

# IMPACT OF SPORTS ON YOUTH DEVELOPMENT

When youth sports programs are rooted in Youth Development principles, they positively impact young people by offering safe spaces to learn, take risks, and gain positive affirmation. These benefits last a lifetime.



Research shows that youth involved in sports experience many benefits, including:

- Improved well-being
- Improved academic performance
- Reduced risky behaviors like substance use, vandalism, and fighting
- Improved life skills that are transferrable to other areas of life like school, home, and relationships

Participating in youth sports improves youth well-being in multiple domains, including:

## Physical Health

including increased physical activity and reduced sedentary time



## Life Skills

including communication, responsibility, goal-setting, and self-discipline

## Mental Health

including increased self-esteem and decreased depression, anxiety



## Belonging & Connection

including teamwork and supportive adult and peer relationships

## EQUITY CONSIDERATIONS IN YOUTH SPORTS

Not all young people have access to the benefits of youth sports. Disparities persist because of barriers like cost, burden on families, distance to quality facilities, unwelcoming or unsupportive environments, lack of representation, and lack of knowledge or respect for diverse cultural norms and values.



### Racial & ethnic

Youth of color often experience structural barriers to accessing youth sports and may face coaching bias.

### Gender

Girls & gender expansive youth experience challenges due to traditional gender norms, limited visibility of mentors who share their identity, and exclusion.

### Socioeconomic

Low-income youth face barriers due to high costs, transportation challenges, & family responsibilities that reduce time for sports.

## Game Plan for Success

Overall, research shows that supportive, accessible environments are more important for achieving positive outcomes for youth than other aspects of participation in youth sports. These supportive environments look like:

Coaches and staff are trained in youth development principles and developmentally appropriate approaches to motivating youth.

Frequency and duration requirements are flexible to reduce burden on youth & families, allowing time for healthy habits like sleep.

Authentic youth engagement and leadership is prioritized so that participants have ownership in their own experience.

Sports programs are responsive to diversity in gender and culture so all youth feel safe and included.

Physical locations are selected with an equity lens to reduce geographic / transportation barriers for youth to create more access.



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Youth  
Development