equipped to coach kids (NAYS, 2017; Hedstrom & Gould, 2004). These trainings should consist of “a general introduction to coaching youth sports, sport-specific coaching information, the emotional needs of children, safety, injury prevention and first aid, conditioning, etc...” (National Standards for Youth Sports, 2017, p.5). Typically, novice coaches are unaware of how difficult coaching can actually be; upon reflection, many of these coaches ask for the opportunity to be an assistant coach or receive a mentor (Hedstrom & Gould, 2004). Youth sport coaches are essential to not only the success of a youth sports program, but also to the growth and development of the participants.

Youth league administrators should be wary of misinforming coaches that youth sports programs are miniature adult sports programs; administrators must inform coaches that their responsibility is to focus on being formative and developing all aspects of the child. Hedstrom and Gould refer to a study that looked into coaching approaches when interacting with children and how it affects participant retention. This study found that coaches that attended a Coach Effectiveness Training (CET) were able to help youth self-esteem increase and their anxiety decrease during the season compared to untrained coaches; also, the trained coaches’ teams had a “positive psychosocial” impact and the impact of win-loss records was minimal (p.42). Another benefit that the study shows was that the attrition rate decreases when one compares trained and untrained coaches; the impact of the CET decreased the attrition rate by 21%, from 26% (untrained coaches) to 5% (trained coaches) (Hedstrom & Gould, 2004). An effective youth sports coaches will instruct with the intention of being formative rather than focusing on the sport-specific product. Even though coaches are a crucial piece, parent involvement can either be beneficial or detrimental to a program.

Parent involvement not only effects a child's sport experience, but also can affect how long a child stays involved in sports. NAYS identifies Parents within their Standards as Core Area #3 which stresses the importance of parents being caring, active, knowledgeable, and positive supporters (National Standards for Youth Sports, 2017). Hedstrom and Gould (2004) reported that parents affect a child's sporting experience in both motivation and competence as well as emotional responses. Parents have a paramount influence on a child's motivational climate in many ways, especially how they utilize and emphasize extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. Fostering a child to become extrinsically motivated focuses on external rewards, such as trophies and public recognition; fostering the growth of intrinsic motivation emphasizes personal improvement or the satisfaction from mastering a skill (Hedstrom & Gould, 2004, p. 26-27). Brustad states in his article *Integrating Socialization Influences into the Study of Children's Motivation in Sport*, "Parental expectations and orientations towards achievement are related to children's perceptions and motivated behavior" (1992, p.72). When implementing a youth sports program, we need to acknowledge the power of influence that parents hold. If parents are not already aware, the program administrator needs to educate parents on the impact they have towards their child's emotional well-being. The youth sports program administrator must also be intentional of informing parents that youth sport programs are formative in nature and so that all adult leadership is on the same page.

Another way that parents can affect a child's sport experience is by how much pressure and stress they inflict on the child. Hedstrom and Gould state that parents are a key factor to "shaping children's emotional outcomes from sport participation" (p.28). Throughout many studies that the authors conducted, parents have been identified as one of the common themes that inflict stress on youth sport participants. The research also showed that a child's emotional

outcome relates to a child's perception of parental pressure, expectations, and evaluation; the way that a parent conducts himself/herself when interacting with their child is yet another factor that can effect a child's emotional response to sport, such as having anxiety or enjoying the experience (Hedstrom and Gould, 2004). As one can see, there are countless ways that a parent's interaction with their child can affect the overall sport experience for the child.

According to Hellstedt (1988), the "degree of parental pressure is related to the type of affective reaction from the young athlete"; with this in mind, each child has a different personality and have a unique reaction to pressure (p.143). For example, some young athletes might perceive parental pressure positively and consider it as support, while other athletes find it flustering and take it in a negative manner. It is the parent's responsibility to be conscious of how the child perceives their words and actions so that they can assist in giving their child a positive sport experience (The Role of Parents and Coaches in Sport, 2017). The BGCSA/Spurs Drug Free League: 2018 Youth Winter Basketball Bylaws also includes a mission statement for parents that states, "all parents and fans is to foster a positive, fun, and competitive environment for all participants. [Parents and fans are] to provide encouragement for all players [and] ensure a positive experience throughout the league" (Taramona, 2017, p.4). This mission holds parents responsible as well as communicates the role and expectations of each parent with respect to the BGCSA basketball league. Quality leadership and involvement, from both coaches and parents, is imperative to implement an effective and productive youth sports league.

### **Child-Centered**

Youth sports programs are in the process of transitioning from the original methodology (replicating youth sports to mimic the rules, expectations, and skill sets of an adult competitive program) to placing youth as its sole focus. Sullivan (2015) states that "youth sports has become

less a tool to educate children about sports and life, and more often a place where parents go to be entertained by their kids” (p.4). Unfortunately, this is the status quo that youth sports administrators fight when trying to conduct an effective youth sports program. The National Alliance for Youth Sports acknowledged this deficit in the youth sports world and vowed to mobilize the evolution of youth sports from being adult-centered to child-centered. Core Area #1 within the NAYS Standards (2017) states that “recreational and developmental programs must be designed and administered so that every child, regardless of their abilities, has an opportunity to have a positive youth sports experience from their participation” (p.3). All persons who are fully engaged in youth sport programs must acknowledge that kids acquires skills, knowledge, and personal growth that transcends sports.

Youth sports programs do not guarantee developmental benefits merely from participation, but by the mission of the program, the execution of the leagues, and the quality of adult leadership. According to multiple studies, there is ample room for personal growth within youth sports, such as creating a sense of belonging, positive self-concept and self-worth, increase in social competency, positive moral development, and much more (Hedstrom & Gould, 2004; Walters, Schluter, Thomson, & Payne, 2011). The league should admonish the thought that “winning is everything” and nurture the long-term development of the cognitive process and skill development. Studies have been shown that kids most enjoy their experience when the emphasis is on fun, fair play, and the opportunity to experience a variety of activities (Walters, Schluter, Thomson, & Payne, 2011; National Standards for Youth Sports, 2017). Youth sports programs need to be broken down and re-evaluate their purpose; the purpose is to facilitate sport in a fun way that fosters holistic growth for each child.

To put it simply, children love playing sports; we need to nurture this natural instinct by making their sports experience enjoyable rather than squandering their joy. When asking a child between the ages of 9-11 what he liked about soccer, the child responded with “it’s hard to explain but it just feels beautiful when I play it... It just makes you feel invincible sometimes. That’s what it does to me” (Walters, Schluter, Thomson, & Payne, 2011, p. 64). Quotes like this truly show the powerful effect that youth sports have on a child’s life and confidence. Throughout the study that Walters, Schluter, Thomson, and Payne (2011) conducted, children did not bring up winning or losing on their own, but only addressed the topic when the interviewers brought it up. Children also considered coaches that focused on winning and favoring one player over another to be unfair; they gleaned that having equal opportunities was one of the most important aspect of sports. Adults that are involved in youth sport programs should take a step back and truly hear what kids want and ask themselves how they can make it happen.

The direct effect of youth sports programs being child-centered is that the experience is enjoyable; it fits in the mold of what children hunger for when playing sports. There can be life-long effects that benefit a child if the program is executed effectively. Hedstrom and Gould’s (2004) research showed that a child’s character can be enhanced when “fair play, sportsmanship, and moral development is systemically and consistently taught to children” (p.5). Sports can create a strong foundation for youth to build character traits, such as teamwork, abiding by the rules, perseverance, and confidence, in order to have a more successful future (Caprez, 2016). After a survey of 1,670 former National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) and over 22,000 non-athletes, 82% of former student-athletes claimed to be employed at their desired level compared to the 78% of non-athletes (White, 2016). This statistic is focused on former

collegiate athletes, but all collegiate athletes had to start somewhere; if youth sports programs can provide a solid foundation for young athletes, then we are not only better preparing them for a successful athletic future, but also an opportunity to have a successful life. It might not be the only way, but the best way to foster youth sport growth is by keeping kids at the center of it all.

### **Conclusion**

Youth sports league developed quickly and programs will constantly be evaluating how to improve so that all youth are able to have an optimal experience. There are many essential components to implementing a productive and effective youth sports program, but the three most important components are organization and structure, quality of adult leadership and involvement, and it being child-centered. I had the opportunity to implement these components into a sport program that had not yet been fully established; this allowed me to be creative and focus the program to be formative in nature to benefit all youth participants.

When I first joined the BGCSA team, I was not aware of all of the factors that constitute an effective youth sports program. I lacked administrative experience, which caused some problems regarding the league schedule, communication, and overall implementation. After months passed, the initial struggles transitioned to success many ways. Some successes within the BGCSA sports program are that the communication has improved, we provide a variety of sports opportunities, have established rules, policies, and procedures. Even though the youth sports program at BGCSA took a huge leap forward in a few short months, there is still much more room for improvement and growth. It is important to continue the growth of youth sports programs within BGCSA and throughout the United States. Youth sports programs are a great way to help kids develop physically, personally, and emotionally. This positive progress can not be ensured merely by throwing our kids into an organization and saying “go have fun,” but by



providing the proper leadership and fostering a climate that acknowledges youth sports as a developmental process.

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