



The Importance of Play



By Sam Piha & Samantha Fasen

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Sam Piha (he/him) has served as founder and president of Temescal Associates since 2007. Sam began his career in 1974 as an afterschool worker, an experience that led to 13 years of classroom teaching and work as a child and family counselor and school social worker. Between 1989 and 2006, Sam managed school-based youth programs at the regional and national levels. He later founded Temescal Associates and The How Kids Learn Foundation, both dedicated to improving the quality of afterschool programs. Sam served as editor and contributing author of several important practice guides and journal articles on afterschool programming. Sam holds a master's degree in Social Welfare.



Samantha Fasen (she/her) joined Temescal Associates and the How Kids Learn Foundation in 2019 and has fully embraced her work with the afterschool field. She helps to coordinate and develop marketing campaigns and multimedia elements to reach a wider audience and share with people the importance of out-of-school time and youth development.



Ren Daraio (they/she) brings over 35 years of experience working in the field of youth development as a facilitator, trainer, and coach. She has experience training and coaching diverse audience groups, from afterschool practitioners and parents to funders and technical assistance providers. Prior to her work with Temescal Associates, Ren was the Deputy Director at the Community Network for Youth Development and a consultant for the Institute for Research and Reform in Education.

ABOUT THE ORGANIZATIONS

[Temescal Associates](#) is dedicated to building the capacity of leaders and organizations in education and youth development.

[The How Kids Learn Foundation](#) (HKLF) is a 501(c)(3) organization. It is dedicated to improving the effectiveness of settings that support the education and healthy development of youth. This includes schools and out-of-school time programs. The HKL Foundation provides educational and training activities. Examples of activities include conferences, speaker forums, screenings of relevant films, training sessions, coaching sessions, the awarding of digital badges to acknowledge exemplar programs and the learning that happens within these settings. Activities also include the development and distribution of educational materials (papers, self-assessment tools, videos, program guides, etc.). You can see a [catalogue of the resources](#) we've produced for the afterschool field.

FRONT COVER PHOTOS: All photos from www.pexels.com.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

2	About & Acknowledgements
4	Introduction
5	Terms and Definitions
8	The Benefits of Play for Kids, Older Youth and Adults
11	The Move Away from Play
12	Sports, SEL And Character Building
13	Access
15	More About
16	Resources to Learn More
18	Appendix 1: “Why Equity Matters in Youth Sports”
20	Appendix 2: “4 Ways PE Teachers and Coaches Can Advance SEL”
22	Appendix 3: “The Most Quotable Quotes About Play & Learning”
24	End Notes

The Importance of Play



Source: www.pexels.com

INTRODUCTION

There is an inscription over a public school in northern Washington state that reads “*Waste Not Thy Hour*”. It reminds me of how young people’s play is often regarded as a waste. For many, play is the antithesis of learning time, however, there is growing evidence that here is a great deal of learning in play.

“In an age of standardized testing and intense academic competition, it’s easy to believe that play is one more thing American children will have to do without. But free play encourages the development of the two skills that no robot can replace: creativity and teamwork.”¹

It’s time to reexamine the value of play, educate our stakeholders, and be unashamed to make play an important part of our afterschool programs. In this paper we open the door to this reexamination by offering some information and definitions of terms you may find as you read about play. It offers some additional information and resources to encourage a reexamination of play.

“Many afterschool programs prioritize an extension of academics and homework completion over organized play, free play, and physical activity.”²

This paper is designed to raise understanding and awareness of the value of play in afterschool programs. This paper also provides suggestions and resources for afterschool and organizational leaders. Some of the contents of this paper are drawn from existing writings on the importance of play and the different forms it takes. We recommend that program leaders share this paper with organizational leaders (school leaders and staff, supervisors at the parent non-profit org, etc.) and program staff as they consider the best ways to promote play for youth and adult stakeholders.

“Physical activity has the power to unlock transformative benefits for young people—fostering connections with peers and caring mentors, improving mental health and mood, boosting academic performance, and promoting healthy lifestyles. Out-of-school time programs that

incorporate sports are uniquely positioned to create supportive environments where youth can grow, thrive, and realize their full potential.”³

TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

There are many terms that one encounters when exploring the issues around play. Below are some definitions that may be helpful.



Source: www.pexels.com

Play - “Play is state of mind that one has when absorbed in an activity that provides enjoyment and a suspension of sense of time. And play is self-motivated, so you want to do it again and again.”⁴

Kinds of play: Play takes many forms. Some are listed by [Michigan State University Extension](#):

- **Physical play** - Physical play is any play that involves physical or motor skills. Whenever children engage in running, jumping, spinning, chasing or roughhousing, they are working on physical play. Children develop strong bodies and become coordinated, and physical play allows them to express the undeniable energy of childhood. Physical play can also help children develop a physical sense of self, boundaries and impulse control. When children have physical control over their bodies, they begin to form the brain connections that allow them to control those movements, both on a motor level and on a cognitive level. A child is more prepared to control their hands in interactions with others if they have a sense of mastery of their motor skills.



Source: www.pexels.com

- **Language play** - Beginning around two months, children start to play with language by making repetitive cooing sounds. As they continue to develop, children use their voices, sounds and eventually words for entertainment purposes beyond basic communication. Older children may invent new words, practice rhymes or suddenly become miniature comedians and respond to everything with a knock-knock joke.
- **Exploratory play** - This type of play involves, you guessed it, *exploring* something new or unfamiliar. The world is big and sometimes overwhelming (even for adults). When children engage in exploratory play, they gain not only the skills they need to explore, but also the desire to understand or learn about new things.



Source: www.pexels.com

- **Constructive play** - When children build something or work to produce some structure they have created in their mind, they are engaging in constructive play. Children who engage in constructive play have the opportunity to enhance their cognitive development by practicing. Not only do children practice cognitive skills, but they also work on fine motor skills, hand-eye coordination and basic engineering skills. Constructive play also allows children the opportunity to be creative, express themselves and often extend

other play, like fantasy play.

- **Fantasy play** - Children use their imagination in fantasy or pretend play, which gives them opportunities to figure out how the world works and then create their own world. Pretend play allows children to explore different roles and relationships. When children take on a role during their play, like 'Mommy,' 'Grandpa,' 'Doctor,' or 'Giant flying dragon,' they get to explore how each character operates in the real world. *What is their job? How do they speak? What do they care about?* Along with the important skill-building capacity of fantasy play,



Source: www.pexels.com

it also presents an opportunity for children to escape and have fun. Just like adults might dive into a book or movie to temporarily escape the stress and responsibilities of normal life, children can benefit from the opportunity to escape to a world of their own making.

- **Social play** - Social play is incredibly important for young children's development. When children engage in social play, they are required to practice important social and life skills like communication, compromise, cooperation, problem-solving, turn-taking and self-expression. Children practice roles, learn acceptable behavior and practice important life skills like negotiation."⁵



Source: www.pexels.com

- **Free play**- Free play is "unstructured, voluntary, child-initiated activity that allows children to develop their imaginations while exploring and experiencing the world around them. It is the spontaneous play that comes naturally from children's natural curiosity, love of discovery, and enthusiasm."⁶

- **Organized play** - “is ordered, overseen by rules, and managed or directed by another person.” ⁷ This includes sports.
- **Outdoor play** – “This allows kids to integrate a bunch of senses: throwing balls or playing tag lets them learn to use the body and mind in tandem. Perhaps that’s why research shows that countries that offer more recess to young children see greater academic success among the children as they get older.” ⁸
- **Structured play** – “is any type of activity that has a set of rules or instructions with a goal. For example, most games, puzzles, construction toys and organized sports are structured activities.” ⁹
- **Symbolic play** – “Children are able to test out roles, feelings, behaviors and relationships, replay things that have already happened in order to make sense of them. Symbolic play may just look like pretending, but it is actually laying the foundation for understanding of themselves and the larger world.” ¹⁰
- **Therapeutic play** – “When play is fun, engaging and meaningful, it can be very therapeutic for children. Play can be a natural way for children to relieve stress and work through different emotions and experiences.” ¹¹
- **Voluntary play** – “Play is a self-chosen, spontaneous pursuit that children can change, alter and manipulate freely. Children should and will change the story, characters, materials, events, locations and purpose of their play at will.” ¹²
- **Unstructured play** “is a category of play without predetermined guidelines. Unstructured play is often informally referred to as simply ‘letting kids be kids’ or ‘just play.’ At times, you may also hear it called ‘free play’ or ‘self-play.’” ¹³

“These types of play are not separate entities – children can be engaged in several of these types of play all at the same time. This speaks to the wonderful power of play. In playing, children have the opportunity to practice skills, learn and grow from even the most basic play experiences. You can help your child reach their potential by simply helping them play.” ¹⁴

Important Characteristics of Play

There are many important characteristics of play. According to Michigan State University Extension, these include:

- **“Active.** During active play, children use their bodies and minds in play by interacting with the environment, materials and other people.
- **Adventurous and risky.** This type of play involves children exploring unknown or new concepts. When children engage in adventurous or risky pretend play, they are able to safely explore these concepts within the confines of a safety net.

- **Communicative.** Play presents a natural opportunity for children to share information and knowledge. Children can communicate verbally, using words or their bodies, postures and other non-verbal cues and these messages can be simple or more complicated.
- **Enjoyable.** Simply put, play is fun! When children play, they should be enjoying themselves and they can often find excitement and humor in or through their play. If they aren't having fun, it probably isn't play. Instead of playing to win, children should be playing to play and have fun!
- **Involved.** Remember that play is a child's work, and just like adults need to concentrate while working, children should concentrate during their play also. Children might become very involved while playing as they are actively thinking about what they are doing.
- **Meaningful.** Play provides opportunities for children to make sense of their world. Through play, children process the things they have seen and heard, what they know and what they don't yet know. These experiences help children build upon their current knowledge, test out new theories and roles and grow their knowledge, understanding and skills." ¹⁵



Source: Lapin Yliopisto University of Lapland

THE BENEFITS OF PLAY FOR KIDS, OLDER YOUTH AND ADULTS

The Six Benefits of Play

DEVELOP PHYSICAL SKILLS	INCREASE CREATIVITY
HONE COMMUNICATION SKILLS	ENHANCE SOCIAL SKILLS
IMPROVE COGNITIVE ABILITIES	PROCESS & EXPRESS EMOTIONS

Source: [National Girls Collaborative Project](#)

The Importance of Play

“At Davos, the uber-elite gathering of global power brokers, AI experts and global CEOs argued that free play encourages kids to develop agency, collaboration and creativity—just the skills that workers will need to maintain an edge over the robots. And psychologists not associated with the report ([Changes in American Children's Time, 1981-1997](#)), including Peter Gray from Boston College, have said the consequences of a lack of play could be dire, including rising rates of mental health problems in teens. That's why Meadows Preschool says, 'it's time to collectively reboot our thinking about play, understanding it not as a trivial, expendable pastime but as an essential activity that science shows is core to children's healthy development.'”¹⁶



Source: A World Fit for Kids!

According to experts “play allows children to use their creativity while developing their imagination, dexterity, and physical, cognitive, and emotional strength. Play is important to healthy brain development.”¹⁷

*“The gift of imaginative free play has been getting the short end of the stick for some time...play does not exclude learning. Play is the essence of learning, and we have the research to back it up...We need to get this concept back into circulation with the mainstream that play is the highest form of learning!”*¹⁸

Rebecca Fabiano is founder of [FAB Youth Philly](#), which supports organizations and individuals that work with children and youth by focusing on improving program quality and providing professional development for staff. FAB Youth Philly also works directly with teens. In a newsletter, Rebecca wrote, “There's been so much interest in the last few years in the various ways that play can positively impact children's learning and their overall health and well-being. Play is so important that this [report from August 2018](#) describes the ways in which doctors have begun to 'prescribe' play to their patients.”¹⁹

*“Play is not frivolous,’ the report ([The Power of Play: A Pediatric Role in Enhancing Development in Young Children](#)) says. Rather, research shows that play helps children develop language and executive functioning skills, learn to negotiate with others and manage stress, and figure out how to pursue their goals while ignoring distractions, among other things.”*²⁰

Is Play Good for Older Kids?

We tend not to give older kids a chance to play. When I taught 6th grade, my students loved visiting the kindergartners - not to be helpers or mentors, but to get a chance to play with the building blocks, Legos, and other playthings. In teens, we see play take different creative forms – theater, project-based learning, making beats, adventure challenges, etc.



Source: (Clockwise) YMCA of Greater Long Beach; Sunset Neighborhood Beacon Center; Youth Radio; and Spotlight: Girls.

Hilary Conklin was a middle school teacher and is now an associate professor in the college of education at DePaul University in Chicago, where her research interests include the preparation of middle school social studies teachers. She writes, “One of the casualties of current education reform efforts has been the erosion of play, creativity, and joy from teenagers’ classrooms and lives, with devastating effects... And while play has gotten deserved press in recent months for its role in fostering [crucial social-emotional and cognitive skills](#) and [cultivating creativity and imagination](#) in the [early childhood years](#), a critical group has been largely left out of these important conversations. Adolescents, too—not to mention [adults](#), need time to play, and they need time to play in school...purposefully infusing play into middle and high school classrooms holds the potential for a more joyful, creative, and educative future for us all—a future in which kids have more interesting things to do in school than countdown to summer break.”²¹

Is Play Good for Adults, too?

In a past newsletter, Rebecca Fabiano, founder of [FAB Youth Philly](#) writes, “The importance of play for children is well documented. Now researchers are turning their attention to its possible benefits for adults. What they’re finding is that play isn’t just about goofing off; it can also be an important means of reducing stress and contributing to overall well-being. This 2017 article from the [Washington Post](#) goes on to talk about why play is important for adults too.”²²

THE MOVE AWAY FROM PLAY

*“It’s a well-known fact that American kids are playing a lot less these days. From 1981 to 1997, children’s playtime decreased by 25%, the report ([Changes in American Children’s Time, 1981-1997](#)) says. A national survey of 8,950 preschool children and parents found that only 51% of children went outside to walk or play once per day with either parent. And because of increased academic pressure, 30% of US kindergarten children no longer have recess. Plenty of people argue this trend away from play bodes poorly both for childhood and for kids’ future employment.”*²³

According to the Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health, this reduction in play time is due to several factors:

- **“Afterschool program changes:** Many afterschool programs prioritize an extension of academics and homework completion over organized play, free play, and physical activity.
- **Child supervision:** Fewer families have available adult supervision in the home during the workday, which makes it necessary for children to be in settings in which they can be monitored by adults throughout the day.
- **Educational trends:** There is a national trend to focus on the academic fundamentals of reading and arithmetic. This trend was spearheaded by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. One of the practical effects of the trend is decreased time left during the school day for other academic subjects, as well as recess, creative arts, and physical education. This trend may have implications for the social and emotional development of children and adolescents.
- **Safety:** In many communities, children cannot play safely outside of the home unless they are under close adult supervision and protection. This is particularly true in areas that are unsafe because of increased violence or other environmental dangers.
- **Screentime:** Children are increasingly being passively entertained through television, computers, smart phones and video games.
- **Super-achieving children:** Parents receive messages that good parents actively build every skill and aptitude their child might need to become super-achieving children, and if their children are not well prepared and high achieving, they will not get a desired spot in higher education.”²⁴

PLAY AND SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING

The [Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning \(CASEL\)](#) writes, “Social and emotional learning (SEL) is an integral part of education and human development. SEL is the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions.”²⁵

*“There are a number of ways the five competencies of social-emotional learning—cooperation, assertiveness, responsibility, empathy, and self-control—can be learned by children participating in sports.”*²⁶

Research published in [Educational Reforms Worldwide](#) states that the “primary goal of SEL is to cultivate the following competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. The competencies mentioned above are essential for better adaptation to different circumstances and situations. They also facilitate academic success and the development of more prosocial behaviors, and fewer emotional and behavioral problems.”²⁷

Below is a video that focuses on play and the development of SEL skills.



Source: <https://casel.org/events/sel-play-its-more-than-fun-and-games/>

SPORTS, SEL AND CHARACTER BUILDING

Organized play is ordered, overseen by rules, and managed or directed by another person. Organized sports are an important way to develop SEL skills and build character.

According to CASEL, “Organized sports are excellent SEL skill-builders, uniforms, referees, and rulebooks are not required for children to reap the [social and emotional benefits of play](#). Like organized sports, all types of play offer opportunities to explore, imagine, and create. When children play with others, they practice cooperation, communication, and conflict resolution. Construction play, like building with LEGOs, activates children’s problem-solving skills. And through dramatic play, children take on the perspectives of others and practice empathy.

Sports are goal-oriented, often done in teams, and naturally provide practice in managing emotions, conflict, and adversity. In other words, they’re a powerful opportunity for SEL! To intentionally build SEL skills through sports, the [Boys & Girls Club of Green Bay](#) prioritizes fostering relationships. Students play icebreaker games, and coaches use warmup time to check in on how each child is doing. They offer constructive feedback on social and emotional skills (e.g., ‘You reacted to that problem well,’ or ‘You were able to regulate those emotions well’). When young athletes get upset, coaches give them time to cool down and then talk through ways to manage similar situations in the future.”²⁸

Below is a video that focuses on sports and SEL.²⁹



Source: <https://youtu.be/UFc6kibaWdE?si=FnACw-UAe8g9kMZw>

*“Sport has the power to change the world. It has the power to inspire. It has the power to unite people in a way that little else does. It speaks to youth in a language they understand. Sport can create hope where once there was only despair. It is more powerful than government in breaking down racial barriers.”*³⁰ - Nelson Mandela



Source: www.pexels.com

ACCESS

The research says there is a strong connection between organized sport and play and the development of SEL and character. In her ED WEEK article entitled “[Kids Are Getting Priced Out of Youth Sports. How Schools Can Help](#)”, Arianna Prothero writes that the rising costs of “participating in organized youth sports is making these activities unaffordable for many families, essentially barring kids and teens from important opportunities to improve their physical health, develop social-emotional skills, and build relationships...Sports participation is much lower among children from low-income families than among those from high-income families. A quarter of kids from families earning less than \$25,000 a year participate in regular sports, compared with 39 percent of kids in families earning more than \$100,000 a year, according to the report. While sports participation among 6- to 12-year-olds from low-income families has gone up over the past four years, participation among 13- to 17-year-olds in that income bracket continues to decrease, dropping from 38 percent in 2012 to 27 percent in 2022.”³¹

Arianna Prothero goes on to report kids are getting priced out of youth sports. “The rising costs of participating in organized youth sports is making these activities unaffordable for many families, essentially barring kids and teens from important opportunities to improve their physical health, develop social-emotional skills, and build relationships. After-school programs can play a vital role in making access to organized sports more equitable.

Sports participation is much lower among children from low-income families than among those from high-income families. A quarter of kids from families earning less than \$25,000 a year participate in regular sports, compared with 39 percent of kids in families earning more than \$100,000 a year, according to the report. While sports participation among 6- to 12-year-olds from low-income families has gone up over the past four years, participation among 13- to 17-year-olds in that income bracket continues to decrease, dropping from 38 percent in 2012 to 27 percent in 2022.”³²

“Youth sports are increasingly privatized, and families must pay to play through fees, uniforms, equipment, travel costs, and other expenses...As kids are facing a mental health crisis, there is a greater recognition of the value of being physically active.”³³ - Jon Solomon, Editorial Director of the Sports & Society Program at the Aspen Institute.



Source: www.pexels.com

“While organized sports are excellent SEL skill-builders, uniforms, referees, and rulebooks are not required for children to reap the social and emotional benefits of play. Like organized sports, all types of play offer opportunities to explore, imagine, and create. When children play with others, they practice cooperation, communication, and conflict resolution. Construction play, like building with LEGOs, activates children’s problem-solving skills. And through dramatic play, children take on the perspectives of others and practice empathy. SO, GET OUT THERE AND PLAY!”³⁴

MORE ABOUT...



The **Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL)**, envisions all children and adults as self-aware, caring, responsible, engaged, and lifelong learners who work together to achieve their goals and create a more inclusive, just world. How? Through a commitment to SEL.

Arianna Prothero is a Texas-based reporter for Education Week covering technology and student health and well-being. She has also extensively reported on school choice policy for the paper. Previously, she was a reporter and anchor at WLRN, the NPR-affiliate station in Miami.



Rebecca Fabiano is the president and founder of Fab Youth Philly. For nearly 25 years, she has worked in various capacities across nonprofit and youth-serving organizations, served on boards and helped to build solid youth programs that engage, encourage, and create spaces for positive development.

Fab Youth Philly (FYP) has a unique, holistic model for youth development. Their three-pronged approach to youth development is aimed at creating relevant, engaging, and empowering learning opportunities at the individual, professional, and community level. First, they provide innovative, award-winning summer and afterschool programs for teens with a focus on workforce development programming. Second, they connect with youth development professionals working with or on behalf of youth through their Center for Youth Development Professionals (CYDP), which offers competency-based professional development and networking opportunities. Third, they consult with other youth-serving organizations to provide a range of consulting services, ranging from curriculum development to retreats and small conferences.



Hilary G. Conklin Ph.D., is a former middle school teacher, a fellow with the OpEd Project and an associate professor in the College of Education at DePaul University in Chicago, where her research interests include the preparation of middle school social studies teachers.

RESOURCES TO LEARN MORE

There are many resources on the topic of play. You can review the articles cited in the paper and in the End Notes. We also cite a few additional resources below.



Websites:

- [The Genius of Play](#) has created easy to use activities, provides expert advice and more. And it's all FREE for anyone to use.
- [The National Institute for Play \(NIFPlay\)](#) is dedicated to advancing society's understanding and application of play. In July they began publishing [Play Times](#), a monthly newsletter with summaries of research on play –[Play Notes](#)– plus interviews with play experts, events and play journals. Everything you need to stay up to date with what's happening in the world of play.
- [The power of play – Part 1-5](#): This is a 5-part series from Michigan State University Extension entitled, "The Power of Play."
- [Project Play](#): Project Play connects the silos across the disjointed landscape of youth and school sports and develops systems-level solutions. Launched in 2013 by the [Sports & Society Program](#) of the [Aspen Institute](#), the award-winning initiative convenes leaders, identifies gaps in access to quality sport activity, and mobilizes organizations for action.

Videos: There are many TED talks and other videos on play. Below are some that we like.

- "[Play is more than just fun](#)," TED Talk by Stuart Brown
- "[The decline of play](#)," TED Talk by Peter Gray

Articles:

- [The decline of American playtime — and how to resurrect it](#) by Anna North
- [The Income Gap Is Becoming a Physical-Activity Divide](#) by Matt Richtel
- [The Power of Play: A Pediatric Role in Enhancing Development in Young Children](#) by Michael Yogman, MD., et. al.
- [Survey: Low-income kids are 6 times more likely to quit sports due to costs](#) by Jon Solomon

Organizations: The list below was copied from [Positive Coaching Alliance](#):

- "[The Play Equity Fund](#) is focused on bringing the transformational power of sport and play to all children, regardless of their race, gender, zip code or socioeconomic status. The Play Equity Fund is the only nonprofit focused solely on Play Equity as a social justice issue. The Play Equity Fund was established by The LA84 Foundation as its 501(c)3 public charity partner.
- [King County Play Equity Coalition](#) is a Seattle-based network of organizations dedicated to shifting power and centering physical activity as a key part of health and youth development. [Read their latest findings](#) from their Youth Action Team on how to make white-dominated sports more inclusive and welcoming for youth of color.

- [Coalitions for Sport Equity](#) is a national group of city and region-based collectives representing sport, physical activity, and play-based organizations in communities nationwide. Supported by the [Center for Healing and Justice through Sport](#) - this collective is working to empower local communities to organize for positive change in youth sports.
- [Laureus USA](#) is a grant-making, nonprofit organization that supports the growth and deepens the impact of programs that use sport for social change. Working globally, Laureus' purpose is to change the world through the power of sport. Through their Sport for Good Cities program, they play the backbone role in uniting stakeholders, providing resources, and driving collaboration at the local level."



Source: www.pexels.com

APPENDIX 1

“Why Equity Matters in Youth Sports”

Rob Marcus is the Chief Community Impact Officer with Positive Coaching Alliance. Below is an article that he authored on the topic of sports and equity.

We often speak of sports as a unifying force that transcends differences and brings people together. Participating in sports can help young people develop healthy habits that last a lifetime. However, beneath the surface of fun and games lies a serious issue that deserves greater attention. To truly celebrate the profound impact of sports, we must first champion equity. This is especially crucial for youth sports, where the youngest athletes are just discovering their passion, unaware of the numerous systemic barriers that threaten their fundamental right to play.

Kids growing up in marginalized areas have disproportionately limited opportunities to engage in sports compared to their peers, which can deprive them of many associated benefits: positive physical and mental health, socio-emotional support, academic success, and future career options. Championing equity means advocating for equal access, and opportunity for all young athletes, so all communities have the capacity to create positive and empowering youth sports experiences. We're in a moment where youth sports providers, advocates, and community leaders must pay attention to the issue of equity—something we've all been reexamining over the last few years of racial uprisings, economic downturns, and a devastating pandemic. It's our collective responsibility to bridge the equity gap and reshape sports culture for generations to come.

What is the sports equity gap?

Systemic barriers, such as pay-to-play fees, constrained school budgets, lack of diverse coaches, and the poor quality of facilities and equipment marginalize low-income and communities of color, putting kids on the sidelines. The disparity between youth from lower-income families and middle- and higher-income families has been found to be somewhere between a 16 and 25 percent participation gap. They also abandon these activities due to financial constraints at a staggering six times the rate. There's also a racial divide with BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) youth playing sports at a significantly lower rate than wealthier, white youth. The consequences of this are immense.

Research has shown that kids who play sports not only experience improvements in physical fitness, overall health, and mental well-being, but also develop essential life skills such as discipline, perseverance, teamwork, and goal-setting. Identifying and nurturing athletic talent at a young age is not just about professional sports ambitions. [Communities that encourage youth sports](#) and physical activity also benefit from being healthier and more productive. So, ignoring the sports equity gap not only means denying low-income youth the joy of play, but it may also deny them the chance to become thriving, engaged community members.

The sports equity gap also affects girls and women of color, both as players and coaches, as they face additional and unique barriers. Equal pay and quality facilities for women soccer players has been a mainstream debate in the United States, even as our National Team is recognized as one of the most successful soccer teams in the world. Research shows that girls enter sports later and drop out earlier and at higher rates than boys. Youth sports also struggle with the low number of women coaches and women in leadership positions who have a tremendous influence on girls' self-esteem, confidence, and long-term commitment. And while Title IX has contributed to improving overall gender equity in sports, girls of color are disproportionately faced with limited access, opportunities, and support for them to play alongside their white peers successfully.

Changing communities, changing systems

So how do we begin to address the Sports Equity Gap? It cannot just be on an individual level—not if we want better than incremental progress. We must see youth sports as a system, akin to education or criminal justice. Systems prioritize functionality over equity. To drive meaningful change for our children, we must scrutinize the youth sports system holistically, assessing all its components and stakeholders.

Through Positive Coaching Alliance’s [Sports Equity Initiative](#), we’re actively pursuing systemic change through a collective-impact approach to battle racial and gender equity gaps in the youth sports system. We believe in the transformative power of collective action and coalition building as our strategic approach, working closely with local stakeholders to realize their vision of an inclusive and positive sports environment that reaches all young people and their coaches. Our commitment extends to identifying the root causes of inequities and implementing targeted solutions, including collaborating with community leaders to develop community-based interventions, conducting outreach and inclusive volunteer coach recruitment, providing access to high-quality coach education, and actively advocating vigorously for necessary policy reforms.

While we’re active in this space, other amazing organizations are also critical players in the sports equity movement. While these dedicated organizations stand at the forefront of the sports equity movement, their collective efforts underscore the significance of unity in reshaping youth sports.

“Collective action is crucial for empowering communities to tackle systemic challenges by uniting voices, resources, and efforts towards the shared goal of achieving equity in youth sports in Seattle. For our coalition, it’s a model that holds the promise of creating enduring and meaningful change. We are committed to centering young people and communities of color, and we actively work with and through our community partners to break down barriers hindering access to youth sports, play, and movement in historically underserved areas,” stated Bookie Gates of the [King County Play Equity Coalition](#) and Founder of [Baseball Beyond Borders](#).

The Future of Sports Equity

Looking ahead, we aspire to achieve equity in outcomes, not just access. We want kids to not only enter sports, but to stay in them. Participation in youth sports is done right when kids have the opportunity to reap the long-term benefits. We aim to see increased youth participation rates in low-income communities of color, amplified BIPOC coach representation, and greater involvement of girls and women of color as players and coaches. We seek improved access to quality coach education, fostering a positive culture in youth sports through collaboration with local stakeholders.”³⁵

APPENDIX 2

“4 Ways PE Teachers and Coaches Can Advance SEL”

*“Social emotional learning in physical education curriculum can create a positive environment for students to explore and practice SEL skills on a regular basis. As a result, students can build strong relationships with the mind-body connection and develop crucial social skills needed to navigate school and life.”*³⁶

Below is an excerpt of an article by Maurice J. Elias and Mitch Lyons for Edutopia.org entitled, “The Benefits of a Written Curriculum for Physical Education and School Sports.”

1. Promote a positive team climate and essential virtues. Sport psychology and SEL show that teams and individuals who value safe, supportive, encouraging, and inclusive team climates perform better and learn faster. Having a [positive team climate](#) includes athletes possessing the psychological safety that allows them to be more collaborative and creative without fear.

Creating a positive, safe, and supportive space is a skill. Many companies in the business community follow this science and have applied the same approach in their operational practices. Codifying these practices in the PE and youth sports context would, if truly implemented, increase the social and emotional benefits that students would get from participation and mitigate much of the abuse that plagues youth sports.

2. Develop skills through thought recognition and relationship building. When adolescents are intentionally taught emotion regulation and focus skills, they are helped when shooting a foul shot with 0.1 seconds left on the clock. Learning how to problem-solve and learning how to make decisions are valuable skills when analyzing one’s own performance and looking to make improvements. Empathy and communication are essential when picking up your teammate when they miss a catch. Knowing and identifying these skills is the first step in having them take root within students’ and athletes’ lives.

Intentionally teaching and practicing metacognition would allow anticipatory defensive players to pierce the passing lane, to find calm through meditation in the middle of a chaotic game, to recognize distracting thoughts in real time to improve concentration. Students who are trained in thinking about what they are thinking about are more likely to be the best version of themselves in any athletic contest.

3. Build student investment and responsibility through student voice. In 21st-century businesses, employee voice is valued because it increases their engagement and empowerment to ask questions, seek help, and try out new skills while providing valuable feedback, decreasing stress, and increasing morale. The employees feel ownership in the business because they contributed to its success.

This same concept applies in athletic activities and sports teams and for the same reasons. Have the participants set the group/team values, rules, and consequences for infractions; let them plan practice and develop game plans; and give them opportunities to provide honest feedback and suggest improvements. This improves autonomy and engagement.

4. Have the coach serve as a facilitator. Of course, for the above to happen, PE teachers and coaches must take on the role of guiding facilitator, mostly by asking pertinent questions of players and giving

them the freedom to offer their answers without fear of being judged harshly. Ideally, it means establishing a written problem-solving protocol that is used regularly when difficulties or challenges exist—whether in a PE class or a game context, in preparation as well as in action.

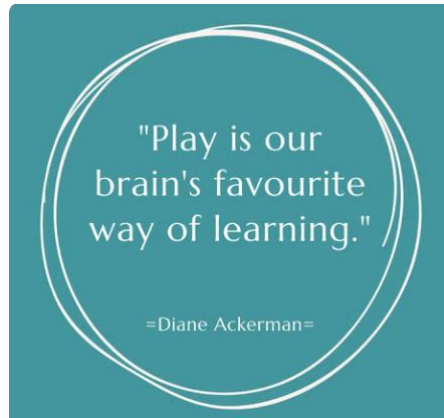
This requires the coach to give up some power, but certainly not during games where split-second decisions must be made by only one person. When students are aware of this new role embraced by their coaches, their relationship changes, and students' accountability and responsibilities are increased.”³⁷



Source: www.pexels.com

APPENDIX 3

“The Most Quotable Quotes About Play & Learning”



Source: sticksandstoneseducation.com.au

Below is an excerpt of an article by [Sticks and Stones Education](https://sticksandstoneseducation.com.au)³⁸:

- "For a small child there is no division between playing and learning; between the things he or she does 'just for fun' and things that are 'educational.' The child learns while living and any part of living that is enjoyable is also play." - Penelope Leach
- "If we want our kids to have happy, productive lives, we must allow more time for play, not less." - Peter Grey
- "When we deny children play, we are denying them the right to understand the world." - Erika Christakis
- "Play gives children a chance to practice what they are learning." - Fred Rogers
- "Play builds the kind of free-and-easy, try-it-out, do-it-yourself character that our future needs." - James Hines Jr.
- "Play is foundational for bonding relationships and fostering tolerance. It's where we learn to trust and where we learn about the rules of gameplay; it increases creativity and resilience, and it's all about the generation of diversity of interactions, diversity of behaviors, diversity of connections." - Isabel Behncke
- "It's the things we play with and the people who help us play that make a great difference in our lives." - Fred Rogers
- "Play is often talked about as if it were a relief from serious learning. But for children play is serious learning." - Fred Rogers
- "Children have always learned and created places for themselves through play." - Donna R. Barnes
- "Children need the freedom and time to play. Play is not a luxury. Play is a necessity." - Kay Redfield Jamison
- "Play is the highest expression of human development in childhood, for it alone is the free expression of what is in a child's soul." - Friedrich Froebel
- "Children learn as they play. Most importantly, in play children learn how to learn." - O. Fred Donaldson
- "The drive to play freely is a basic biological drive. Lack of free play may not kill the physical body as with lack of air, food, or water, but it kills the spirit and stunts mental growth." - Peter Grey
- "The creation of something new is not accomplished by the intellect but by the play instinct." - Carl Jung
- "When children pretend, they're using their imaginations to move beyond the bounds of reality. A stick can be a magic wand. A sock can be a puppet. A small child can be a superhero." - Fred Rogers
- "Necessity may be the mother of invention, but play is certainly the father." - Roger von Oech
- "Play is the foundation of learning, creativity, self-expression, and constructive problem-solving. It's how children wrestle with life to make it meaningful." - Susan Linn

- "Play matters because people matter. It reminds us of our interdependence and gives us a chance to really see other people and, in turn, to be really and truly seen." - Jill Violet
- "Play is not frivolous. It is not something to tuck in after completing all the important stuff. Play the important stuff. Play is a drive, a need, a brain building must-do." - Denita Dinger
- "Education is not preparation for life; education is life itself." - John Dewey
- "If we want our kids to have happy, productive, moral lives, we must allow more time for play, not less." - Peter Gray
- "Play is training for the unexpected." - Mark Beckoff
- "The world of pretend play is one in which children can be free to express themselves, their ideas, their emotions, and their fantastic visions of themselves, of other people, and of the world." - Sandra Russ
- "Children learn through doing – play is how they explore their world, learn how to assess risk, try things out and get to know themselves." - Beth Almeras
- "Play is the primary way children were designed to learn." - Kathy Hersh-Pasek and Roberta Golinkoff
- "Through observing children at play, we recognize what their worries, concerns, and fantasies are. We learn about their basic needs, their feelings of love and anger, their rivalries and fears of failure, their secret wishes, and desires." - Jerome Singer
- "Free play gives children an outlet to express their emotions and feelings and helps them develop a sense of who they are." - Joan Santer and Carol Griffith
- "For a child, it is in the simplicity of play that the complexity of life is sorted, like puzzle pieces joined together to make sense of the world." - L.R. Knost
- "Never in my wildest dreams could I have imagined we would have to defend children's right to play." - Nancy Carlsson-Paige
- "Let them play! The more they play, the more resilient and socially adept they will become." - Jessica Joelle Alexander
- "It is paradoxical that many educators and parents still differentiate between a time for learning and a time for play." - Leo F. Buscaglia
- "Toys are the tools of childhood, and the simple act of playing allows kids to develop a lifelong love of learning." - Mark Carson
- "Risky play is really important for kids—all kids—because it teaches hazard assessment, it teaches delayed gratification, it teaches resilience, it teaches confidence. When kids get outside and practice bravery, they learn valuable life lessons." - Caroline Paul

END NOTES

- ¹ Siobhan O'Connor, [*The Secret Power of Play*](#)
- ² Kenneth R. Ginsburg, MD, MSED, [*The Importance of Play in Promoting Healthy Child Development and Maintaining Strong Parent-Child Bonds*](#)
- ³ Afterschool Alliance, [*Afterschool Webinar: Leveraging Youth Sports to Support Positive Youth Development*](#)
- ⁴ National Institute for Play, [*Play: The Basics*](#)
- ⁵ Michigan State University Extension, [*The power of play – Part 3: Types of play*](#)
- ⁶ Play and Playground Encyclopedia, [*What is Free Play?*](#)
- ⁷ N. Sam M.S., [*Organized Play*](#)
- ⁸ Willow Meadows Baptist Church, [*The Importance of Play*](#)
- ⁹ Joanna Lewsley, [*Should I set up structured play activities for my toddler?*](#)
- ¹⁰ Michigan State University Extension, [*The power of play – Part 4: Characteristics of play*](#)
- ¹¹ IBID.
- ¹² IBID.
- ¹³ Nathan Recess Guardians, [*Unstructured Play Is Critical For Kids*](#)
- ¹⁴ Michigan State University Extension, [*The power of play – Part 3: Types of play*](#)
- ¹⁵ Michigan State University Extension, [*The power of play – Part 4: Characteristics of play*](#)
- ¹⁶ Willow Meadows Baptist Church, [*The Importance of Play*](#)
- ¹⁷ Kenneth R. Ginsburg, MD, MSED, [*The Importance of Play in Promoting Healthy Child Development and Maintaining Strong Parent-Child Bonds*](#)
- ¹⁸ Sam Piha, [*Making Way For Play: The Benefits For Kids, Older Youth And Adults*](#)
- ¹⁹ IBID.
- ²⁰ Jenny Anderson, [*Kids are so over-scheduled that doctors are being told to prescribe play*](#)
- ²¹ Hilary G. Conklin, [*Playtime Isn't Just for Preschoolers—Teenagers Need It, Too*](#)
- ²² Sam Piha, [*Making Way For Play: The Benefits For Kids, Older Youth And Adults*](#)
- ²³ Willow Meadows Baptist Church, [*The Importance of Play*](#)
- ²⁴ Sam Piha, [*Is Play a “Waste”?*](#)
- ²⁵ CASEL, [*What is Social Emotional Learning?*](#)
- ²⁶ Sarah Scavone, [*The Positivity of SEL From Sports*](#)
- ²⁷ Jan Dennis, [*Building Social Emotional Learning Through Play*](#)
- ²⁸ CASEL, [*Connections July 2024*](#)
- ²⁹ Edutopia, [*Using Athletics to Teach Social and Emotional Skills*](#)
- ³⁰ Steemit, [*The power of sports, the language understood by all!!*](#)
- ³¹ IBID.

- ³² Arianna Prothero, [*Kids Are Getting Priced Out of Youth Sports. How Schools Can Help*](#)
- ³³ IBID.
- ³⁴ CASEL, [*Connections July 2024*](#)
- ³⁵ Rob Marcus, [*Why Equity Matters in Youth Sports*](#)
- ³⁶ Doug Curtin, [*Social Emotional Learning in Physical Education*](#)
- ³⁷ Maurice J. Elias & Mitch Lyons, [*The Benefits of a Written Curriculum for Physical Education and School Sports*](#)
- ³⁸ Sticks and Stones Education, [*The Most Quotable Quotes about Play & Learning*](#)