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SRG 2011

## *Assessing Youth Sport Programs' Facilitation of Positive Youth Development*

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### **Background / Context / Objective**

With growing societal concern for youths' healthy development, extensive literature suggests organized leisure activities serve as optimal contexts to foster positive youth development (Larson, 2000), and sport has consistently been found to be the most popular organized activity among youth (Hansen & Larson, 2007). While youth's involvement in sport is associated with numerous positive outcomes (e.g., increased self-esteem, competence, academic achievement), it is also associated with negative experiences and outcomes (e.g., increased alcohol use, low moral reasoning) (See Zarrett et al., 2008 for a review). One possible explanation for these apparently conflicting findings, is that existing research has typically viewed sport as a single entity and largely overlooked the significant diversity in program philosophies, structures, goals, atmospheres and coaching approaches (Gould & Carson, 2007). As such, the purpose of this project was to examine associations between sport program characteristics and youths' developmental experiences within these programs.

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### **Research Methods**

Participants included 920 youth athletes aged 10-18 ( $M=14.2$ ,  $SD=2.4$ ; 53% male) in 32 different sports (80% team, 20% individual; e.g., soccer, competitive swimming, hockey, volleyball, basketball, field hockey). Given the purpose of the study, participants were recruited from varied sport programs; they were from diverse sport contexts (36% school, 64% club), were of mixed levels/abilities (i.e., 39% regional, 55% provincial, 6% national), and came from across communities (population 105-1.3 million) in three provinces (i.e., Ontario, Alberta, Nova Scotia).

To assess sport programs' characteristics, participants addressed numerous questions about their sport program, leading to the operationalization of 12 program-level variables: sport type (team, individual), sport context (club, school), number of coach(es), team manager (yes, no) age of coach(es), sex of coaches, training time (per year), competition time (per year), team sex (coed, same sex), age range of athletes, size of team, and community size. Participants' demographic data was also collected, leading to 5 individual-level variables: age, sex, years of involvement, birth month, and competition level.

To measure youths' developmental experiences in their sport programs, participants completed the Youth Experience Survey for Sport (YES-S; MacDonald et al., 2012), a 37-item tool measuring youths' experiences in 5 domains: (a) personal and social skills, (b) cognitive skills, (c) goal setting, (d) initiative, and (e) negative experiences.

Analyses involved five separate multiple regressions with the five domains of the YES-S (above) serving as the five dependent variables. Given the exploratory nature of the investigation, a stepwise regression model was used, with all 17 independent variables included in each of the five models.

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### **Results**

In the first regression analysis, we found 7% of the variance in personal and social skills was attributable to predictor variables. Significant predictors were sport type, training time, and team sex. Specifically youth



involved in team sports, who were involved in more training, and were members of mixed-sex (co-ed) teams had higher scores in the area of personal and social skills.

In the second regression analysis, 7% of the variance in initiative was attributable to predictor variables. Coach sex was a significant predictor of initiative development, meaning programs where coach and athlete sex were matched (i.e., males coaching males, females coaching females, or males and females coaching co-ed teams) were associated with more developmental experiences in the area of initiative. In addition, age was a significant predictor of initiative, meaning older athletes had more developmental experiences in the area of initiative.

In the third regression analysis, 9% of the variance in cognitive skills was attributable to predictor variables, with age being the only significant variable. Accordingly, older athletes had more developmental experiences in the area of cognitive skills. Finally, in the fourth and fifth regressions, there were no significant predictors, meaning none of variance in goal setting and negative experiences was attributable to the 17-predictor variables.

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### **Policy Implications and Future Directions**

Findings have important implications for enhancing sport participation among youth, and highlight areas for further research.

First, we found higher amounts of training time was associated with higher scores among youth in the area of personal and social attributes. The Long Term Athlete Development Model offers recommendations for training and competition percentages throughout development, with an increasing focus on competition with age and level. Clearly, while competition is important for the development of technical skills and tactical strategies, it appears that training may offer a more beneficial context for the development of important personal and social skills, and should not be overlooked. As such, it is important that policy and practice recognize the value of training time versus competition time in developing the person within the athlete.

Second, we found mixed-sex teams were also associated with higher scores in the area of personal and social attributes. These findings highlight the need to consider methods to create more opportunities for co-ed youth sport involvement, whether through exhibition games, training camps, etc.

Third, team sports were also associated with the higher scores in the area of personal and social attributes. One would assume that this is due at least in part to the interactive nature of team sports. Future research may want to focus on exploring how individual sports can also better facilitate personal and social attributes such as leadership and teamwork.

Fourth, we were particularly interested by the finding that coach-athlete sex match was associated with higher scores in the area of initiative. These findings suggest that when considering initiative development, we should be promoting females coaching females, males coaching males, and mixed-sexes coaching co-ed teams at youth levels. As such, these results highlight the continued importance of the Women in Coaching program. In particular, the program may want to prioritize the training and placement of female coaches on female-only and co-ed teams at youth levels. Future research may also aim to focus on why sex-matched coaches may be doing a better job of facilitating initiative among youth sport participants.

Finally, we feel it is also important to note non-significant findings of our study. We were somewhat surprised by our findings that the sport program characteristics examined did not predict youths' development in 3 of the 5 domains (cognitive skills, goal setting, or negative experiences) and that 8 of the 12 program

characteristics examined (i.e., sport context, number of coaches, team manager, age of coach(es), competition time, age range of athletes, size of team, community size) did not predict any developmental experiences. Further, when program variables were significant, they only accounted for a very low amount of variance in developmental experiences. Despite this, past research highlights that youth sport programs have the potential to facilitate both positive and negative developmental experiences and outcomes (Zarrett et al., 2008), so there is clearly more to investigate around this research question. Future research and policy should perhaps shift focus from program-level variables to other factors within programs that may be contributing to youths' developmental experiences in sport. For example, a growing body of literature is highlighting the critical role of the coach in facilitating positive developmental experiences among youth (e.g., Camiré et al., 2011), emphasizing the need to better understand coaches' roles and characteristics, in addition to their coaching processes and mechanisms, in order to best optimize resource allocation and distribution to facilitating youths' positive development.

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**Key Stakeholders and Benefits**

NSOs, PSOs, True Sport, Women in Coaching, CS4L, Kidsport, PHE