

Go Out and Play: Athletic Participation and Children's Well-Being

Go Out and Play: Youth Sports in America is a comprehensive, 184-page research report, which covers a range of topics, including children's participation in organized sports, youth involvement with exercise, links between athletic participation and family life, gender and the frequency of physical education, associations between athletic participation and children's physical and emotional well-being, age of entry into sports and drop-out rates, how gender equity varies across communities (urban, suburban and rural), gender and interest in sports and physical activity, and sports involvement among understudied populations (children with disabilities, children in immigrant families).

Advocates for youth sports often tout its favorable influence on children's health and emotional well-being. Section Five of *Go Out and Play* explored a variety of ways that sports involvement intersects with the overall development of girls and boys. Here "health and well-being" are broadly defined to include physical health, emotional health and successful social adaptation in school. The results show that for many U.S. children, athletic participation contributes to general health and body esteem, healthy weight, social relationships, higher quality of life, and educational achievement. Some of the main findings are listed below.

- Across all grade levels (third-12th), higher percentages of female athletes than non-athletes described their health as "excellent."
- High scores on body esteem are more likely at all grade levels among girls who play three or more sports per year. Moderately involved (one or two sports per year) female athletes have higher body esteem than non-athletes in third-fifth grades and high school, but not in sixth-eighth grades.
- Eighty percent of high school girls who played on three or more athletic teams had a healthy BMI, compared with 75% of moderately involved athletes and 60% of the non-athletes.

- Fewer third- through eighth-grade female athletes than non-athletes watch more than 21 hours or more of TV during the week (21% and 35%, respectively).
- Among the sixth- through eighth- and ninth- through 12th-grade girls, athletes report significantly higher rates of participation in clubs and groups than non-athletes.
- Popularity is associated with athletic participation for both female and male athletes.
- Among the girls, 28% of the sixth- through eighth-grade non-athletes have low quality of life, compared to 21% of moderately involved athletes and only 10% of highly involved athletes.

Conclusion: The findings above strongly suggest that sports help shape the physical and emotional health of U.S. children. Athletic participation is clearly part of the solution to national public health concerns about overweight among children. Sports help children develop not only healthy bodies, but also healthy body images, the latter a basic indicator of mental health. The synergies between sports participation and physical and mental health, moreover, are present among children as early as the middle-school years.

To access the full report, go to www.WomensSportsFoundation.org/GoOutandPlay

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