

Community sport's greatest value

- Canadians place the greatest value on what sport can do for their children. Almost two-thirds of adult Canadians report that their children are, or have been, involved in sport.
- There is strong agreement across the country that community sport is one of the most positive forces in the lives of young people today, even more than school, friends and peers, religion and the music/entertainment industry.
- International research shows that sport can indeed contribute to giving children a healthy start in life, help those with a poor start get back on track, and equip youth with the information, skills, personal resources and social support they need to make key life transitions successfully.
- However, poor sport can expose children and youth to negative experiences, discourage their participation, and even impede their positive development. True Sport however, has the power to encourage participation, create positive development and positive experiences.
- Over 80 percent of Canadians believe that promoting positive values in youth should be a priority for sport in Canada, underlining the importance of getting sport right.
- 70 percent of Canadian parents feel their expectations of what sport should provide their children have been met or exceeded, however, more can be done to ensure sport is delivering the greatest benefits possible.

Helping young children learn and develop through play

- The early years 0 to 6 are critical in the brain development of children, with specific windows of opportunity for developing key capacities for learning and functioning later in life.
- Play – structured and unstructured – is one of the primary ways that young children explore the world, develop their physical, cognitive and social-emotional capacities, and make the most of these developmental opportunities.
- While competitive sport is far too complex for very young children, age-appropriate games and physical activity help young children acquire mobility, coordination, knowledge about the world and themselves, self-confidence and initial social skills.
- In 1998-99, an estimated 87 percent of Canadian children aged 4 to 15 participated in organized activities outside of school. Among children aged 4 to 9, those who participated in activities, particularly sports, tended to have fewer difficulties in reading or math than those who rarely or never participated.

Building physical capacity and motor skills

- Early to mid-childhood is when children acquire the strength, coordination and motor-skills necessary to move with efficiency and confidence in physically challenging circumstances. Sport and physical activity can help children to build this general base of motor abilities and a basic understanding of how their body moves.
- Age-appropriate sport and games involving physical activity, and focusing on skills and expression rather than competition and team strategies, are ideal in this respect for children under 12 years of age.

- As children get older, team strategies and competition can be introduced and sport used to enhance the development of specialized motor skills and patterns and to improve creativity, attention, balance, coordination, agility, strength, endurance, and knowledge. Evidence shows that it must be good sport – true sport.

Keeping children and youth active and healthy

- Children and youth who are insufficiently physically active tend to be at higher risk for obesity, type-two diabetes, disease, disability, and motor skill deficiencies.
- Regular participation in physical activity during childhood and adolescence can help:
 - Build and maintain healthy bones, muscles and joints
 - Control weight, build lean muscle and reduce fat
 - Prevent or delay development of high blood pressure and reduce blood pressure in adolescents with hypertension
 - Lower risk of cardiovascular disease
 - Reduce feelings of anxiety and depression.

Using sport to reduce youth health risk behaviours

- While athletes are at greater risk for accidental injuries than non-athletes, they are also more likely to eat healthily and weigh less, and less likely to smoke cigarettes, use drugs, engage in sexual activity, or be bored or hopeless.
- Sport programs can also serve as a platform for educating young people about HIV/AIDS and other health risks, equipping them with information, skills and effective role models that can help them to protect themselves by adopting healthy lifestyle behaviours. Prominent athletes and local coaches who embody positive values and behaviours play a key role in this respect.
- Organized sport participation is generally associated with less antisocial behaviour, such as carrying a weapon or contemplating or attempting suicide, and with less engagement in violence. However, participation in highly competitive contact sports can, in some cases, foster excessive anxiety, and aggressive or violent behaviour.
- These cases appear to be largely driven by parents and coaches who over emphasize winning and directly or indirectly signal that aggressive behaviour is a valid means to victory. This underscores the importance of ensuring that those involved with youth sport reinforce positive true sport values rather than negative values on the rink and playing field.

Benefits of sport for girls

- Girls benefit particularly from sport's potential protective effects against osteoporosis, anxiety, depression, suicide, and adolescent sexual activity and pregnancy.
- Girls' participation is also strongly linked to pro-education values, a greater sense of control over their own bodies, and more generalized feelings of empowerment, identity and self-direction that can help them overcome restrictive gender norms and participate more fully in society.

- Sport participation can also help undermine traditional gender stereotypes concerning academic aptitude, as studies have shown that girls' engagement in sport is linked to improved performance in science and mathematics.

Fostering positive youth development

- Sport can also contribute positively to adolescent identity formation, a critical step in the transition from adolescence to adulthood. Young people who participate in sport score significantly higher on self-concept than those who do not, with girls benefiting even more than boys.
- Sport also facilitates friendships and positive social relations, which also play an important role in youth identity formation.
- Research tracking Canadian youth aged 12 to 15 showed an association between regular participation in sport activities and higher self-esteem and better health. Youth who rarely or never participated in organized sports were more likely to report having lower self-esteem and difficulties with friends.
- Youth who participated in organized sports regularly over the years were more likely to report that expressing their opinion was important and, looking ahead 5 years, had a more positive outlook on their personal futures.
- In a 2003 Ipsos-Reid survey of Canadians aged 12 to 21, respondents indicated that playing sports:
 - Improved their health (99 percent);
 - Helped them make friends (87 percent);
 - Improved their feelings about themselves (85 percent);
 - Helped them succeed at school (58 percent); and
 - Helped them become more active with their family (54 percent).

Enhancing academic achievement

- Sport and physical education play an important role in school life, helping to improve young people's academic achievement levels, behaviour, attendance, health, and social skills.
- Physical exercise causes children and youth to experience a short-term state of relaxation marked by improved concentration, enhanced creativity and memory, better problem solving and task performance, and improved mood. In a school environment, this leads to a better learning environment and greater readiness of individual children to learn.
- Participation in school-based physical activities has been shown to result in considerably healthier social and academic self-concepts, while longitudinal research from the UK confirms that sport can contribute to identification with, and commitment to, school and school values.

Teaching positive values and life skills

- Sport offers young people a means to gain and enhance a range of life skills that can improve their chances of finding employment, raise their level of income, and make them more optimistic and willing to volunteer in the community.

- Research undertaken by the *International Labour Organization* found that well-designed sport programs help youth to acquire many generic employment skills, as well as ethically based skills that employers particularly value such as volunteering, commitment to teamwork and team building, tolerance, and acceptance of rules.
- While the extent to which sport can specifically advance moral or character development is still debated, most researchers agree that, while performing sport skills does not inherently confer any moral benefit and sport experiences vary widely, the social interaction associated with sport participation offers the potential to influence moral development.
- Sport can potentially have a positive moral influence when it is true sport and fosters positive experiences, minimizes negative experiences, empowers youth, treats them as individuals, and systematically and consistently teaches fair play and sportsmanship.

Preventing youth crime and gang involvement

- Research on youth participation in criminal gangs has shown that absence of a positive adult role model is the best predictor of gang membership and a key differentiating factor between gang and non-gang members.
- Youth who participate in sport are less likely to engage in delinquent behaviour and have lower rates of criminal arrest. This relationship tends to be strongest among disadvantaged youth and athletes in minor sport.
- Sport programs to prevent youth crime work best when they are holistic, values based, empowering, and delivered as part of a wider series of activities, in partnership with local renewal agencies and other groups. Purely recreational programs are unlikely to be very effective.
- International research has shown that after-school activities including sport, combined with graduation incentives, can encourage disadvantaged teens to complete high school, reduce youth arrests by as much as 71 percent, and increase attendance at post-secondary education by up to 26 percent.

Providing positive adult role models

- A consistent positive relationship with a caring adult is a significant protective factor, helping to build resilience in children and youth and enabling them to better manage the challenges in their lives.
- Adult role models are one of the primary benefits sport offers young people and play a key part in determining whether sport programs exert a positive or negative influence. Character, fair play, and morals are learned by youth when the goals, attitudes *and* behaviour of the coach or teacher are moral, when they demonstrate the True Sport principles.
- Whether youth have positive or negative experiences depends largely on the adults involved – parents, coaches, officials, and administrators – and the quality of coaching and mentoring. The values and practices employed by these adults can be enabling and enriching for young people, or they can drive them out of sport for a lifetime.

BACKGROUND

PUTTING CHILDREN AND YOUTH ON A POSITIVE LIFE COURSE

WHAT SPORT CAN DO

THE
TRUE SPORT
REPORT

- Canadians have identified a number of serious issues in community sport: too much focus on winning and competition, violence, under- and over-involvement of parents, poor coaching and leadership, harassment, intolerance/racism, lack of fair play, and injuries. These pressures may be contributing to decreasing sport participation rates as children grow older.
- U.S. research has shown that the leading reasons youth drop out of sport are that they are no longer having fun, they don't have the time, and they don't believe they are good enough to play. A comparable investigation of the sport experiences of youth in Canada is needed to address declining participation rates and ensure that youth benefit from sport experiences.
- Increasing physical activity levels by 10 percent would save Canadians over \$150 million annually in direct health care costs.
- All of this evidence would lead us to believe that when sport is founded on the True Sport values of fun, fairness, excellence and inclusion the benefits are monumental.

Download **WHAT SPORT CAN DO: The True Sport Report**

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