

Go Out and Play: Sports, Exercise and Family Life

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).

Go Out & Play is one of the few studies that examine the role of sports and physical activity in American family life. Sports are an asset for U.S. families, and parents can be a resource for young athletes. Children's involvement with sports is associated with higher levels of family satisfaction. Youth sports can help build communication and trust between parents and children. Sports help parents and children spend more time together. The positive connections are particularly evident in dual-parent families, but they also resonate in single-parent families. Key findings include:

- In dual-parent families, family satisfaction increases as children's participation in sports increases—especially for daughters.
- Daughters' involvement with sports is related to higher levels of satisfaction in single-parent families.
- Ninety percent of parents attended their child's game or performance once a week or more, thus immersing themselves in the life of the school or community.
- Parents devoted similar levels of encouragement to daughters and sons. A combined 63% of parents practiced or exercised with their child once or more per week.
- Parents of third- through eighth-graders were much more involved than parents of high school students; 46% of mothers and 35% of fathers scored high on parental involvement, while 20% of parents of high school students scored high.

- Mothers topped girls' list of those who "encourage me a lot," and fathers ranked the highest among the boys. Similar numbers of girls (47%) as boys (44%) cited their physical education or gym teacher. Boys, however, said their fathers encourage them to be physically active at a higher rate than that reported by girls.
- Dads may be spending more time mentoring their sons than daughters; i.e., while 46% of boys cited their dads as teaching them the most about exercise and how to play sports, only 28% of girls did so.
- Non-family members are the top two people girls mentioned as their mentors in exercise and sports—coaches and physical education teachers.

Conclusion: The adage goes, "It takes a village to raise a child." Youth sports are part of the village, and both families and children seem to be enriched by youth sports involvement. The positive contributions of girls' sports involvement in single-parent families should be noted by policy makers and advocates for youth development. And yet, the mosaic of results also suggests that while mothers and fathers provide similar levels of encouragement and support for both their daughters and sons to be active in sports and exercise, girls are being shortchanged by dads who may be channeling more energy into mentoring sons than daughters.

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

Citation: Sabo, D. and Veliz, P. (2008). *Go Out and Play: Youth Sports in America*. East Meadow, NY: Women's Sports Foundation.