

# Keeping Sports Fun: Battling Burnout in Youth Sports



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# Disclosure

- I have no relevant financial disclosures
- Executive Committee, Council on Sports Medicine and Fitness



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# Learning Objectives

1. List the symptoms of burnout in youth athletes
2. Identify risk factors for burnout in youth athletes
3. Develop strategies to educate families on how to decrease the risk of burnout in youth athletes

# The Good

- 60 million children and adolescents participate in organized sports
- Up to 42 million children participate in recreational sports in the United States



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## THROUGH SPORTS, CHILDREN CAN:



Maintain a healthy body weight



Grow confidence



Discover goals and passions



Increase bone density



Fight depression and anxiety



Build crucial teamwork skills



Develop a sense of sporting conduct



Develop integrity and the ability to play fair and honest



Work on time management skills



Learn to balance responsibilities



Make friends



Have fun!



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Sources:

Aspen Institute ([www.aspenprojectplay.org](http://www.aspenprojectplay.org))

Utah State University 2019 Youth Sport Survey ([www.cehs.usu.edu](http://www.cehs.usu.edu))

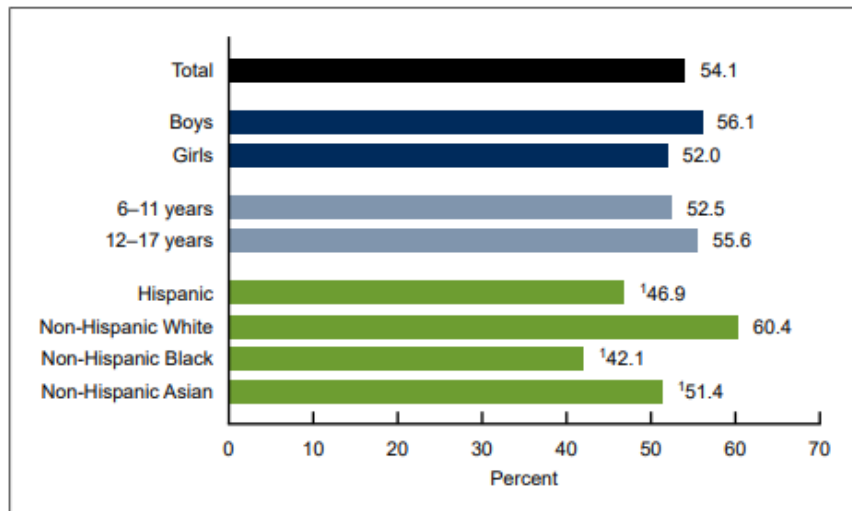


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# Participation Trends 2020

Figure 1. Percentage of children aged 6–17 years that participated in sports in the past 12 months, by sex, age group, and race and Hispanic origin: United States, 2020



<sup>†</sup>Significantly different from non-Hispanic White children ( $p < 0.05$ ).

NOTES: Estimates are based on household interviews of a sample of the U.S. civilian noninstitutionalized population. Access data table for Figure 1 at: <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/databriefs/db441-tables.pdf#1>.

SOURCE: National Center for Health Statistics, National Health Interview Survey, 2020.



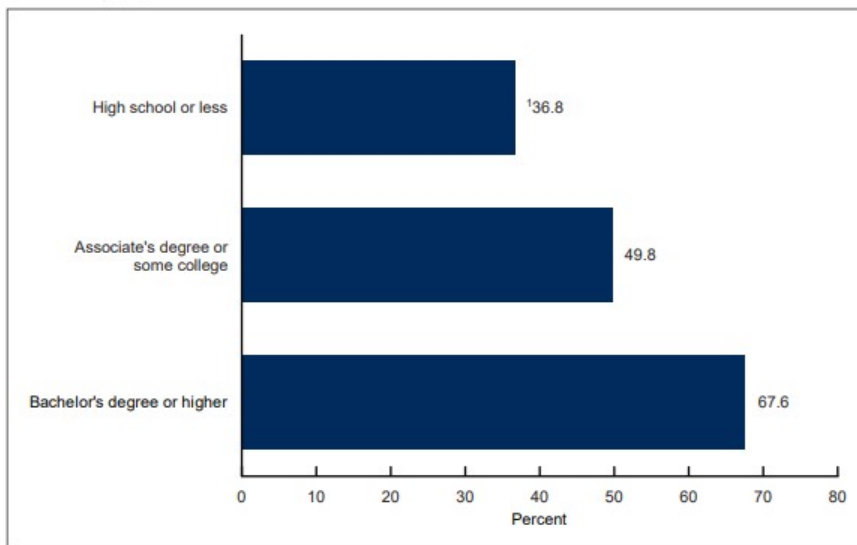
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# Parental Education

Figure 2. Percentage of children aged 6–17 years that participated in sports in the past 12 months, by parental education: United States, 2020



<sup>1</sup>Significant linear trend by parent's highest education ( $p < 0.05$ ).

NOTES: Estimates are based on household interviews of a sample of the U.S. civilian noninstitutionalized population. Access data table for Figure 2 at: <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/databriefs/db441-tables.pdf#2>.

SOURCE: National Center for Health Statistics, National Health Interview Survey, 2020.



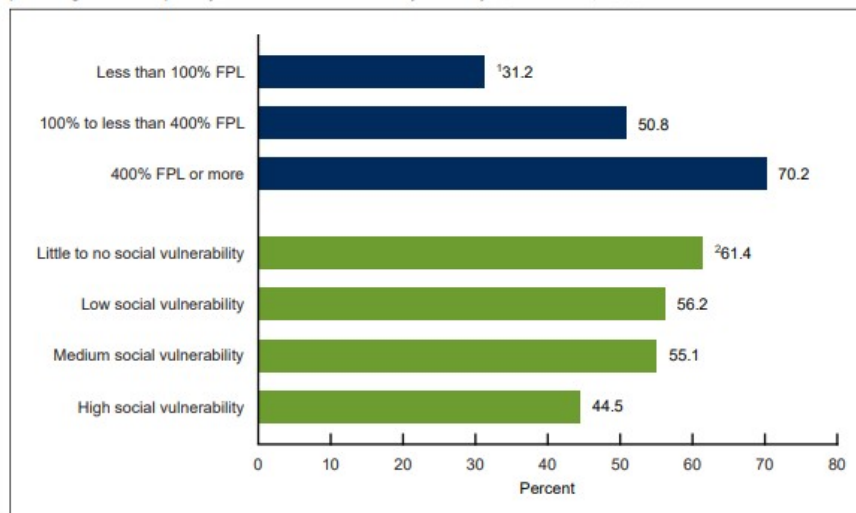
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# Family Income

Figure 3. Percentage of children aged 6–17 years that participated in sports in the past 12 months, by family income as percentage of federal poverty level and social vulnerability of county: United States, 2020



<sup>1</sup>Significant linear trend by family income ( $p < 0.05$ ).

<sup>2</sup>Significant linear trend by social vulnerability index score ( $p < 0.05$ ).

NOTES: FPL is federal poverty level, which is based on the ratio of the family's income in the previous calendar year to the appropriate poverty threshold defined by the U.S. Census Bureau. Estimates are based on household interviews of a sample of the U.S. civilian noninstitutionalized population. Access data table for Figure 3 at: <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/databriefs/db441-tables.pdf#3>.

SOURCE: National Center for Health Statistics, National Health Interview Survey, 2020.



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# The Bad

- 70% of youth athletes discontinue participation by 13 years of age
- 75% of adolescents do not meet physical activity guidelines
- Injury and burnout primary causes for attrition from sports



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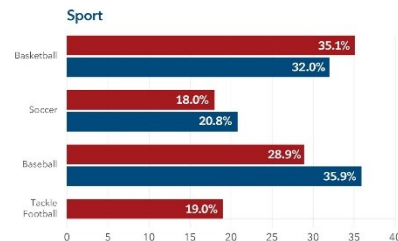
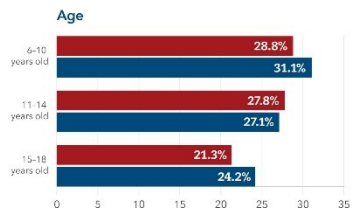
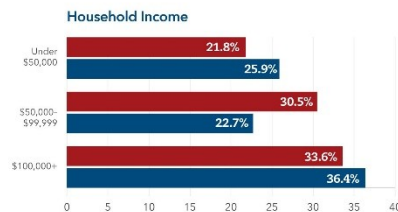
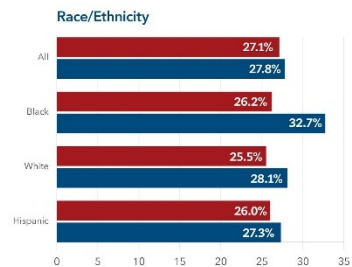
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## Youth Who Have Lost Interest in Sports

Percentage of youth sports parents who say their child lost interest in the past year

■ Fall 2022 ■ Fall 2021



Source: Aspen Institute, Utah State University, Louisiana Tech University, TeamSnap youth sports parent surveys, 2021 and 2022.  
 Note: Smaller sample sizes prevented analysis of additional races/ethnicities and sports. Tackle football did not have a large enough sample size to be evaluated in Fall 2021.

# How Did We Get Here?



PROFESSIONALIZATION OF  
YOUTH SPORTS



HIGH TRAINING  
VOLUMES



PRESSURE TO  
SPECIALIZE



PRESSURE TO  
SUCCEED



PERCEPTION  
AROUND FUTURE  
ATHLETIC  
SUCCESS



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**IF A YOUTH SPORT COACHING  
PROGRAM RESEMBLES AN ELITE  
COACHING PROGRAM, IT IS PROBABLY  
NOT THE BEST PLACE FOR A YOUNG  
ATHLETE TO BE.**

**COACHINGYOUNGATHLETES.COM**

# Professionalization of Youth Sports

- High training volumes
- Early specialization
- Mini adults
- Bullying and abusive coaching
- Increased risk of injury
- Cost
- Outcome focused approach
- Lack of free play
- Loss of enjoyment

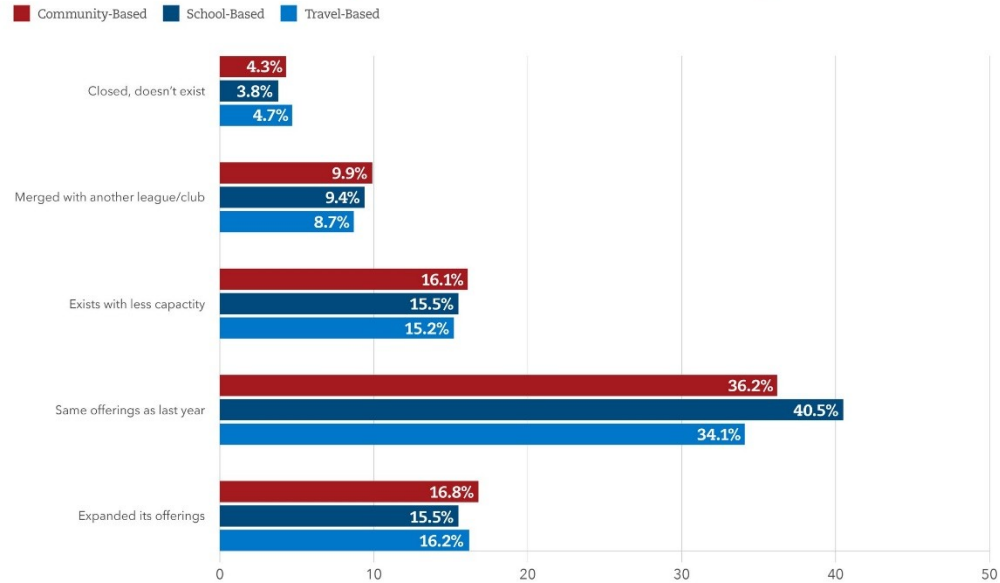


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## 2022 Status of Youth Sports Clubs, Teams, and Organizations vs. 1 Year Ago



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Source: Aspen Institute, Utah State University, Louisiana Tech University, TeamSnap youth sports parent surveys, 2022



# Increased Sport Specialization

- Adolescents who spend more hours practicing their sport per week than their age
    - 70% more likely to sustain an overuse injury
  - Athletes who practice sport for 8 months or more
    - 3 times more likely to sustain an overuse injury
- than peers



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MLB TONIGHT TONIGHT MLB TONIGHT MLB TONIGHT MLB TONIGHT

### PLAYER PROFILE

OUTFIELDER & QUARTERBACK

**A's KYLER MURRAY**

AGE: 21 HT: 5'11" WT: 195 LBS  
BATS: RIGHT THROWS: RIGHT

**2018 MLB DRAFT**  
9TH OVERALL PICK BY ATHLETICS

**JUNIOR QB AT UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA**  
2018 HEISMAN TROPHY WINNER  
• 4,361 PASSING YDS, 70.9 CMP%, 54 TD

▶ SIGNED WITH ATHLETICS IN JUNE (\$4.66M SIGNING BONUS)




**KYLER MURRAY**  
OKLAHOMA

**THE DRAFT**  
IN MINNEAPOLIS

- 5-10
- 207 LBS.
- HEISMAN TROPHY WINNER
- 4,361 PASSING YARDS, 42 TD PASSES
- 1,001 RUSHING YARDS, 12 TD'S




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# Sport Diversification

- 88% of college athletes played more than one sport as children
- 70% did not specialize until greater than 12 years old
- One year of specialization can lead to increased risks of injury and burnout



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## AGE CHILDREN QUIT REGULARLY PLAYING A SPORT (AGES 3-18)

SPORT	AVG. AGE OF LAST REGULAR PARTICIPATION	AVG. LENGTH IN YEARS OF PARTICIPATION
Baseball	10.5	3.3
Basketball	11.2	3.2
Bicycling	9.5	2.5
Cross Country	12.7	1.7*
Field Hockey	11.4	5.1
Flag Football	10.4	4.1
Tackle Football	11.9	2.8
Golf	11.8	2.8
Gymnastics	8.7	3.0
Ice Hockey	10.9	3.1
Lacrosse	11.2	2.2
Martial Arts	9.2	2.6
Skateboarding	12.0	2.8
Skiing/Snowboarding	12.1	4.3
Soccer	9.1	3.0
Softball	10.4	2.8
Swimming	10.2	3.2
Tennis	10.9	1.9
Track and Field	13.0	2.0*
Volleyball	12.3	2.0*
Wrestling	9.8	1.6
<b>All Sports</b>	<b>10.5</b>	<b>2.9</b>

\* These sports have low average lengths of participation due to kids starting these sports later.

Source: Aspen Institute/Utah State University 2019 National Youth Sport Survey (1,032 youth sports parents).

# Attrition

- Structural constraints
  - Sports no longer fun
  - Loss of recreational opportunities for older children
  - High cost to compete
    - Physically and financially



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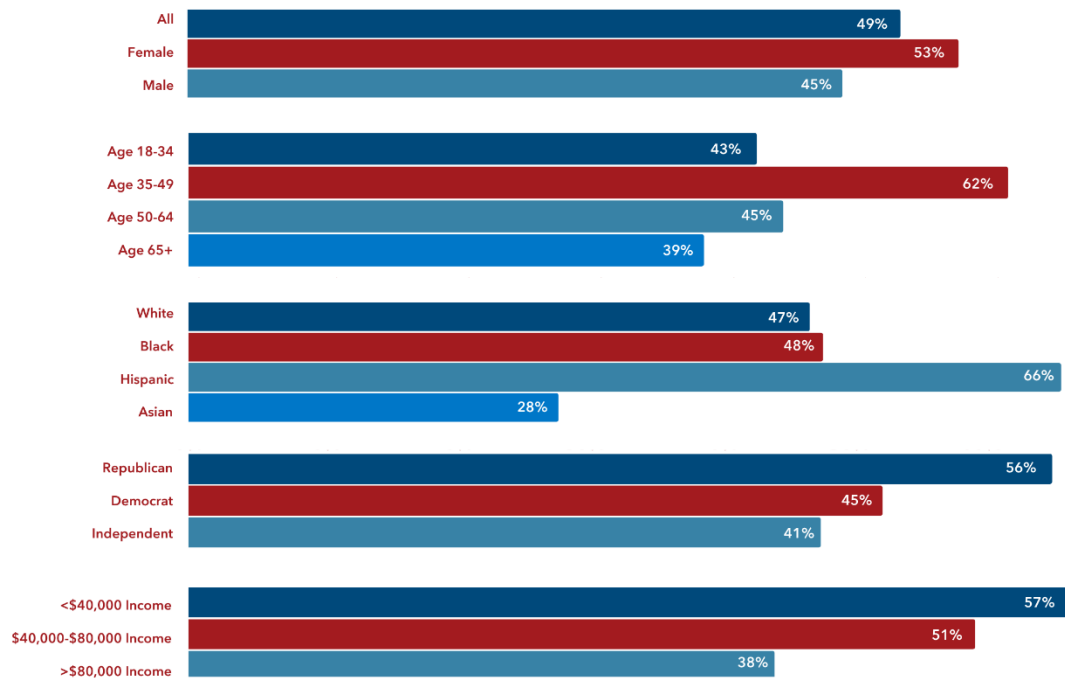
# Cost

- Kids from homes earning  $> \$100K$ , 2 times more likely to play a team sport at least once a day as kids from families earning  $< \$25K$



## Difficulty Paying for Youth Sports

% of U.S. adults who have ever struggled to afford fees, equipment, uniforms, travel, other costs



Source: SurveyUSA.com, Commission on the State of the U.S. Olympics and Paralympics.



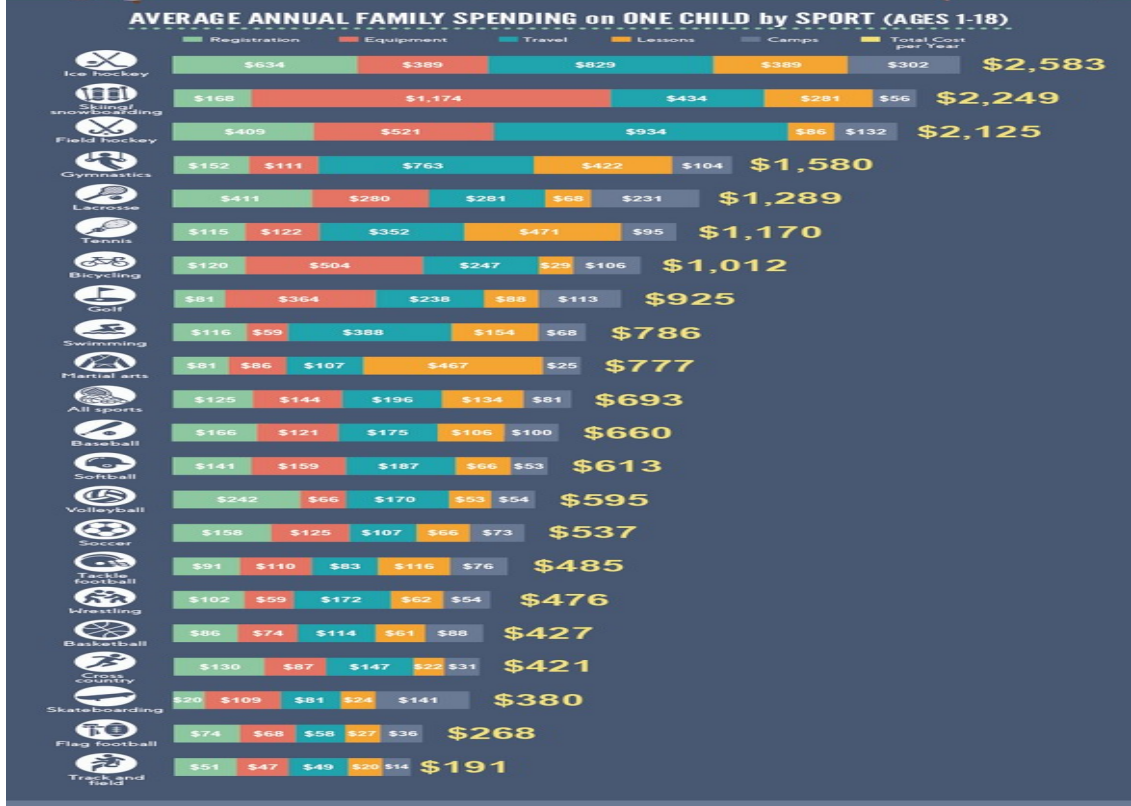
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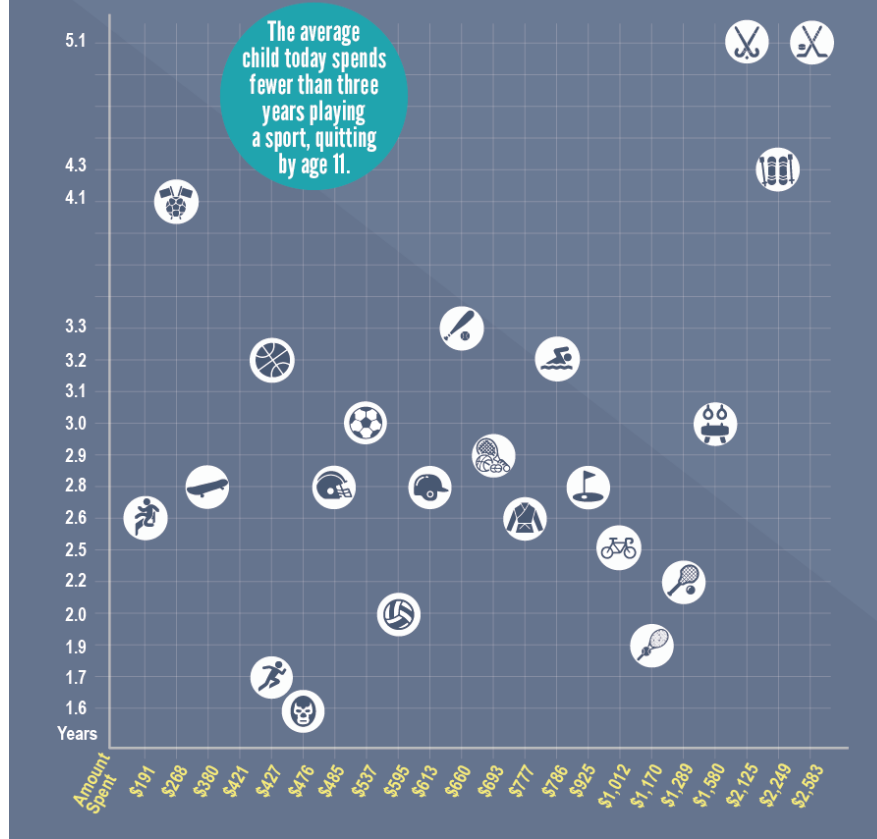
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# THE AVERAGE COST OF Each Children's Sport



## AVERAGE TIME SPENT PLAYING a SPORT COMPARED to AVERAGE COST



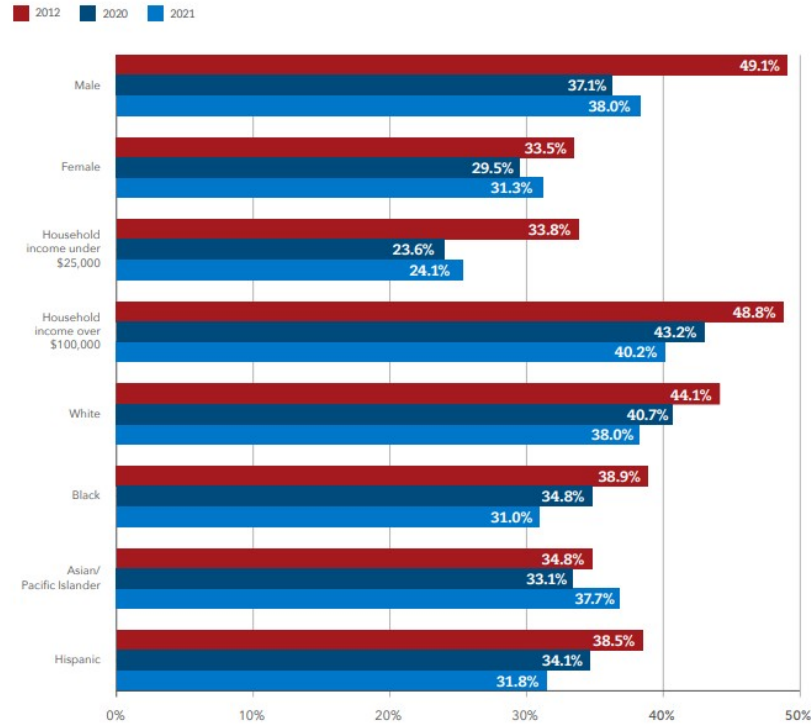
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## Core Sport Participation by Demographic

Percentage of children ages 6-12 who played a sport on a regular basis

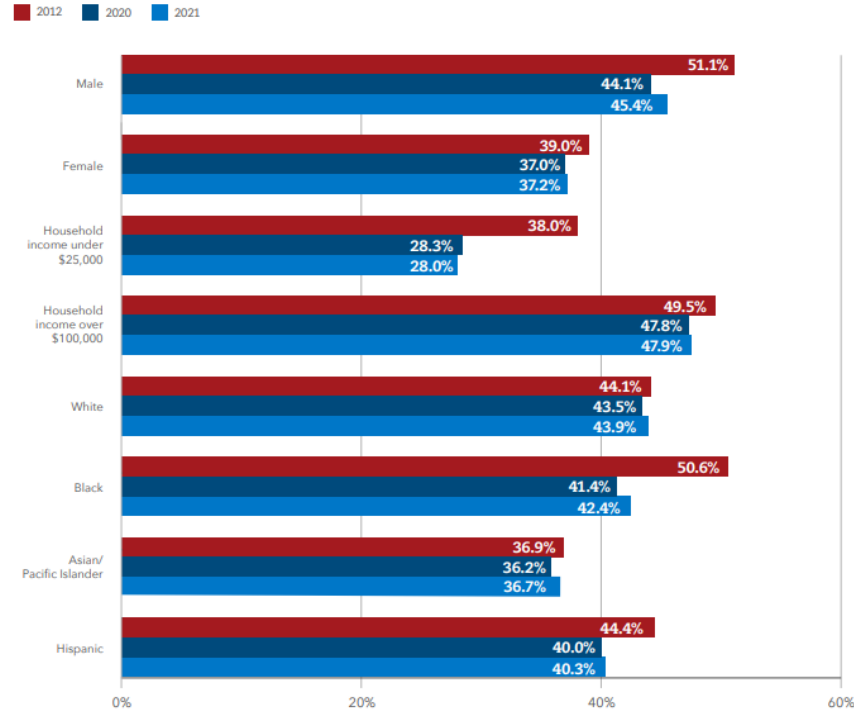


Source: Sports & Fitness Industry Association, 2021



## Core Sport Participation by Demographic

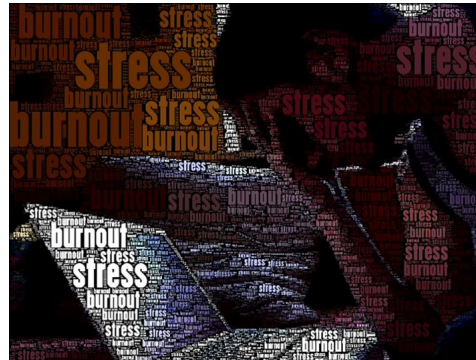
Children ages 13-17 who played a sport on a regular basis



Source: Sports & Fitness Industry Association, 2021

# Burnout

Physical or mental exhaustion and a reduced sense of accomplishment that leads to devaluation of sport.

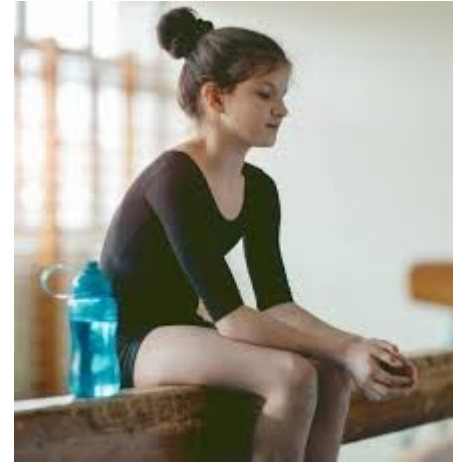


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# Risk Factors

- Intense competition
- High parental/coaching expectations
- Overtraining and lack of rest
- Lack of intrinsic motivation
- Pressure/extrinsic motivation
- Perfectionism
- Fear of failure



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# Intense Competition



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# High Parental/Coaching Expectations

- Burnout higher in athletes who perceive that parents measure success by performance
- Coaches who are controlling, foster perfectionism, encourage extrinsic motivation have higher likelihood of burnout
- Intrateam conflict



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# Overtraining

- Training volume
- Overscheduling
- High chronic training loads



# Overtraining



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# Lack of Intrinsic Motivation

- Burnout lower if success is defined by meeting intrinsic goals
- Perceived stress
- Prioritizing short-term goals
- Focus on performance outcomes from peers, coaches, or parents





# Perfectionism

GOAL SETTING	Setting impossibly high expectations of yourself	Setting high, yet realistic, goals for yourself
	Striving for success via flawlessness	Striving for excellence via hard work & patience
MENTAL SKILLS	Trying to reach the top by demanding daily perfection from yourself	Trying to reach the top by fine-tuning skills through countless hours of hard work
	Having a hard time receiving feedback	Wanting and seeking feedback; asking 'how can I improve?'
	Fearing failure	Making failure your fuel
	Self-doubting and lacking confidence when facing challenges	Having a positive and resilient attitude when facing challenges
TEAM	Being overcritical of your performance, getting down on yourself	Holding yourself accountable but also having self-compassion
	Continually worrying about disappointing your teammates and coach	Supporting your teammates on and off the field and giving 110% effort
IN GAME PLAY	Constantly comparing yourself to others; discouraged when players perform better than you	Appreciating skilled teammates that work hard because it inspires you to work even harder
	Hesitating and being indecisive on the field	Making quick decisions; trusting your training
	Being unable to take compliments & feel happy for a job well done	Speaking to yourself positively even when your play wasn't flawless
	Struggling to get past mistakes or missed opportunities	Having resilience to rebound, recover, and get back at it
	Playing over-cautiously to not make mistakes	Playing with passion, intensity, and creativity

## Beating Perfectionism: Evidence-Based Tactics



Reframe

# Fear of Failure



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# CLINICAL SUSPICION



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# Physical Signs

- Fatigue
- Sleep disturbance
- Lack of concentration
- Weight changes
- Unexplained musculoskeletal complaints
- Irritability



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# Emotional Signs

- Depressive Symptoms
  - Depressed mood
  - Loss of interest in activities
- Anxiety symptoms
  - Excessive worry
  - Agitation



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# Behavioral Signs

- Withdrawal
  - Loss of enjoyment in sport
- Decreased performance
  - Academic
  - Athletic
- Decreased enjoyment in sport



# DIAGNOSIS



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# Athlete Burnout Questionnaire

	MOI	Almost Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Frequently	Almost Always
1 I am accomplishing many worthwhile things in my sport	RA	1	2	3	4	5
2 I feel so tired from my training that I have trouble finding energy to do other things	E	1	2	3	4	5
3 The effort I spend in my sport would be better spent doing other things	SD	1	2	3	4	5
4 I am not achieving much in my sport	RA	1	2	3	4	5
5 I feel overly tired from my sport participation	E	1	2	3	4	5
6 I don't care about my sport performance as much as I used to	SD	1	2	3	4	5
7 I am not performing up to my ability in my sport	RA	1	2	3	4	5
8 I feel "wiped out" from my sport	E	1	2	3	4	5
9 I am not into my sport like I used to be	SD	1	2	3	4	5
10 I feel physically worn out from my sport	E	1	2	3	4	5
11 I feel less concerned about being successful in my sport than I used to	SD	1	2	3	4	5
12 I am exhausted by the mental and physical demands on my sport	E	1	2	3	4	5
13 It seems that no matter what I do, I don't perform as well as I should	RA	1	2	3	4	5
14 I feel successful at my sport	RA	1	2	3	4	5
15 I have negative feelings toward my sport	SD	1	2	3	4	5

Note: Items 1 and 14 are reverse scored, MOI = measure of interest, RA = reduced accomplishment, SD = sport devaluation, E = exhaustion



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# Evaluate For Organic Causes

- Anemia
- Infection
- Systemic inflammatory disease
- Mental health conditions
- Endocrinologic disease



# Laboratory Evaluation

- CBC
- CMP
- CK
- ESR
- CRP
- Iron studies
- Thyroid studies
- EBV titers
- CMV titers



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# Psychologic Screening Tools

- PHQ-9
- GAD-7
- Profile of Mood States (POMS)

# Impact of Burnout

- Short-term effects
  - Decreased performance
  - Increased injuries
  - Delay in recovery from injury



# Impact

- Long-term effects
  - Disengagement from sports
  - Mental health issues
  - Effects on personal development



# Prevention Strategies

- Encourage a balanced approach
- Parental involvement
- Coaching techniques
- Intrinsic motivation
- Training approach



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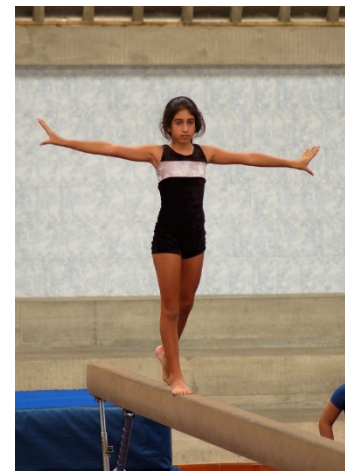
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# Balanced Approach

- Importance of play and enjoyment
- Varied sports participation
- Higher levels of autonomy
- Increased GRIT



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# Parental Involvement

- Setting realistic expectations
- Supporting athlete's interests and goals
- Help develop grit by encouraging them to honor commitments
- Don't rush to rescue



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# Coaching Techniques

- Fostering a positive environment
- Promoting open communication

SPORTS COACH TIP NO. 18

**YOUTH SPORTS ISN'T JUST  
ABOUT SPORT.  
IT'S ABOUT KEEPING  
THE FUN IN THE  
GAME AND TEACHING  
YOUR ATHLETES LESSONS  
THEY CAN TAKE  
WITH THEM IN LIFE.  
-COACH JOHN BURNS**

#SPORTSCOACTIP  
[COACHGRAY.COM/SPORTSCOACTIP](http://COACHGRAY.COM/SPORTSCOACTIP)



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# Intrinsic Motivation

- Set a priority over extrinsic goals
- Encourage appropriate autonomy

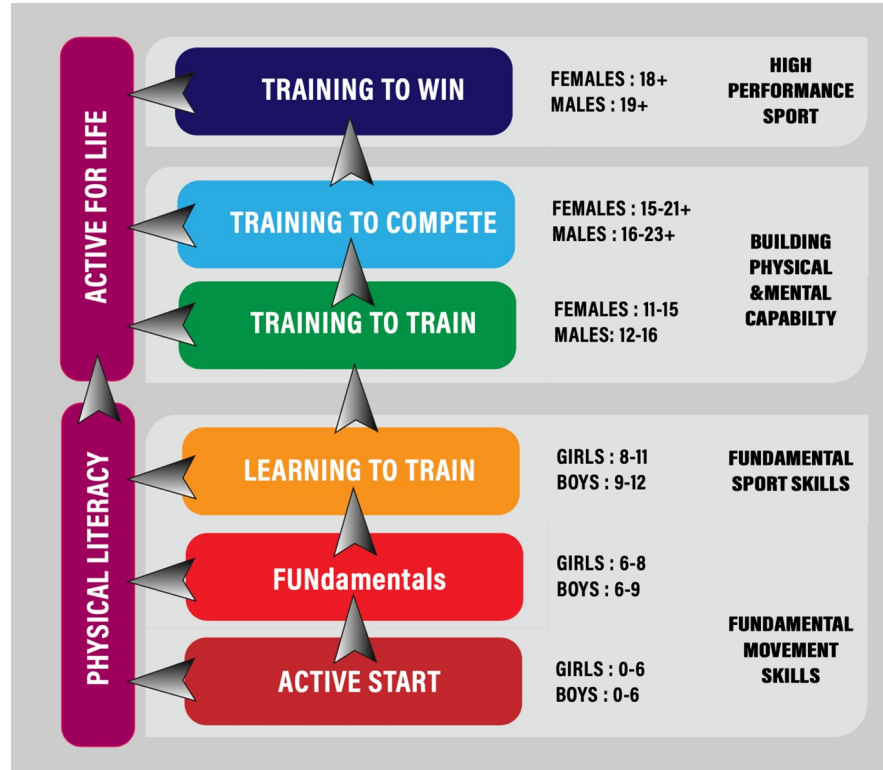


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# Training Approach



# Kids and Sports: Let the Fun Win!

## Fun matters!

Kids say **FUN** is the **#1** reason they like organized sports. Keep it fun, so they'll want to keep playing.



## Age matters!

Most kids are ready for organized sports around **age 6**. Until then, give young kids free play, every day!

## Schools matter!



**70%** of preschools & elementary schools offer physical education classes. These keep kids active & involved in sports longer. Plus they're fun!

## Variety matters!



**Over 30%** of teens drop out of sports. Schools can keep kids playing longer by offering a variety of sports & levels of play.

## Asking questions matters!



When choosing a sports program for your child, ask about hiring procedures, codes of conduct & communication between coaches & athletes.



## Parents matter!

Kids play sports longer when parents give positive support. Keep the focus on fun, not just winning.

## Coaches matter!



**25%** of athletes report emotional abuse by coaches. Treating athletes with respect keeps them playing longer.



## Attitude matters!

This includes parents, coaches & athletes. **Keep it positive** to avoid burnout and dropout.



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# 6 Ways to Reduce Overuse and Burnout Injuries in Young Athletes



1

Avoid sport specialization by participating in a variety of sports throughout the year

2

Limit training to no more than 18-20 hours/week

3

Limit practice to 1.5 hours/day and competitive games to 3x/week

4

Young athletes should have at least 1-2 days off/week to decrease risks of injuries

5

Young athletes should have at least 3 months off every calendar year, in increments of at least one month each, from organized sport training to allow for physical and psychological recovery

6

Focus on form and technique before intensity.



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Developed by J. P. Barfield, D.A., FACSM, Department of Physical Therapy, School of Health Sciences, Emory & Henry College, 2019



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# CALL TO ACTION



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# Call to Action

- Access
  - Opportunity
  - Availability
  - Cost



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# Loving Physical Activity For a Lifetime

- Athletic autonomy
- Intrinsic motivation
- Promote skill development
- Avoid overtraining/overscheduling
- Encourage mindfulness tools
- Prioritize fun
- Take time off from organized sports
- Focus on wellness



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## Characteristics of Well-Designed Sports Programs

• Positive youth-coach relationships
• Coaches who encourage kids to deal with challenges that occur during activity
• Both recreational and competitive environment
• Athletes participate in multiple sports instead of the requirement that they play only 1
• Kids have a sense of belonging to the program
• Life skills educational element
• Athletes develop skills valued by future employees:
◦ Volunteering
◦ Commitment to team building
◦ Acceptance of rules
◦ Tolerant attitude toward cultural diversity

## Risk and Protective Factors for Burnout

Risk Factors	Preventive and Protective Factors
Pressure or extrinsic motivation	Intrinsic motivation
Perceived stress	Supportive parental relationship
Prioritizing short-term goals	Long-term athlete development models
Perfectionism	Higher levels of autonomy, optimism, and mental toughness
Focus on performance outcomes from peers, coaches, or parents	Prioritization of effort and intrinsic goals over extrinsic goals
Overscheduling and high chronic training loads	Adequate rest and breaks from participation
High chronic training loads	
Intrateam conflict	

# What Can We Do?

- **Educate** athletes, parents, coaches, leagues
- **Emphasize** focus on fun, skill acquisition, safety, sportsmanship
- **Encourage** following guidelines
- **Escalate** slowly
- **Evaluate** for overtraining
- **Entertain** the diagnosis of burnout for nonspecific concerns, fatigue, mood changes, or poor academic performance



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