



SHOULD I LET THEM PLAY?

TEEN SPORTS IN AMERICA:
ATTITUDES AND VIEWS OF PARENTS



April, 2016



INTRODUCTION

The personal growth and development benefits associated with youth sports participation are well-documented and understood. This research confirms that parents appreciate the many ways that organized sports can benefit their children, both in the present and in preparing them for the future.

Peeling back the onion a little, we find that parents are also aware of and concerned about aspects of the “underbelly” of youth sports that they witness unfolding around them. Many parents agree that things are becoming intense, both for kids and among parents on the sidelines, and they acknowledge the increased pressure for kids to specialize in order to keep competing.

Most (71%) wish high school sports were more like when they were kids. This comes up spontaneously in conversation, especially around the aggressiveness they see from some sideline parents who exhibit poor sportsmanship. Still, and encouragingly, there are strong associations between high school sports and community pride, which may seem anachronistic today. Community spirit around kids’ sports is alive and well, at least for now, and must be nurtured and encouraged.

METHODOLOGY

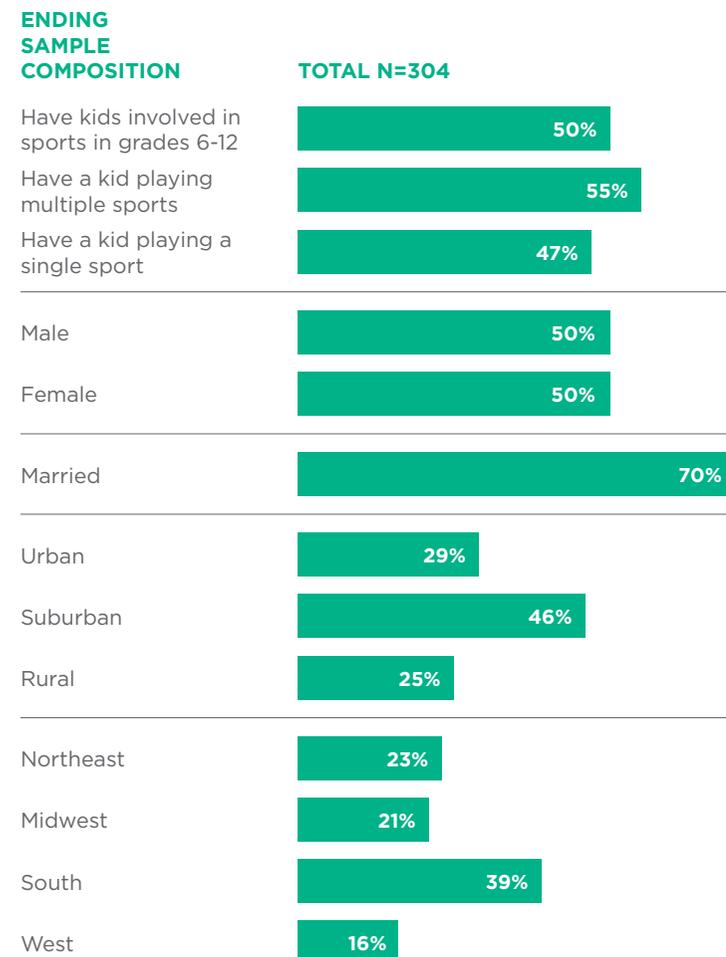
National online survey among 304 parents with at least one child in grades 6-12, to be inclusive of current high school parents as well as those approaching that threshold.

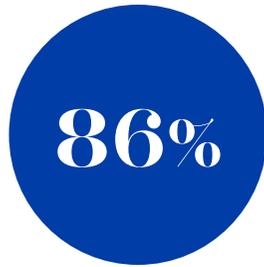
Quota: at least half have a child in these grades involved in organized sports.

Strive for good geographic and demographic representation, but no other quotas imposed.

Survey conducted March 28-30, 2016.

In addition, we conducted five in-depth interviews with parents of youth sports participants. Verbatim comments from these interviews are included throughout this report.





of parents feel sports are important for kids in these teen years.

This sentiment was shared equally by men and women, as well as across regions and among urban, suburban and rural dwellers. As expected, the opinion was strongest among parents of kids playing sports (97%) and among those who had themselves played sports in high school (94%).

Important to play organized sports grades 6-12	Total N=304	Kid Plays N=152	Kid Does Not Play N=152	Played Sports N=192	Did Not Play N=112
% Yes	86	97	74	94	71
% No	14	3	26	6	29

How do people feel about intensity and specialization in youth sports?

Findings are a bit mixed on these points, as parents seem to want to have it both ways. On the one hand, many—especially parents whose 6th to 12th graders do not play sports—feel that sports are becoming too intense too early. Three out of four parents overall agree that there is too much emphasis on winning in kids sports. Six out of 10 feel that kids are too pressured to focus on one sport and think that it's better for kids to play multiple sports.

At the same time, parents do want their kids to take sports seriously, and a majority—this time especially those with kids playing sports—think it's fine for them to practice a chosen sport year round.

% Agree or Agree Strongly	Total N=304	Kid Plays N=152	Kid Does Not Play N=152
Sports are becoming too intense too early for kids.	65	57	73
There is too much focus on winning in kids' sports.	76	72	80
Kids are too pressured to focus on one sport.	60	57	63
It's better for kids to play multiple sports than specialize in one.	59	66	53
Kids should take playing sports seriously.	69	77	62
Kids should practice their chosen sport year round.	60	68	51

“I think it's kind of sad—there's a lot more pressure to make your high school team. It's almost like you have to start at 8-9, but then your kid gets to high school and is burnt out.” - Mother of 11-year-old

People want to feel connected to high school sports, but there’s also a lot of bad behavior...

It is encouraging to see a near universal sense that high school sports foster community pride, true across all the segments we investigated and across regions. And while parents certainly see a role for club/private sports—most likely for their pre-high school teens—there is a preference among parents of athletes that they play with their school teams (63% agreement).

What is disconcerting is the level of agreement around the embarrassing behavior of parents at games. This was our surrogate for fans getting unruly, shouting at refs and coaches, etc., which we see many examples of online and off. Maybe this is one reason parents tend to agree that they “wish HS sports were more like they were when I was that age.”

% Agree or Agree Strongly	Total N=304	Kid Plays N=152	Kid Does Not Play N=152
High school sports foster a sense of community pride.	91	97	86
My local community highly values high school sports.	89	94	84
I would prefer my kid plays sports with his/her school rather than with a private club (asked of those with kids playing, N=152).	63	n/a	n/a
I wish high school sports were like they were when I was that age.	71	74	68
Parent behavior at games is embarrassing.	79	75	83

“It’s having to remind parents that your children are not playing for the Blackhawks. They’ve had trouble getting refs for hockey because they’ve been yelled at so much by the parents.” - Mother of 12-year-old athlete

Parents believe in their kids, but many also need a reality check.

As parents, our hopes run high for our kids' success. We may just wish the best for them or we may actually fantasize that they have what it takes to play professionally. According to the NCAA, roughly 6% of high school athletes will compete at an NCAA school, and in 2012 CBSNews reported the odds of receiving a scholarship to a NCAA school as 2%. Nevertheless, parents' hopes and estimations of their kids' skills run high, with nearly 70% of both dads and moms thinking their kids could earn an athletic scholarship. And they are convinced they should take their kids' sports seriously.

But it isn't all about competing and making it—parents also agree that they want their kids to value fun as well and want them to play in high school regardless of whether they play in college or beyond. Interestingly, dads are even more gung-ho about them playing even if they don't go on, most likely because more of the men played when they were young.

Among parents with a 6th-12th grader in organized sports. % Agree or Agree Strongly	Male N=82	Female N=70
I hope my kid is skilled enough to compete at the collegiate level.	78	84
I think my kid could earn a scholarship playing sports.	67	69
Parents should take their kids playing sports seriously.	77	69
I want my kid to value the fun as much as winning.	98	97
I personally want my kid to play high school sports even if he/she doesn't end up playing in college or the pros.	91	81

“The fun part is absolutely critical. The moment it doesn't become fun anymore, you've got to move on and find something different.” - Father of 12-year-old

While moms and dads tend to agree on most aspects of youth sports,

we found that they differ on some issues. Moms are more likely to acknowledge the pressure to specialize, and they also appear to be more tuned in to the potential for burnout. Dads are more likely to think it's better to play multiple sports—again, possibly tied to their own youth experiences, or perhaps they read more about issues surrounding sports specialization—yet at the same time, men are the ones most likely to want kids to take sports seriously. Given all the life-skill benefits they ascribe to sports and the fact that they agree there is too much focus on winning, “taking sports seriously” may relate as much to discipline and teamwork as it does to improving skills and winning.

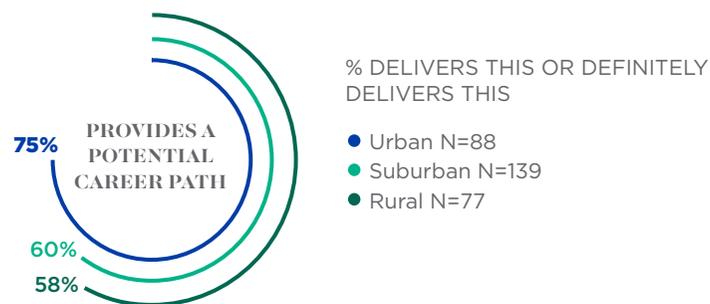
% Agree Strongly	Male N=151	Female N=153
Kids are too pressured to focus on one sport.	52	67
Kids should be allowed to stop playing sports if they feel “burnt out.”	36	50
It's better for kids to play multiple sports than specialize in one.	66	53
Kids should take playing sports seriously.	73	66

A few regional differences are worth noting:

- Parents in the Northeast are less likely to think it is important that their kids take playing sports seriously.
- Southern parents are more likely to think playing sports could lead to scholarships.
- Midwestern parents are more likely to prefer that their kids play sports with their school rather than a private club.

% Agree or Agree Strongly	Northeast N=69	Midwest N=65	South N=120	West N=50
Kids should take playing sports seriously.	55	74	75	70
I think my kid could earn a scholarship playing sports.	68	58	79	58
I would prefer my kid plays sports with his/her school rather than with a private club.	59	74	65	50

PARENTS FROM URBAN AREAS ARE THE MOST LIKELY TO THINK THAT PLAYING SPORTS COULD PROVIDE A POTENTIAL CAREER PATH FOR THEIR KIDS.



Parents advise athletic directors to focus on human skills and interaction more than on sports and winning.

“Winning championships isn’t as important as the confidence instilled by participation.”

“Give every kid a chance to make the team.”

“Allow the kids to have fun.”

“The school could let the students know that yes, we will be exercising/training/setting aside time outside of school, but it is FUN.”

“Reduce the barriers of entry to sports that ‘don’t have as much active participation’... or are seen as ‘country club sports.’”

“To teach them values as much as skills.”

“They should definitely reinforce that there are multiple opportunities. And give kids a reality check—emphasize the real intent/the benefits of high school—don’t get caught up in the perfection aspect or thinking about college scholarships or pros.”

“Winning is good, but having fun is more important.”

“Help kids to enjoy what they are doing and have more fun and not only focus on winning.”

What advice might you give to the Athletic Director of your local public high school? (OPEN END)



ADDITIONAL DATA



STILL THINKING ABOUT KIDS IN 6TH TO 12TH GRADES, HOW WELL DO YOU THINK ORGANIZED SPORTS ARE ABLE TO PROVIDE THE FOLLOWING BENEFITS TO KIDS? (DEFINITELY DELIVERS THIS, DELIVERS THIS, DOESN'T DELIVER THIS, DOESN'T DELIVER THIS AT ALL.)

% Saying Definitely Delivers This	Total N=304	Kid Plays N=152	Kid Does Not Play N=152	Played Sports N=192	Did Not Play N=112	Male N=151	Female N=153
Keeps them healthy	57	66	47	63	46	59	54
Keeps them out of trouble	45	60	31	45	46	44	46
Helps them make friends	55	70	39	62	43	58	52
Teaches them teamwork	73	82	64	78	65	74	73
Lets them show their competitive side	47	61	34	51	41	48	46
Lets them feel talented at something	44	57	30	49	35	44	43
Makes them feel like they're part of something bigger	50	65	36	54	45	48	52
Teaches perseverance, how to recover from losing	56	66	45	59	50	56	56
Teaches leadership skills	45	61	30	52	35	45	46
Teaches them to be disciplined	53	68	38	58	45	52	54
Builds character	56	70	42	63	45	57	55
Provides a chance for college scholarship	32	41	22	33	29	27	36
Provides a potential career path	19	29	9	22	13	21	17
Builds confidence	53	67	39	58	45	52	54
Prepares them for the future	30	45	15	33	26	32	29
Gives the local community something to be proud of	41	57	26	44	38	40	42
Teaches skills that are transferable to the classroom	33	45	21	38	25	32	33
Leads to healthier lifestyles later in life	47	63	32	52	40	50	44

THINKING IN GENERAL ABOUT KIDS' SPORTS PARTICIPATION, TO WHAT EXTENT DO YOU AGREE OR DISAGREE WITH THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS?

(AGREE STRONGLY, AGREE, DISAGREE, DISAGREE STRONGLY)

% agree or strongly agree	Total N=304	Kid Plays N=152	Kid Does Not Play N=152	Played Sports N=192	Did Not Play N=112	Male N=151	Female N=153
In order to succeed in a sport, kids should start specializing before 6th grade.	39	45	34	39	40	39	40
It's better for kids to play multiple sports than specialize in one.	59	66	53	63	54	66	53
Kids are too pressured to focus on one sport.	60	57	63	56	66	52	67
Parents should strongly influence what sport(s) their kids choose.	27	34	19	25	29	30	24
There is too much focus on winning in kids' sports.	76	72	80	73	80	72	79
My local community highly values high school sports.	89	94	84	93	82	88	90
High school sports foster a sense of community pride.	91	97	86	95	85	92	91
Kids should practice their chosen sport year-round.	60	68	51	61	56	59	60
All kids should have a chance to participate in a high school sport, regardless of skill level.	77	81	74	79	75	77	77
The risk of injury outweighs the benefits associated with high school sports.	40	43	37	35	48	43	37
Kids should be allowed to stop playing sports if they feel "burnt out."	92	91	93	91	95	91	94
Kids can get the same benefits from other activities that they get from playing sports.	70	66	75	65	80	69	72
Sports are becoming too intense too early for kids.	65	57	73	61	72	64	66
Kids should take playing sports seriously.	69	77	62	71	66	73	66
Parents should take their kids' playing sports seriously.	73	78	68	77	67	77	69
Kids should play sports with their school rather than play with a private club.	41	48	34	41	41	47	35
Parent behavior at games is embarrassing.	79	75	83	76	85	78	80
I feel too many kids are too intimidated to try out for a sport.	71	68	74	70	72	70	72
I wish high school sports were like they were when I was that age.	71	74	68	73	67	68	75

NOW TO ANSWER THIS QUESTION, PLEASE THINK SPECIFICALLY ABOUT YOUR CHILD IN GRADES 6 THROUGH 12 WHO CURRENTLY PARTICIPATES IN AN ORGANIZED SPORT. IF YOU HAVE MORE THAN ONE PLEASE THINK OF THE OLDEST. HOW MUCH DO YOU AGREE OR DISAGREE WITH THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS?

(AGREE STRONGLY, AGREE, DISAGREE, DISAGREE STRONGLY)

% of parents with a child in organized sports in grades 6-12 who agree or agree strongly	Total N=152	Played Sports N=108	Did Not Play N=44**	Male N=82	Female N=70
I would prefer my kid plays sports with his/her school rather than with a private club.	63	61	68	67	59
I hope my kid is skilled enough to compete at the collegiate level.	81	81	80	78	84
I think my kid could earn a scholarship playing sports.	68	69	66	67	69
I want my kid to value the fun as much as winning.	97	97	98	98	97
I take my kid's sports very seriously.	79	84	66	84	73
I want my kid to take his/her sports seriously.	88	89	86	90	86
It's entirely up to my kid what sport to play or whether to play any.	98	98	98	98	99
My kid could get the same benefits from other activities that he/she gets from playing sports.	68	67	73	73	63
I personally want my kid to play high school sports even if he/she doesn't end up playing in college or the pros.	90	92	86	91	81
My kid would be allowed to quit playing sports if he/she feels "burnt out."	91	90	93	87	96
I feel that my kid is too intimidated to try out for a sport.	34	32	36	33	34
I would want my kid to specialize in a single sport.	44	43	48	43	46

**Caution: small base

THANK YOU!



