

Position statements - 2. Children in sport, 1995

FEPSAC Position Statement # 2

Children in sport

Organised sport for children has been on the increase in most countries in recent years. Indeed, many children find sport interesting and often this is enhanced by coverage of sport in the media. Sport can sometimes be the most popular of organised leisure-time activities. Moreover, parents are interested in children's sport as it is often considered to be a positive environment for children's growth. Also, the development of elite, or top-level, sport has led to the search for talent and this has included recruitment into sport at an early age.

Organised sport has traditionally been regarded as an environment for positive growth and socialisation for children. However, it is also known that sport can disturb an individual's development and be a negative influence on socialisation. The significance and influence of sport for the child will depend primarily on the nature of the interactions that are created in sport and on the quality of the emotional atmosphere that is sustained within sport contexts.

Positive Outcomes

At its best, sport gives the child the chance to experience enjoyment and the acquisition of different kinds of positive outcomes, such as challenge, social interactions, skill enhancement and physical development. A safe and positive environment means that a child's abilities and perceived competence are appropriate for the challenges that sport provides. This is more likely if the child is given a chance to be independent. Also, parents should not impose too high expectations of success on their children, but show a caring and accepting attitude towards the child. A mastery motivational climate should be created. Under such favourable conditions, sport can enhance the child's initiative and independence, as well as self-esteem and identity. Through sport children can acquire different skills that they can use in activities outside of sport.

It is easy to develop close social relationships in sport contexts and this is why sport is a good environment for the development of cooperative skills and prosocial behaviour in children. However, sport itself does not necessarily promote prosocial behaviour. This will occur only if children are given a chance to experience successful interaction and true collaboration.

Sport also teaches children how to observe common rules of behaviour. Rules make it possible to teach about the responsibilities of an individual to other members of the group.

Problem Outcomes

For most children, sport is a positive experience and an interesting leisure activity. However, poor management of the sport experience for children may cause problems. A healthy balance needs to be achieved between involvement in leisure-time sport and education. Similarly, excessively high expectations of success by adults, such as parents and coaches, may result in anxiety and stress in children. The child will not find any satisfaction in sport if his or her self-esteem is threatened. Since it is the adults who are often responsible for the rules being observed, and at the same time the importance of the competition and winning are stressed highly, sport may lose its educational value. A child's moral responsibility for the observance of rules can easily be delegated to the adult acting as the referee, and in the worse case the rules are felt to be a hindrance to winning.

Behaviour in sport by both adults and children is affected by structural aspects of sport as a whole, including the importance of competition and sport subcultures. A number of studies have indicated that the increased level and importance of competition results in the strengthening of factors that may threaten the child's enjoyment and psychological health. For example, instead of participating in many sports with variable training regimens, children are often encouraged to specialise too early in one sport. Similarly, increasing competition at the cost of cooperation, and increasing the importance of competition, may undermine social education and could even increase the incidence of asocial behaviour, such as aggression. Moreover, fair play and moral responsibility can be reduced when competition is increased.

However, it is not necessarily competition itself that gives rise to these negative consequences. It is more important for the child to adopt the goal of self-improvement either singly or in combination with winning/outcome goals, to optimise the benefits of the sport experience. Children should compete for their own reasons rather than for those suggested or imposed by adults.

High-level sport comprises a number of subcultures that have developed for different kinds of sport. These subcultures are characterised by norms, attitudes and behavioural practices that can differ from the established rules. It is possible that such subcultures involve positive practices, while others may indulge in undesirable ones such as rule violation or aggression. The existence of two sets of rules results in dual morality. The transference of professional subcultures to children's sport is not recommended.

Recommendations

- Children's sport should be organised with the prime objective of enhancing the well-being of the child.
- Those involved in children's sport should understand that children are not mini-adults.
- A subculture of children's sport should be created with its own rules and systems for competition.
- Children should be offered opportunities for varied practice in many sports, and early specialisation should be avoided.
- A mastery motivational climate should be created for children's sports by emphasising personal and self-improvement goals, and stressing enjoyment, the learning and development of new skills, cooperation, and feelings of autonomy.
- Adults should have a caring and accepting attitude towards the child and, when appropriate, emphasise independence and collaboration in decision-making by the children.
- Coaches should have regular contact with the parents of children in their charge. For those children in high-level sport, parents should be an integral part of the athlete's support team.
- Adults involved in children's sport should have opportunities for receiving education on children's needs and development in sport.
- Adults should learn to recognise signs of potential problems, such as anxiety or eating problems, and seek expert assistance where necessary.