

New study dispels myths about what makes youth sports fun for kids

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A new study looks at what makes organized sports fun for kids, and some of the findings might surprise you. The new study, published today, dispels the popular myth that what makes sports the most fun for girls are the social aspects, like friendships, while for boys the fun factor has to do with competition.

"Our data indicate girls and boys are more similar than different when it comes to what makes playing [sports](#) fun," said Amanda J. Visek, Ph.D., an associate professor of exercise and nutrition sciences at the George Washington University Milken Institute School of Public Health (Milken Institute SPH). "What counts most for girls and boys are things like 'trying your best,' 'working hard,' 'staying active,' and 'playing well together as a team.' These findings are the same for athletes at younger and older ages and across recreational and more competitive levels of play."

Visek's study is a follow-up to the original research she and her colleagues at the Milken Institute SPH previously conducted that engaged soccer players ages eight to 19 in concept mapping all of the determinants that make playing sports fun for players. The resultant maps, called FUN MAPS, uncovered 81 fun-determinants within 11 fun-factors. This new study took a closer look at that data and found that, among the 81 determinants of fun, 'winning' ranked No. 40 in importance, scoring farther down on the list than many might have guessed.

At the same time, this study did find some small yet intriguing differences in fun priorities, depending on the age or gender of the young athletes.

For example, younger players reported it was more important to have a coach who allowed them to 'play different positions' than older players. This study's findings underscore other research that suggests younger

players are more likely to benefit from this strategy compared to older, more developed athletes.

"Sport sampling—allowing kids to play several [different sports](#)—as well as the opportunity for kids, especially those at younger ages, to get experience playing all of the different positions within a sport, is important for their athletic development," Visek said.

In addition, boys rated 'copying the moves and tricks of professional athletes' and 'improving athletic skills to play at the next level' as more important to having fun on the playing field when compared to girls. Visek and her research team think this might be a result of boys having more male professional athletes to look up to and identify with than girls, who have fewer female professional athletes to emulate.

These findings, among others that the study unveils, can be used by sport organizations to make their programs more fun and thus keep kids playing longer. Kids in the United States who drop out of organized sports typically do so by middle school, claiming that games and practices just aren't fun anymore.

Importantly, organized sports are one way to keep kids engaged in physical activity—a habit that can help kids sustain a healthy lifestyle, keep them fit, and help them maintain a healthy body weight. More than one out of three U.S. children and adolescents are overweight or obese, and Visek believes that providing kids with higher quality, more fun sport experiences might be one solution toward promoting children's health.

One limitation of this study was that the participants were all soccer players. Visek's research team asked the players to rate the importance of all the determinants and to respond keeping in mind all of the sports they play. Although most of the players were multi-sport athletes who

participated in other sports in addition to soccer, Visek says additional research is necessary to ensure the findings apply to other team sports, as well.

The findings of this study suggest that coaches and parents may be missing the mark if they push a winning season or mistakenly reinforce perceived gender differences.

"When it comes to organized sports, kids just want to have fun," Visek said. "This research does not support the common gender and developmental stereotypes we tend to make about kids in sports."

The study, "Toward understanding youth athletes' fun priorities: An investigation of sex, age, and levels of play," was published Nov. 14 in the *Women in Sport & Physical Activity Journal*. The research was supported by the National Institute of Nursing Research and the National Center for Advancing Translational Sciences, which are both part of the National Institutes of Health.

More information: Amanda J. Visek et al. Toward Understanding Youth Athletes' Fun Priorities: An Investigation of Sex, Age, and Levels of Play, *Women in Sport and Physical Activity Journal* (2019). [DOI: 10.1123/wspaj.2018-0004](https://doi.org/10.1123/wspaj.2018-0004)

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