The Power of Play

A Literature-Based After School Sports Program For Urban Youth

by TOM ZIERK

We, particularly as educators, have a tendency to forget or at least to underestimate, the significance of those aspects of education we don't control—the family, the community in all its manifestations, and all the other experiences of a young person's life outside the classroom.

—Harold Howe (1991, p. 21)

There is a longstanding belief in American education that the physical sphere of human experience has little to do with the intellectual sphere. This helps explain why sports and physical activities are usually viewed as extra-curricular (literally, "outside" the curriculum). The message children often hear is that you can't be smart and athletic at the same time; we do not normally associate athletic endeavors with ways to promote social or cognitive development. But contrast this message with the fact that an estimated 35 million children and adolescents between the ages of six and eighteen play some sort of organized sport each year (Seefeld & Ewing, 1992).

The Case for Sports

The kinds of social relationships that are encouraged and develop among members of a sports team greatly affect the quality of a young athlete's experience. For too many children, the sports experience is poor and eventually they drop out. In fact, by age fifteen more than 75 percent of the children who started playing organized sports at age six or seven have already quit (Wolff, 1997). The major reason for such a high attrition rate is the quality of adult leadership.

Influenced by the professional model, coaches and parents tend to focus more on performance and achievement and less on children and their developmental needs, desires, and expectations. Winning, championships, and trophies become more important than the day-to-day sports experience itself. Sports psychologist Jay Coakley observes that "the most important thing is not what the child does with the ball or what the ball does to the child, but rather how the child's interpretation of the sport's experience is mediated through relationships with others" (Coakley, 1986, p. 140).

Early adolescents are particularly vulnerable as they enter this time in their lives—when self-confidence and the need to experience and develop academic and social skills are critical. It is at this time that early social relationships help shape how children will view themselves, others, and the world around them. Issues such as friendship, fairness, and respect are some of the themes that are often played out during sports activities.

Developing Social and Emotional Skills. The single best childhood predictor of adult adaptation is not school grades or classroom behavior but rather how successfully a child gets along with others (Hartup, 1992). Research shows that antisocial and aggressive behavior interferes with school learning and the development of positive peer relations. One study, for example, found that 25 percent of children who were rejected by their peers in elementary school had dropped out before completing high school, compared to a general rate of eight percent (Goleman, 1995).

Success on the job also depends on social skills; in fact, studies show that 85 percent of job success can be attributed to social skills. Rarely is an employee fired for technical incompetence but rather for his or her inability to relate to peers. The Secretary of Labor's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) identifies interpersonal skills—negotiating, exercising leadership, working with diversity, and participating as a team member—as essential competencies that young people need in order to participate in the modern workplace.

It is in backyards, school lots, and playgrounds where children develop the social skills that will be important throughout their lives. Especially critical are the skills needed to make and keep friends and to resolve interpersonal problems, including negotiating, role-taking, and empathy. Given that the intensity of violence among children has escalated, it has become imperative that children acquire skills to resolve interpersonal conflicts without fighting.

Promoting Social and Cultural Understanding. Conflicts often arise out of misunderstandings of racial, cultural, or religious differences. As our multicultural population continues to grow, children must learn how to work and play with diverse groups of children.

On a team, children have opportunities to discover how much they are alike, while recognizing, understanding, and appreciating differences. One study found that participation of students on multiracial sports teams had strong, positive effects on race relations, more so than teacher workshops, multiracial texts, and classroom discussions on race relations (Slaven & Madden, 1980). Sports bring individuals together who have differences in skill levels, personalities, and social and cultural backgrounds. From this shared experience, young people learn that diversity can create stronger teams. They also become better equipped to counteract bias and prejudice.

Games are important, primarily because the target population is children in the process of developing. . .

—Terry Orlick,
Winning Through Cooperation (1978)

For one after school program, children's natural interest in sports provides the central theme around which literacy, language, social skills, and health issues are woven into a rich learning experience.

The Sports PLUS After School Program attracts youngsters in ways that connect them to school, build academic and social skills, promote health, and foster the capacity to be active participants in their own future. Ten-year-old Christina remarks, "The program encouraged me to do sports. I think, write, and read more." Jocyln, a fourth grader, says, "I learned how to read better." "What I liked about the after school program was the games we played and the books we read, like *Long Shot For Paul,* by Matt Christopher," comments Charles, a fifth grader.

The Sports PLUS After School Program was developed by Sports PLUS (Positive Learning Using Sports), located at the New Hampton School in New Hampton, New Hampshire. The program offers an alternative to traditional sports programs because it is school- and community-based. And in contrast to competitive programs, the Sports PLUS approach first develops a positive learning environment in which all children feel safe, both emotionally and physically, to explore their individual potential. Children in this interpersonal atmosphere, which includes numerous opportunities for dialogue and group interaction, are able to take risks free from ridicule and without feeling less capable than others. And perhaps of equal importance, it offers an opportunity to have fun, which is the main reason children say they play sports.

As a coeducational program, Sports PLUS offers both genders an opportunity to learn more about themselves and about equal treatment and respect. In the Sports PLUS Program, there are no bench-warmers. Maximum participation is the

rule, both in the classroom and on the field. Gender grouping is avoided as boys and girls engage in all program activities together.

Children participating in the PLUS After School Program soon learn to view sports not as something extra, but as part of their total education. The children develop a better understanding

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of diversity as they make, share, and swap their own all-star sports cards with classmates. Just like experienced Olympic athletes, students engage in relaxation training and self-talk as a way to set personal goals. For example, students brainstorm ways for three children to play basketball at one hoop in an activity called "You Make the Call." In their sport portfolios, they write what they think U.S. soccer player Michelle Akers meant in saying, "Though you can't control your dreams so they turn out like you've planned, you can always learn to adjust so you can handle them." And in the Lawrence, Massachusetts, Sports PLUS program, participants enjoyed meeting and hearing 1994 Olympic Gold Medalist Holly Metcalf read the story *Wilma Unlimited*, by Kathleen Krull. Holly served not only as a motivating force of strength and resilience but also as a model for literacy.

The PLUS After School Program encourages students to make connections from their sports experience to what they learn and how they live. Students learn to identify how the principles and skills that make them excel in sports—team play, discipline, practice, belief in oneself, responsibility, perseverance—can also lead to success in school, on the job, or in the community. The program provides a full range of developmental opportunities, focusing on the whole child rather than on a single problem behavior such as delinquency or violence.

At one Boston elementary school, for example, where this nonprofit program has been operating since 1994, about 100 boys and girls in grades 4-6 have participated free of charge. Results have exceeded expectations: Students developed a greater interest in reading and spent more time reading recreationally. Equally important, students keep coming back, and attendance is over 90 percent.

Program Goals

We have taken a holistic approach of the kind advocated by Schorr (1997) and structured Sports PLUS After School to incorporate four interrelated goals:

1. Increase reading and language development. Students participate and express themselves in group discussions, develop an interest in and appreciation for reading, respond to literature both orally and in writing, develop listening skills, build reading comprehension skills, interpret literary themes and their implications.

2. Develop social and emotional skills, including decision-making, goal-setting, communication, and emotional management; understand cause and effect relationships; predict outcomes and draw conclusions; interpret motives; make comparisons and contrasts; think of alternative solutions to problems.

3. Promote social and cultural understanding—develop perspective-taking and empathy skills, manage feelings, respond appropriately to conflict, cooperate and work in small teams, develop a greater understanding and acceptance of others.

4. Promote physical activity and a healthy lifestyle—develop an acceptable level of fitness, demonstrate skills to promote personal fitness, learn basic nutrition concepts, interpret health risks and take corresponding protective measures.

Program Components

The Sports PLUS After School Program offers a diversified curriculum that responds to differences in learning styles and developmental abilities. Lessons integrate reading, writing, speaking, and thinking skills, all focused on sports. Activities are varied to address students' learning styles, such as verbal, auditory, kinesthetic, and visual. Children in the program are offered a variety of sports: basketball, soccer, floor hockey, whiffle ball, track and field, and touch football.

Sports PLUS focuses on five themes that naturally occur in sports situations: teamwork, respect, responsibility, fair play, and perseverance. Each of its five program components is organized around all of these five theme modules. As students explore one theme, they visit or revisit others. This affords children opportunities to explore the relationships among themes and to develop an integrated perspective.

Program Structure

The Sports PLUS After School Program includes five sessions:

1. Academic Session. The program features children's literature as an instructional medium to illustrate each theme. For example, Matt Christopher's *The Hit-Away Kid* is one book used in the Fair Play unit. On a fly ball to left field, Barry McGee, the "Hit-Away Kid," appears to make a great catch. While the umpire calls the batter out, Barry knows he dropped the ball. Barry must decide which is more important, playing by the rules or playing to win.

Each theme module includes two sports trade books and five activity types to choose from:

Sport Shorts—created to promote dialogue and discussion;

You Make the Call—children explore consequences and generate alternative courses of action;

Sport Cartoons—challenge children to determine what the characters are thinking and feeling;

Current Events, Role Plays, Quote of the Day—can be used independently, in conjunction with children's literature as "mini-lessons," or in warm-up and/or cool-down exercises. Students respond and react to what they read, and they complete self-selected exercises in their individual portfolios.

Sports Ledger—journals in which children record what they read, chart progress, and set goals.

2. Reading Workshop. This component provides students time to read self-selected sports books independently and/or as a group. When children choose literature they want to read rather than being told what to read, they not only become personally invested in the reading but also develop a real sense of ownership in the class.

3. Skill-Building Lessons. Within each theme module students study one of five core skill clusters:

Communication—Students practice sending and receiving both verbal and nonverbal messages, learn point of view, practice active listening skills, and build a vocabulary that gives encouragement to others.

Problem-Solving—Students focus on individual and group problem- solving by using the TEAM method: Take a time out; Examine the problem; Alternative decision-making; Make a game plan.

Conflict Resolution—Students practice the win/win model for negotiating compromise and apply different conflict management approaches to different situations.

Goal-Setting—Children practice the habit of positive self-talk and learn about long- and short-term goal-setting. They set goals using the athlete's equation for success: goal-setting= imagination + action + perseverance.

Anger Management—Students learn that anger, like conflict, is a normal part of life and can be managed in healthy, constructive ways. They explore and express feelings, practice various types of relaxation techniques, and study the physiological effects of anger.

4. Sports Session. Teachers and students select one of six major sports to include in a theme module: basketball, floor hockey, soccer, flag football, track and field, or whiffle ball. Game strategy, rules, basic skills (throwing, striking, catching, and kicking), and sport-specific stretches are outlined for each. This format is designed to provide teachers and students with flexibility in selecting appropriate sports. The variety of sports is offered to give students a chance to discover individual talents and interests. More ideas and options for other sports and games are also included.

5. Health and Nutrition Break. The health and nutrition piece is incorporated into the snack break and sports session. It addresses nutrition, exercise and fitness, health, safety, disease prevention, and drug abuse prevention.

Teacher as Coach

"How to stimulate engagement is the first question every good teacher asks," observes Theodore Sizer (1992). Like athletes, students need to be mentally and physically prepared before participating. Lessons and activities follow a warm-up, practice and cool-down. In a warm-up session, Sports PLUS teachers focus on what will be taught and state the goals of the particular activity. The session also involves tapping into the curiosity of each child and assessing and building on prior knowledge and personal experience. In the cool-down, groups reflect on how they worked together and share what and how they think. In this way, children are taught to be

conscious of their own learning, particularly interacting and learning in teams.

The emphasis is on *teaching for transfer,* or encouraging children to make connections among their learning on the field, in the classroom, and in life in general. By acting more like a coach than a teacher, instructors foster inquiry, problem-solving, and decision-making skills. This is quite different from the traditional didactic method in which the adult assumes center stage. In contrast to traditional classrooms, the student is the prime actor rather than a passive spectator. There is heavy emphasis on group discussion. Students talk about issues that are important to them and how the five themes are illustrated by behavior, both good and bad, and examples found on the playing field or in peer groups.

Support Components

Support components refer to additional program components designed to bolster the core program elements.

1. *Family Involvement.* Each family member receives a Home Court Handbook that informs them about what their children are learning and includes activities to use at home. Family members are invited to attend special events and a minimum of three family meetings each year.

2. *Role Models.* Visits from athletes and other professionals add an exciting dimension to the program. By talking about program themes, reading with the children, and/or participating in sports, these individuals serve as important role models.

3. *Field Trips.* Through a minimum of three planned field trips, participants are connected to a wider world of issues, people, and events. Children begin to see the interrelationships between schooling and the wider community. To share a common learning experience with their children and to assist as chaperones, family members are encouraged to attend.

4. *Student-Coaches Program.* Graduates of the program (7th-8th graders) are invited back to Sports PLUS to serve as student coaches, or peer leaders. They assist their younger counterparts in organizing sports activities; they demonstrate and teach specific sports skills; and they read stories and provide academic assistance. Student-coaches receive training to familiarize them with their roles and to help them develop coaching and teaching skills.

A Typical Week

The activities of a typical week in the teamwork module might include:

Tuesday: The teacher/coach announces the MVP (Most Valuable Person) of the previous week, elected in a secret ballot by the students. The criteria for election as MVP are also the themes emphasized in Sports PLUS: the qualities of teamwork, respect, responsibility, fair play, and perseverance. Either in group discussion or in their journals, students reflect on their experiences of playing basketball the previous week. Students talk about issues or problems they confronted during the game, such as what happened when some of the players hogged the ball. Students then read and discuss a chapter in the book *One Man Team* by Dean Hughes (1994). This is a story about a talented basketball player who has yet to learn what it means to be a team player.

Wednesday: Students begin by discussing a quote from Princeton basketball coach Pete Carrill: "In a team sport like basketball, every time you help somebody else, you help yourself." Students then review where the story *One Man Team* left off and discuss how the Carrill quote relates to the story. In teams, students interpret a sports cartoon related to the theme of teamwork. Students examine the character's actions and feelings and predict what might happen next. For the remaining time, they play three-on-three basketball and focus on passing skills.

Thursday: Students review the cartoon examined on Wednesday and brainstorm ideas to create their own cartoons based on the theme of teamwork. They play three-on-three basketball and finish the day by voting for the MVP of the week.

Conclusion

The variety of problems that label a growing number of children "at-risk" are often simplified with a reductionist approach. "Problems" are identified in one of three areas: the child, the school, or the family (Pinato & Walsh, 1996). And too often it is the children who are viewed as the problem. Current theory and practice tend to focus on problem prevention, rather than on youth development. As Karen Pitman, a national youth advocate tells us, "Problem-free does not mean fully prepared" (Pitman, 1994). Programs, especially the ones held during the critical out-of-school hours, need to build on children's strengths and capacities; they need to help students see the

positives in themselves and the possibilities of tomorrow.

Successful programs use and build upon the students' and families' language, culture, and experiences as a basis for learning. Children must be recognized as individuals and as part of diverse communities, not merely as a monolithic group. It is important, then, not to focus exclusively on either the child, the family, or the school, but rather to consider all three through the interaction of both an active environment and an active child. After all, learning and development are mediated through relationships with others, including family members, peers, coaches, and teachers.

Clearly, after school programs must emphasize interpersonal factors and incorporate social-support networks that sustain effort and hope. Better dialogue among schools, families, and the wider community will give children and their families more options and greater paths to success. Sports offers one alternative for making meaningful connections.

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