



DEFINING QUALITY YOUTH SPORTS ENVIRONMENTS:

A Conceptual Framework and Examples from the Field

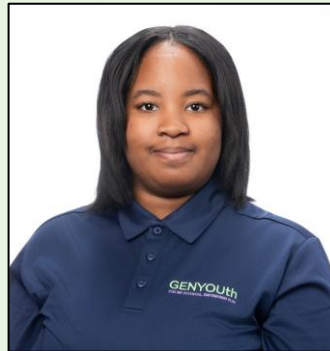
Putting It All Together

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Youth Voice and Autonomy in Youth Sports



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Moderator
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International Sport and Culture
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Youth Panel Themes

- Having mechanisms for hearing from youth and incorporating their feedback is key!
- Potential for youth sports to teach a huge range of transferrable life skills—value of hard work and discipline, teamwork, personal improvement, and more
 - Those lessons have spillover effects in all aspects of life!
- Coaches are a lynchpin for cultivation of growth and development
 - This takes lots of effort! Good coaches go above and beyond.
- As athletes get older, shift toward focus on competition and less on other skills—and most talented athletes may get the most attention.
- Access to facilities can be variable and leads to different levels of time burden.
- Parent communication may represent a missed opportunity in some cases.

Structural Quality, Access, Transparency, and Engagement in Youth Sport Programs



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Girls On the Run



Moderator
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Presentation Themes

- Clear rules and policies, and associated training, communication, etc., are crucial to ensure understanding and alignment across coaches, athletes, parents, and others.
- Ensuring access demands attention to a wide range of factors—e.g., addressing affordability, providing programming in the places where kids already are (or to which they're proximate), adapting programming for youth with disabilities and other needs, ensuring cultural responsiveness, and more
- It is essential to intentionally center youth as leaders in designing sport experiences and ensuring experiences are fun—and that means not just up-front design but also ongoing youth feedback and continuous improvement
- Effective coaching is core to the youth experience—quality onboarding, training, and continuous support are essential.
- Strong leadership is critical, especially in the face of high staff and volunteer turnover.
- Having a strategy for engaging parents is key and may require different opportunities given that there is no “one-size-fits-all” approach that works for all parents.

Sample Breakout Takeaways

- There is often overlap or synergy across different sections of the framework, particularly in terms of the foundational conditions; it may be worthwhile to signal that interconnectedness more explicitly.
- Access goes beyond just having opportunity available—it's key to consider broad factors including affordability (including equipment costs, communication of aid opportunities, etc.), transportation, cultural relevance, accessible communication, and what the experience is like when kids actually get there.
- Partnerships can play a key role in expanding reach and accessibility to priority populations; such partners may need to be more explicitly integrated into the framework.
- Strong, proactive outreach and recruitment efforts are essential to ensure broad representation, not just of youth but also of coaches and others; those approaches may be worth elevating in the framework.
- Youth voice should systematically be included in shaping programs (e.g., via athlete councils or other ongoing mechanisms)—what do youth themselves want to see?
- Parents play a particularly central role in youth access and experience—it may be important to incorporate them more fully (e.g., accessibility for not just for youth but also for parents)

Psychological Environment, Health, and Safety in Youth Sport Programs



Jackie Kippen
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Jaci McCormack
Rise Above



Tierra Stewart
DC Scores



Moderator
Lynette Craft, PhD
American Orthopaedic Society
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Presentation Themes

- Quality is created through organizational systems, not just individual coaches, with consistent training, procedures, and supports shaping the youth experience—“quality youth sports environments begin before the first practice.”
 - *But* it also important to be flexible to meet local needs (“stubborn on vision, flexible on details”)
- Parents plan a key role in how youth experience sports environments—there is a need to go beyond just communication and toward deep engagement.
- Belonging must be intentionally designed, and prioritized over performance.
- Coaches should be developed as leaders in whole-child development, responsible for fostering confidence, connection, well-being, and growth, not just sport skills.
- Health and safety extend beyond injury prevention to include psychological safety, mental health support, trusted relationships, and supportive environments.
- Programs should be youth-centered and responsive, adapting to participant needs and prioritizing fun.
- Strong partnerships and community connections strengthen quality, especially when partners share the program’s mission and values.

Sample Breakout Takeaways

- Attendees appreciate that safety is viewed holistically, encompassing not just physical but also psychological and emotional well-being.
- Fun, belonging, and positive team culture are central to high-quality youth sport experiences—and fun depends on wide-ranging factors (e.g., not just the activities themselves, but also things like balanced teams, injury avoidance, appropriate breaks, etc.)
- Access to resources to support safety can be a challenge in many communities; developing partnerships can be critical to foster safe environments.
- Coaches are a primary driver of youth experience, making coach training and support critical—kids “come for the stuff and stay for the staff”
- Safety is foundational—parents won’t send their kids if programs aren’t safe.
- Parents and spectators are major factors driving how the environment feels for kids; setting clear expectations and engaging those audiences are key considerations.
- Programs need practical tools and resources to support implementation and evaluation—e.g., tools to understand whether their program environment fosters belonging.
- It is important to ensure language in the framework is accessible; we should reconsider terms that feel jargony or otherwise not user-friendly (“autonomy support,” “motivational climate”)

Appropriateness for Developmental Stage and Positive Youth Development in Youth Sport Programs



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Presentation Themes

- Enjoyment is central to sustained participation and may be strengthened by focusing on individual mastery over competition.
- Developmentally appropriate experiences should reflect differences in youth readiness, skill levels, and competitive needs—not just age.
- With intentional focus, sport programs can achieve a huge range of positive youth development goals—e.g., building fundamental movement skills and life skills such as self-control, teamwork, responsibility, leadership, and more
- Coach training should extend beyond sport skill development and include elements like youth development, motivation, and SEL; providing that training may require flexible delivery to meet different coach needs.
- Quality implementation matters—factors like belonging, relationships, and reflection/debriefing can have an important influence on youth outcomes.
- Strong research can be integrated with practice and generate win-win opportunities!

Sample Breakout Takeaways

- In thinking about developmental appropriateness, we need to avoid incorrect assumptions about what is fun for different groups (e.g., older v. younger youth, boys v. girls)—oftentimes these are the same but need to be operationalized differently.
- It is critical to mobilize parents as partners in positive youth development and engaging them as reinforcers rather than compromisers of PYD goals.
- Potential value in clarifying terms like “life skills,” “character-building,” and “the 5 C’s.”
- There is an enormous need for coach training in (and organizational reinforcements around) child development to enable them to better shape sports context to developmental stage and adapt to individual differences.
- Strong appreciation for the importance of teaching and coaching around PYD, including translating these principles into competitive sports contexts.

Cross-Cutting Themes

- Keep youth at the “top of the pyramid”: fun, belonging, and youth voice should drive decisions.
- Factors in the framework function as a system: things like protocols/standards, access, safety, and belonging influence one another. How can this interconnectedness be integrated into the framework?
- Strong programs balance consistency and flexibility—shared values and standards paired with adaptation to local community needs.
- Quality starts long before the first practice, through mission-setting, planning, training, policies, communication, expectation management, and more.
- People matter at every level: coaches, volunteers, leaders, parents, and community partners all shape the youth experience; attracting and retaining good people, and positioning them to succeed, is key.
- Parents are essential and sometimes overlooked partners, requiring engagement, education, and clear expectations, not just communication.
- Partnerships can play a variety of key roles—e.g., ensuring accessibility, promoting health and safety, and evaluating results.
- Continuous evaluation is essential and must include translation of results into ongoing improvement..
- The field would benefit from greater knowledge sharing, highlighting successful models, tools, partnerships, and implementation strategies.