22

Children and Sport Psychology

After reading this chapter, you should be able to

1. discuss the importance of studying the psychology of the young athlete,
2. explain the major reasons children participate in and drop out of sport,
3. discuss the importance of peer relationships in youth sport,
4. describe stress and burnout effects in young athletes,
5. identify and explain how to apply effective coaching practices with youngsters, and
6. discuss the role of parental involvement in youth sport.

As many as 45 million children participate in sport in the United States. What motivates them? Is competitive sport too stressful for them? Why do so many youngsters drop out of sport after the age of 12? Is there something wrong with how they're being coached? These are among the important questions we try to answer in this chapter.

Most people think of sport psychology as something that applies principally to elite athletes. In fact, youngsters compose the greatest population of sport participants, and since the mid-1970s a growing number of highly committed sport psychologists have devoted their careers to examining the important psychological issues in children's sport participation. Their work has major implications for creating safe and psychologically healthful sport programs for children.

Importance of Studying the Psychology of Young Athletes

In the United States alone, an estimated 45 million children under the age of 18 years are involved in school and extracurricular physical activity programs, ranging from youth basketball and baseball to cross-country skiing and rodeo (Ewing & Seefeldt, 2002). Sport participation has been found to represent 66% of all out-of-school activities for youths (Duffett & Johnson, 2004). Some of sport psychology's most important contributions, therefore, are potentially to children's sport.

Many children are intensely involved in organized sport. On average, they participate in their specific sport 11 hours weekly for an 18-week season (Gould & Martens, 1979). Sport is one of the few areas in children's lives in which they can participate intensively in an

activity that has meaningful consequences for themselves, their peers and family, and the community alike (Coleman, 1974; Larson, 2000). For most children, sport participation peaks near the age of 12 years (State of Michigan, 1976). We know from research in developmental psychology that this age and the time leading up to it are critical periods for children and have important consequences on their self-esteem and social development. Thus, the youth sport experience can have important lifelong effects on the personality and psychological development of children.

One reason youth sports are so popular is that people feel youths receive psychological and social values from participation. Sport parents, for example, list the development of personal and social values as highly important when they are asked what they hope their children develop from playing sports (U.S. Anti-Doping Agency, 2011). Contrary to popular belief (and as shown in chapters 23 and 24), participation in organized sport is not always automatically beneficial for the child (Gould & Bean, 2011; Martens, 1978). Character development, leadership, good sporting behavior, and achievement orientations do not magically occur through mere participation. These benefits usually follow competent adult supervision from leaders who understand children and know how to structure programs that provide positive learning experiences. In one national survey by the U.S. Anti-Doping Agency (2011), coaches were ranked as the most important positive influence on young athletes. At the same time, the adult respondents highlighted their concerns about too much emphasis on winning in youth sport today. An important first step to becoming a qualified youth sport leader is understanding the psychology of youth sport and physical activity participation.

KEY POINT Some of the most important implications of sport psychology are in children's sport. For most children, sport participation peaks at around 12 years of age.

Children's Reasons for Participation and Nonparticipation

A good place to start is to look at children's motives for both participation and nonparticipation in sport.

Why Children Participate in Sport

Some 8,000 youths (49% male, 51% female) involved in sponsored sports throughout the United States, both in school and after school, were asked to rank in importance a number of possible reasons for their participation (Ewing & Seefeldt, 1996). Boys and girls in both school and nonschool athletic programs had similar responses (see "Motives for Participation in Youth Sport"), and their comments were consistent with findings from previous research into the motivation for participation (Gould & Horn, 1984). Most children participate in sport to have fun. Other reasons most of them cite are to do something they are good at, improve their skills, get exercise and become fit, be with their friends and make new friends, and compete.

Sex (Sirard, Pfeiffer, & Pate, 2006) and cultural differences (Yan & McCullagh, 2004) have been found in youth motives for participation. For example, in a study of 1,602 middle school students, Sirard and colleagues (2006) found that boys were more motivated by the competitive aspects of sports and girls were more attracted by social opportunities. However, more differences exist within these groups than between them, making it very important for practitioners to strive to understand the unique motivations of each young person they work with.

Why Children Discontinue Participation in Sport

Children's sport participation peaks between the ages of 10 and 13 years and then consistently declines to the age of 18, when a relatively small percentage of youths remain involved in organized sport (Ewing & Seefeldt, 1989; State of Michigan, 1976). Moreover, dropout rates for organized youth sport programs average 35% in any given year (Gould & Petlichkoff, 1988). So, of every 10 children who begin a sport season, 3 to 4 will drop out by the start of the next season.

An in-depth study of 50 swimming dropouts, ranging in age from 10 to 18 years, indicated that "other things to do" and "a change in interest" were the major reasons the vast majority of children gave for discontinued involvement (Gould, Feltz, Horn, & Weiss, 1982). Other reasons that the sample rated as important (but less important than other interests and change of interests) were "not as good as I wanted to be," "not enough fun," "wanted to play another sport," "didn't like the pressure," "boredom," "didn't like the coach," "training was too hard," and "not exciting enough." So, although most young swimmers who quit did so because of interest in other activities, up to 28% cited negative factors such as excessive pressure, dislike of the coach, failure, a lack of fun, and

an overemphasis on winning as important influences on their decision to withdraw.

In a more recent study of more than 500 youth sport dropouts in soccer, ice hockey, and basketball, "other things to do" and a "decline in excitement" were the two items rated as the most important reasons for withdrawal (Rottensteiner, Laakso, Pihlaja, & Knottinen, 2013). Rounding out the top five reasons for dropping out were "not able to be with my friends," "not enough team spirit," and "wanted to play another sport." The results also showed that coaches and teammates were the two most influential groups affecting the young athletes' decision to discontinue. Most interesting was the finding that a lack of teamwork, team affiliation issues, and concerns about a lack of ability were more important reasons for discontinuing in females than in males. Coaches and other youth sport leaders should be particularly sensitive to these issues when working with young female athletes.

KEY POINT For every 10 children who begin a sport season, 3 to 4 discontinue before the start of the next season.

Deeper Motives: Perceived Competence, Goal Orientations, and Intrinsic Motivation

The reasons youths give for participation and dropping out are their surface-level responses, not the deeper, underlying motives some sport psychologists have sought (figure 22.1). For example, children who discontinue often have low perceived competence, tend

Motives for Participation in Youth Sport

REASONS FOR PARTICIPATING IN NONSCHOOL SPORTS	REASONS FOR PARTICIPATING IN SCHOOL SPORTS
Boys	**Boys**
1. To have fun	1. To have fun
2. To do something I'm good at	2. To improve my skills
3. To improve my skills	3. For the excitement of competition
4. For the excitement of competition	4. To do something I'm good at
5. To stay in shape	5. To stay in shape
6. For the challenge of competition	6. For the challenge of competition
7. To get exercise	7. To be part of a team
8. To learn new skills	8. To win
9. To play as part of a team	9. To go to a higher level of competition
10. To go to a higher level of competition	10. To get exercise
Girls	**Girls**
1. To have fun	1. To have fun
2. To stay in shape	2. To stay in shape
3. To get exercise	3. To get exercise
4. To improve my skills	4. To improve my skills
5. To do something I'm good at	5. To do something I'm good at
6. To learn new skills	6. To be part of a team
7. For the excitement of competition	7. For the excitement of competition
8. To play as part of a team	8. To learn new skills
9. To make new friends	9. For team spirit
10. For the challenge of competition	10. For the challenge of competition

Adapted, by permission, from M. Ewing and V. Seefeldt, 1989, *Participation and attrition patterns in American agency-sponsored and interscholastic sports: An executive summary.* Final Report Sporting Goods Manufacturer's Association (North Palm Beach, FL: Sporting Goods Manufacturer's Association).

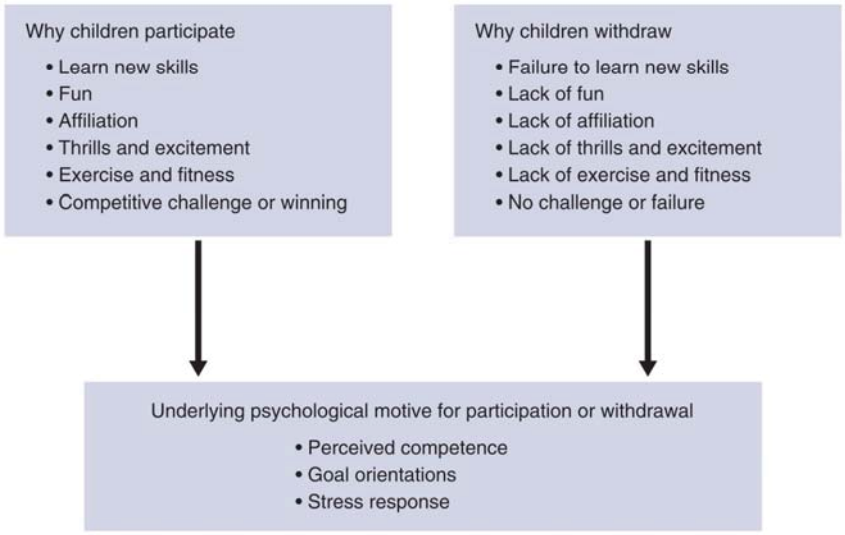


FIGURE 22.1 A motivational model of youth sport participation and withdrawal.
Adapted from Gould and Petlichkoff 1988.

to focus on outcome goals, exhibit less self-determined forms of motivation, and experience considerable stress.

Maureen Weiss, a leading researcher in this area, concluded that youth sport participants differ from nonparticipants and those who drop out in their level of **perceived competence** (Weiss & Ferrer-Caja, 2002). That is, children with low perceptions of their abilities to learn and perform sport skills do not participate (or they drop out), whereas children who persist have higher levels of perceived competence. In addition, youths who focus on outcome goals (especially if they have low perceptions of ability), are more extrinsically than intrinsically motivated, and have greater levels of stress are more likely to discontinue. From this information, you can infer that one crucial task of youth sport leaders and coaches is to discover ways to enhance children's self-perceived ability. One way is to teach children to evaluate their performances by their own standards of improvement rather than by competitive outcomes (winning or losing). Leaders must also create task-oriented motivational climates, foster self-determined behavior through the use of autonomous competent coaching strategies, and reduce stress placed on young athletes.

KEY POINT Children with low perceptions of their athletic abilities do not participate in sport, or they drop out, whereas children with high perceptions of their competence participate and persist.

Sport-Specific and Sport-General Dropouts

Youth sport leaders usually want to know whether children are withdrawing from their programs and entering other sports (**sport-specific dropouts**) or are withdrawing from sport participation altogether (**sport-general dropouts**). For example, in the swimming study cited earlier, 68% of the youngsters who discontinued competitive swimming were active in other sports (Gould et al., 1982). Similarly, in a study of former competitive gymnasts, 95% were participating in another sport or were still in gymnastics but at a less intense level (Klint & Weiss, 1986). Thus, we need to distinguish between sport-specific dropouts or sport transfers and those children who discontinue involvement in all of sport (Gould & Petlichkoff, 1988).

KEY POINT It is useful to learn whether children are withdrawing from a particular sport or program or from sport participation altogether.

Youth Sport Participation: Implications for Practice

The research on why children participate or withdraw from sport leads to a number of general conclusions:

- Most of the motivations children have for participating in sport (i.e., having fun, learning new skills, doing something one is good at, being with friends, making new friends, maintaining fitness, exercising,

and experiencing success) are intrinsic in nature. Winning clearly is neither the only nor the most common reason for participation.

• Most young athletes have multiple reasons for participation, not a single motive. Although most children withdraw because of interest in other activities, a significant minority discontinue for negative reasons such as a lack of fun, too much pressure, or dislike of the coach.

• Underlying the descriptive reasons for sport withdrawal (e.g., no fun) is the child's need to feel worthy and competent. When young athletes feel worthy and competent about the activity, they tend to participate. If they don't feel confident about performing the skills, they tend to withdraw. Recent research also shows that young people are more likely to be involved in sport if their relatedness needs are met in the youth sport environment.

Think about the interactional model of motivation—how a person interacts with a situation (see chapter 3). If you understand the reasons children participate in sport, you can enhance their motivation by structuring environments that better meet their needs. Study "Strategies for Structuring Sport Situations to Meet the Needs of Young Athletes" for suggestions.

KEY POINT Teach young athletes that success means exceeding their own goals, not merely winning contests.

Emphasizing individual goal setting, in which children compare their athletic performances with

Strategies for Structuring Sport Situations to Meet the Needs of Young Athletes

Coaches who understand children's motives for participating in sport can use a number of strategies to structure the environment for skill development, fun, affiliation, excitement, fitness, and success.

Strategies for Meeting the Need for Skill Development

- Implement effective instructional practices (e.g., effective demonstrations, contingent feedback).
- Foster a positive approach to instruction, emphasizing what the child does correctly.
- Know the technical and strategic aspects of the sport.

Strategies for Meeting the Need for Fun

- Form realistic expectations to avoid negative coaching results and athlete frustration.
- Keep practices active—avoid lines and standing around.
- Joke and kid around freely with the children.

Strategies for Meeting the Need for Affiliation or Relatedness

- Provide time for children to make friends.
- Schedule social events (e.g., pizza party) outside practice.
- Incorporate periods of free time before and during practices.

Strategies for Meeting the Need for Excitement

- Do not overemphasize time spent on drills; incorporate variety into practices.
- Incorporate change-of-pace activities (e.g., water polo for swimmers) into practices.
- Focus on short, crisp practices.

Strategies for Meeting the Need for Fitness

- Teach young athletes how to monitor their own fitness.
- Organize planned, purposeful practices specifically designed to enhance fitness.

Strategies for Meeting the Need for Success

- Allow children to compete.
- Help children define winning not only as beating others but as achieving one's own goals and standards.

their own standards (self-referenced standards), helps children avoid focusing solely on the outcomes of competitions (Martens, 2004), and they will more likely feel competent. At least 50% of young athletes will lose, so when self-evaluation depends on winning and losing, 50% of young athletes can develop low self-worth and thus become less likely to continue sport participation. Youth sport leaders can keep and analyze participation statistics and conduct "exit interviews" with children who drop out. In this way leaders can track how many children begin, continue, and complete seasons and—if children discontinue—whether they chose to participate in another sport or to discontinue involvement in sport altogether. The leader can ask whether young athletes discontinued because of conflicts with other interests (something adult leaders may not have control over) or because of poor coaching, competitive pressure, or a lack of fun (which adult leaders can better control).

For example, a high school football coach was concerned about the low number of players coming out for his squad. He examined previous participation records at all levels of play and saw that many youngsters had participated in elementary and middle school programs but that few had participated in the ninth grade. The coach spoke with some of the players who had discontinued during middle school and discovered that some very negative coaching had occurred at the seventh- and eighth-grade levels. He discussed with these coaches the advantages of a positive approach to coaching (explained later in this chapter) and found in subsequent years that more players were coming out for his high school team.

Petlichkoff (1996) suggested that when children discontinue sport involvement, a coach should ask the following questions:

- Has the child developed an interest in another sport or activity?
- Does the child's withdrawal appear to be permanent or temporary?
- Did the child have a part or choice in the decision to withdraw, or was she cut from a team or injured?
- What effect does the withdrawal have on the child's well-being?

On the basis of the responses to these questions, the coach can determine whether the child's withdrawal is appropriate (a child selects soccer participation over basketball) or inappropriate (a child discontinues all sport and physical activity participation because of low perceived competence). We should be particularly concerned when children permanently withdraw, especially today when so many children who could benefit from sport are inactive; when children have no choice in the decision; or when the withdrawal has negative effects on their well-being.

KEY POINT Rigorously analyze why young athletes withdraw from sport.

Role of Friends in Youth Sport

Affiliation motive is a major motive that children have for sport participation. Thus, children enjoy sport because of the opportunities it provides to be with friends and make new friends. Although affiliation is certainly important in its own right, sport psychology researchers have discovered that friends and the peer group have other important effects on young athletes.

Peer Relationships and Children's Psychological Development

Developmental psychologists have long known that friends and peers play a major role in the psychological development of children. Peer relations are linked to a child's sense of acceptance, self-esteem, and motivation, so it is natural that sport psychology researchers have turned their attention to this important area. Leading developmental sport psychologist Maureen Weiss and her colleagues have studied friendship and peer relationships in sport. For example, they conducted in-depth interviews with 38 sport participants, 8 to 16 years of age, to learn how children view the component of friendship in sport (Weiss, Smith, & Theeboom, 1996). They identified both positive and negative dimensions in this facet of sport participation. These were some positive dimensions that the researchers heard about:

- Companionship (spending time or "hanging out" together)
- Pleasant play association (enjoying being around one's friend)
- Enhancement of self-esteem (friends saying things or taking actions that boost one's self-esteem)

Maximizing Sport Involvement in Underserved Youths

Millions of children live in poverty today, and research indicates that these children are less often involved in sport and physical activity. They also have high obesity rates relative to same-aged peers who are of middle and upper socioeconomic status. Recognizing this state of affairs, sport and exercise psychologists began to examine both the benefits of involvement in and factors influencing poor children's participation in sport and physical activity. Riley and Anderson-Butcher (2012) interviewed low-income parents whose children participated in a summer sport-based youth development program at Ohio State University. The parents reported that their children received a variety of benefits from participation, including facilitated biopsychosocial development (e.g., increased peer interactions, enhanced personal and social skills); broadened opportunities (e.g., exposure to college opportunities, interaction and exposure to different peers, constructive use of discretionary time); and enhanced cognition, affect, and behaviors (e.g., enhanced thoughts about self, increased positive behaviors). Similarly, Holt, Kingsley, Tink, and Scherer (2011) interviewed low-income parents and youths in Canada and found that a variety of personal (e.g., emotional control, confidence, discipline, and academic performance) and social (e.g., relationships with coaches, making new friends, teamwork, and social skills) attributes were identified as benefits of participation. Thus, low-income youths can gain a variety of benefits from sport and physical activity participation.

Examining factors influencing participation, Dollman and Lewis (2010) found that children of higher socioeconomic status participated in sport more often than their less well-off peers and that these discrepant participation rates—especially among girls—could be explained by the fact that girls of high socioeconomic status received more tangible (e.g., more access to equipment), transportation, and emotional (e.g., permission to play, encouragement and play time with parents) support. In another study, low-income parents reported challenges associated with sports participation (Holt, Kingsley, Tink, & Scherer, 2011). They found that parental time and scheduling demands limited their children's participation (parents often worked multiple jobs), as did financial barriers resulting from the costs required to have children initially participate in sport or to maintain participation as the child progresses. In other studies, safety has been cited as barrier to participation (Humbert et al., 2006). These results suggest that those parties interested in enhancing sport participation in low-income children and youths need to make special efforts to overcome these barriers and facilitate sport and physical activity participation.

- Help and guidance (friends providing assistance relative to learning sport skills as well as general assistance in other domains, such as school)
- Prosocial behavior (saying and doing things that conform to social convention, such as not saying negative things, sharing)
- Intimacy (mutual feelings of close, personal bonds)
- Loyalty (a sense of commitment to one another)
- Things in common (shared interests)
- Attractive personal qualities (friends have positive characteristics such as personality or physical features)
- Emotional support (expressions and feelings of concern for one another)
- Absence of conflicts (some friends do not argue, fight, or disagree)
- Conflict resolution (other friends are able to resolve conflicts)

The young athletes identified fewer negative dimensions of friendship, but those they commented on included the following:

- Conflict (verbal insults, arguments, and disagreements)
- Unattractive personal qualities (friends have undesirable behavioral or personality characteristics, such as being self-centered)
- Betrayal (disloyalty or insensitivity on the part of a friend)
- Inaccessibility (lack of opportunity to interact with one another)

Girls were more apt than boys to identify emotional support as a positive feature of friendship in sport. The

older children among these participants saw intimacy as more important, whereas children under 13 years mentioned prosocial behavior and loyalty more often. Respondents older than 10 years also cited attractive personal qualities more frequently.

Using this initial research, Weiss and Smith (1999) developed the Sport Friendship Quality Scale to measure six aspects of sport friendships. These include self-esteem enhancement and supportiveness, loyalty and intimacy, things in common, companionship and pleasant play, conflict resolution, and conflict. With the development of this measure of friendship, researchers can begin to study peer relations in sport more extensively.

Conducting additional peer relationship research is especially important. Smith (1997, 1999) found that children who perceived more positive relationships with peers in physical activity also reported more positive feelings toward physical activity, higher physical activity motivation, and higher physical self-worth. Positive peer relationships have also been found to be related to lower stress, higher self-determined motivation, and continued participation in youth soccer players (Ullrich-French & Smith, 2006, 2009). Hence, peer relations had a great deal to do with the child's motivation for physical activity, which suggests that promoting positive peer relationships can enhance participation in physical activity.

Although research in this area is relatively new, Weiss and Stuntz (2004) have identified implications for practitioners. Most notably, practitioners should enhance peer relationships by creating motivational climates that enhance task goals and foster cooperation versus competition (see chapter 3). Practitioners can also conduct drills that require small groups of players to interact, which will maximize athlete or student involvement. Last, reducing displays of social status (e.g., public picking of teams) will enhance peer relationships.

Friendship in Sport: Implications for Practice

The research on peer relationships and friendship has a number of implications for practice (Weiss et al., 1996). First, time should be provided for children to be with their friends and for making new friends. The adage that all work and no play makes Jack (or Jill) a dull boy (or girl) seems to ring true. Fraser-Thomas, Cote, and Deakin (2008) found that peer support and peer relations were associated with prolonged engagement in competitive junior swimmers. Second, in an effort to enhance self-esteem among youngsters participating in physical activity, coaches and parents should encourage positive peer reinforcement. Positive statements to teammates should be reinforced, whereas derogatory remarks, teasing, and negative comments should not be tolerated. Children must be taught to respect others, refrain from verbal aggression and bullying, and learn how to resolve conflicts with peers. In chapter 23 we discuss a number of techniques for doing this. Third, the importance of teamwork and the pursuit of group goals should be emphasized. Techniques for fostering group cohesion (see chapter 8) and goal setting (see chapter 15) should be frequently used in the youth sport setting.

Stress and Burnout in Children's Competitive Sport

Stress and burnout are among the most controversial concerns in children's competitive sport. Critics argue that competitive sport places excessive levels of stress on youngsters, who often burn out as a result. Proponents contend that young athletes do not experience excessive competition and that competition teaches children coping strategies, which transfer to other aspects of their lives.

Stress Levels in Young Athletes

Levels of stress in young athletes have been assessed through the use of state anxiety measures administered in competitive game situations (where stress is predicted to be maximal). Most young athletes do not have excessive levels of state anxiety in competition. For example, 13- and 14-year-old wrestlers took the Competitive State Anxiety Inventory for Children just before competition (figure 22.2, showing the distribution of anxiety scores of the 112 wrestlers). Their prematch state anxiety level averaged 18.9 out of a possible 30. Only 9% of the wrestlers had scores in the upper 25% of the scale, which could be considered extremely high. Thus, 91% of the wrestlers did not have excessive stress (Gould, Eklund, Petlichkoff, Peterson, & Bump, 1991).

Simon and Martens (1979) measured state anxiety levels of boys aged 9 to 14 in both practice and socially evaluative settings. State anxiety levels in this study were compared among participants in band (both soloists with the band and band ensemble members);

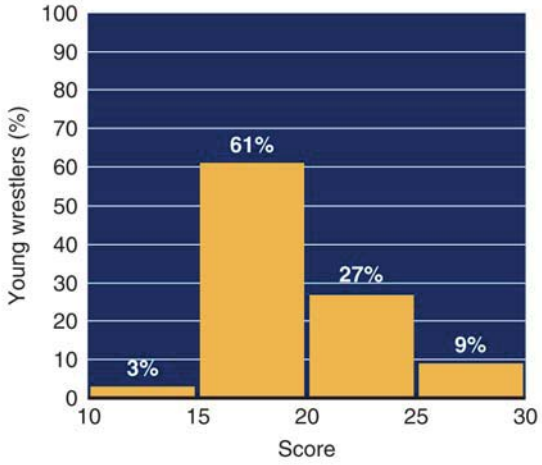


FIGURE 22.2 Prematch state anxiety levels in youth wrestlers as measured with the Competitive State Anxiety Inventory for Children.

students taking academic tests; students in competitive physical education classes; and participants in competitive baseball, basketball, tackle football, gymnastics, ice hockey, swimming, and wrestling. Levels exhibited in sport competition were not significantly greater than those exhibited in the other activities tested. State anxiety was elevated more in competition than in practices, but this change was not dramatic. In fact, band soloists reported the greatest mean state anxiety levels ($M = 21.5$ of 30).

KEY POINT State anxiety levels in children during sport competitions are not usually significantly higher than those during other childhood evaluative activities.

These studies didn't answer the question of whether long-term stress effects might be apparent in the children's trait anxiety levels. Later investigators examined the influence of sport participation on children's trait anxiety (i.e., their predisposition to perceive competition as threatening and respond with heightened nervousness). This research indicated that young athletes have at most only slightly elevated trait anxiety levels. Moreover, in half the studies, no differences were found (see Gould, 1993, for a detailed review).

An interesting study conducted by Dimech and Seiler (2011) examined whether sport participation could buffer the effects of social anxiety, or fear that social or performance situations will result in embarrassment, on children aged 7 and 8 years. Results revealed that children participating in team sports had reduced social anxiety symptoms over the course of a year. Although more research is needed on this topic, the results show that team sport participation might be valuable for helping children overcome social anxiety.

Factors Associated With Heightened State Anxiety in Young Athletes

Although most children who participate in sport do not have excessive levels of state or trait anxiety, stress can be a problem for certain children in specific situations. And although this may be true of only 1 of 10 children who participate in the United States, among 45 million young participants that could mean 4.5 million children with heightened stress. For this reason, sport psychologists also look at what personal and situational factors are associated with heightened state anxiety by administering various background and personality measures away from the competitive setting (e.g., trait anxiety, self-esteem, team and individual performance expectancies, ratings of parental pressure to participate) as well as state anxiety assessments in practice, immediately before competition, and immediately after competition. Links are then made between heightened levels of state anxiety and factors related to these changes (see Scanlan, 1986, for a detailed review).

- High stress levels resulting from youth sport participation are relatively rare yet can affect more than 4.5 million children in specific situations.
- Excessive trait anxiety does not appear to be associated with youth sport participation.

Using the findings from these studies, researchers have developed a profile of the young athlete at risk for having unhealthy levels of competitive state anxiety (see "Characteristics of Children at Risk for Heightened Competitive State Anxiety"). A thorough knowledge of these characteristics will help you detect a child at risk.

Most of the research has involved youngsters under 14 years of age, usually in local competitions. However, some studies have looked at elite junior athletes of high school age. For instance, elite high school distance runners had stress in performing up to their ability, improving on their last performance, participating in championship meets, not performing well, and not being mentally ready (Feltz & Albrecht,

1986). Elite junior wrestlers cited similar stressors (Gould, Horn, & Spreemann, 1983). Thus, elite junior competitors seem stressed primarily by a fear of failure and feelings of inadequacy.

Situational Sources of Stress

Situations, too, can increase stress, particularly these types of factors:

- *Defeat.* Children have more state anxiety after losing than after winning.
- *Event importance.* The more importance placed on a contest, the more state anxiety felt by the participants.
- *Sport type.* Children in individual sports have more state anxiety than children in team sports.

Consequently, youth sport leaders must understand both the personalities of children who are at risk of having high levels of competitive stress and the situations most likely to produce heightened state anxiety. We cannot help children deal with excessive stress until we identify the particular stresses that specific situations elicit in them.

KEY POINT Stress in elite junior competitors is caused by a fear of failure and feelings of inadequacy.

Stress-Induced Burnout

We discuss burnout at length in chapter 21, including its implications for children. Here we only elaborate on earlier points, focusing on burnout as a stress-induced

Young athletes are not immune to the pressures of their sport and are prone to stress, anxiety, and burnout.

Characteristics of Children at Risk for Heightened Competitive State Anxiety

- High trait anxiety
- Low self-esteem
- Maladaptive perfectionism (a disposition to set high standards and at the same time be very concerned about making mistakes and parental evaluation)
- Low performance expectancies relative to the team
- Low self-performance expectations
- Frequent worries about failure
- Frequent worries about adult expectations and social evaluation by others
- Less perceived fun
- Less satisfaction with their performance, regardless of winning or losing
- Perceiving that it is important to their parents that they participate in sport
- Outcome goal orientation and low perceived ability

phenomenon in young athletes. Burnout, which is a growing concern with children's competitive sport, is thought to occur when children lose interest as a result of specializing in a particular sport at a very early age and practicing for long hours under intense pressure for several years. Children as young as age 4 begin participating in sports such as gymnastics, swimming, and tennis, and some attain world-class levels by their early teens. When careers end early or performance declines prematurely, burnout is suspected. We can understand burnout as a special case of sport withdrawal when a young athlete discontinues or curtails sport involvement in response to chronic or long-term stress or motivational concerns (Gustafsson et al., 2011; Smith, 1986). A previously enjoyable activity is no longer pleasurable because of the stress it causes and shifts in children's motivation. Children withdraw from sport, of course, for reasons other than burnout.

KEY POINT Burnout is a special case of sport withdrawal in which a young athlete discontinues sport involvement in response to chronic stress.

As mentioned in chapter 21, Coakley (1992) found that adolescents who burned out of sport typically had one-dimensional self-definitions, seeing themselves only as athletes and not in other possible roles, such as students, musicians, or school activity leaders. Also, young athletes who burned out had seriously restricted control of their own destinies, both in and out of sport. Their parents and coaches made the important decisions regarding their sporting lives with little or no input from them. As discussed in the section on feedback and reinforcement in chapter 6, control of one's destiny by someone else almost always results in decreased intrinsic motivation.

Some prominent factors associated with burnout have been reported that also result in increased state anxiety (see "Factors Associated With Burnout in Young Athletes"; Gould, 1993). Unlike the usual state anxiety felt before a contest, however, for a child en route to burnout the stress does not abate but instead builds constantly. Thus, burnout is best viewed as the end result of long-term stress.

DISCOVER Activity 22.1 helps you determine your youth sport motives and stress sources.

Dealing With Stressed Children: Implications for Practice

Once children with stress, or at high risk of experiencing stress, have been identified, what can adult leaders do to help them learn to cope? Adults should make concerted efforts, first, to create a positive environment and a constructive attitude toward mistakes, which will help children develop confidence. Stress can be alleviated by reducing social evaluation and the importance of winning (e.g., no more fiery pep talks). Adult anxiety reduction techniques (progressive muscle relaxation, breath control, mental training, autogenic training, systematic desensitization, biofeedback, and cognitive–affective stress management strategies) can be adapted for use with children. For instance, Terry Orlick (1992) adapted progressive muscle relaxation for children by creating a "spaghetti toes"

Factors Associated With Burnout in Young Athletes

- Very high self- and other-imposed expectations
- Win-at-all-costs attitude
- Parental pressure
- Long repetitive practices with little variety
- Inconsistent coaching practices
- Overuse injuries from excessive practice
- Excessive time demands
- High travel demands
- Love from others displayed on the basis of winning and losing
- Maladaptive perfectionism

exercise (see "Orlick's Spaghetti Toes Relaxation Exercise"). Orlick and McCaffrey (1991) also have these suggestions for modifying arousal regulation and stress management strategies for children:

- Use concrete and physical strategies (e.g., a little "stress bag" for children to put their worries in).
- Use fun strategies (e.g., have children release muscle tension by making their bellies turn to gelatin).
- Use simple strategies (e.g., imagine changing television channels to change one's mind focus).
- Vary approaches to the same exercise.
- Individualize approaches in relation to the children's interests.
- Remain positive and optimistic.
- Use role models (e.g., tell them Peyton Manning uses positive self-talk).

General directions (e.g., "Just relax" or "You can do it") are not enough to help children manage stress. You'll need to develop strategies for making the directions fun and relevant to the children.

Effective Coaching Practices for Young Athletes

You may have heard about or seen Little League coaches who emulate big-time college or professional coaches to try to achieve success and impress people. For example, former vice president Dan Quayle once boasted that he modeled his coaching of his 12-year-old son's basketball team after then Indiana University basketball coach Bobby Knight. But is Knight's style (especially his use of punishment, severe criticism, and emotional outbursts) appropriate to use with 12-year-olds? Probably not. Coaching practices designed for adult elite athletes are often inappropriate for young athletes who are developing. Sport psychologists have found many coaching practices that are more effective with youngsters; in fact, an organization called the Positive Coaching Alliance (www.positivecoaching.org) has been developed to emphasize the need for youth coaches to be more positive with young athletes. Let's look at what the research says about coaching children.

What the Research Says About Coaching Children

The classic research about coaching children was conducted at the University of Washington by Ron Smith, Frank Smoll, and their colleagues. These investigators examined the relationship between coaching behaviors (e.g., reinforcement, mistake-contingent technical instruction) and self-esteem in young baseball players and looked at whether coaches could learn effective coaching practices (Smith, Smoll, & Curtis, 1979). Their study had two phases. In the first phase, 52 male youth baseball coaches were observed while they were coaching and were assessed using a specially developed instrument, the Coaching Behavior Assessment System (CBAS) (chapter 9). The researchers also interviewed 542 players about their Little League baseball experiences and found that coaches who gave technical instruction were rated more positively than those who used general communication and encouragement. The coaches who used more reinforcement and mistake-contingent technical instruction (gave instruction after errors) were also highly rated, and these results held even when the team's win–loss records were considered. Positive reinforcement and mistake-contingent encouragement (encouraging a player after a mistake) positively affected postseason self-esteem measures, liking of teammates, and liking of baseball.

KEY POINT Children have special coaching needs that are much different from the needs of adults.

Unfortunately, the first phase did not show that the coaching behaviors actually changed the athletes' perceptions, only that these factors were correlated. In a second phase, the investigators assigned 32 baseball coaches either to a control condition, in which they coached as they had always done, or to an experimental coaching education program, in which they received training based on results of the first phase. The experimental group received guidelines on desirable coaching behaviors, saw these behaviors modeled, and were monitored until they had increased the frequency of their encouraging remarks by 25%. The control group did not receive any special training (their coaching, however, was not excessively negative). As you might expect, the experimental group coached differently from the control group: They were more encouraging, gave more reinforcement, and were less

Orlick's Spaghetti Toes Relaxation Exercise

There are lots of games you can play with your body. We'll start with one called Spaghetti Toes. I wonder how good you are at talking to your toes. I'll bet you're pretty good. Let's find out.

Tell the toes on one of your feet to wiggle. Are they wiggling? On just one foot? Good! Now tell these toes to stop wiggling. Tell the toes on your other foot to wiggle. Tell them to wiggle real slow . . . and faster . . . and real slow again . . . slower . . . stop! Did your toes listen to you? Good. If you talk to different parts of your body, as you just did with your toes, your body will listen to you . . . especially if you talk to them a lot. I'm going to show you how you can be the boss of your body by talking to it.

First, I want to tell you something about spaghetti. I like spaghetti. I bet you do, too. But did you ever see spaghetti before it's cooked? It's kind of cold and hard and stiff, and it's easy to break. When it's cooked, it's warm and soft and kinda lies down and curls up on your plate.

I want to see if you can talk to your toes to get them to go soft and warm and sleepy like cooked spaghetti lying on your plate. You might have to talk to them quite a bit to make them know what you want them to do, but I know they can do it.

Wiggle your toes on one foot. Now tell these toes to stop wiggling. Tell them to go soft and sleepy like warm spaghetti lying on your plate. Now wiggle the toes on your other foot. Stop wiggling. Turn those toes into soft spaghetti. Good.

Now wiggle one leg. Stop wiggling. Tell the leg to go soft and sleepy like warm spaghetti. Now wiggle the other leg. Stop. Tell it to go soft and sleepy. Wiggle your behind. Let it go soft and sleepy.

Wiggle your fingers on one hand. Tell your fingers to stop wiggling. See if you can make those fingers feel warm and soft and sleepy like spaghetti lying on your plate. Now wiggle your fingers on your other hand. Slowly. Stop. Make those fingers feel warm. Tell them to go soft and sleepy. Now wiggle one arm. Stop. Tell your arm to go soft and sleepy. Now wiggle the other arm and tell it to go soft and sleepy. Good.

Try to let your whole you go soft and warm and sleepy, like soft spaghetti lying on your plate. [Pause] That's really good. Your body is listening well. Let your body stay like spaghetti and just listen to me. I want to tell you about when spaghetti toes can help you.

When you are worried or scared of something, or when something hurts, your toes and your hands and muscles get kinda hard and stiff—like hard spaghetti before it's cooked. If you are worried, scared, or something hurts you, you feel a lot better and it doesn't hurt so much if your hands and toes and muscles are like warm, soft spaghetti lying on a plate. If you practice doing your spaghetti toes, you'll get really good at it. Then you can tell your hands and toes and muscles to help you by going warm and soft and sleepy, even if you are scared or something hurts.

Before you go, let's try talking to your mouth. Wiggle your mouth. Let it go soft and sleepy. Wiggle your tongue. Let it go soft and sleepy. Wiggle your eyebrows. Let them go soft and sleepy. Let your whole you go warm and soft and sleepy. Let your whole you feel good. (Orlick, 1992, p. 325)

Reprinted from T. Orlick, 2004, *Feeling great: Teaching children to excel at living* (Carp, Ontario, Canada: Creative Bound). By permission of T. Orlick.

punitive. Compared with the players in the control group, the players in the experimental group rated their coaches as better teachers, liked their teammates more, liked their coaches more, and showed greater positive changes in self-esteem.

These findings clearly identified coaching behaviors associated with positive psychological development in children and have been further verified in recent research with youth swimmers (Coatsworth & Conroy, 2006). Moreover, the research shows that coaches can learn these positive behaviors. Other studies have shown that remarks from coaches must be not only positive but also sincere to be effective (Horn, 1985); giving information frequently after good performances and giving encouragement combined with information after poorer performances are associated with effectiveness, competence, and enjoyment (Black & Weiss, 1992). Also, learning a positive approach to coaching results in lower (5%, compared with 26% with untrained coaches) player dropout rates (Barnett, Smoll, & Smith, 1992). Finally, players taught by coaches who used a positive,

mastery-oriented approach to coaching reported decreased anxiety over the course of a playing season, whereas athletes taught by control coaches reported increases in anxiety (Smith, Smoll, & Cumming, 2007).

Relative to this line of research, Langan, Blake, and Longsdale (2013) reviewed all of the studies conducted on the effectiveness of interpersonal coach education programs. They concluded that these programs enhance the interpersonal effectiveness of coaches as well as selected personal and social outcomes in young athletes. However, the findings were sometimes mixed: Self-esteem showed effects in some studies but not others, whereas anxiety and attrition effects were more consistent. Most important, the reviewers found no evidence that these interventions have any harmful effects.

KEY POINT A coach's technical instruction, reinforcement, and mistake-contingent encouragement correlate with a player's self-esteem, motivation, and positive attitudes.

Coaching Young Athletes: Implications for Practice

Some ready observations for practical work follow from these studies. The following 12 coaching guidelines are drawn from Smoll and Smith (1980), Weiss (1991), and Conroy and Coatsworth (2006).

1. Affirming, instructional, supportive, and autonomy-supportive behaviors are highly desirable to use when coaching young athletes. You should avoid punitive, hostile, and controlling coaching behaviors.

2. Focus on catching kids doing things right and give them plenty of praise and encouragement. Praise young children frequently. Add such rewards as a pat on the back and a friendly smile. The best way to give encouragement is to focus on what youngsters do correctly rather than on the errors they make.

3. Give praise sincerely. Praise and encouragement are ineffective unless they are sincere. Telling a young athlete he did a good job when he knows he did not conveys that you are trying only to make him feel better. Insincerity destroys your credibility as a leader or coach. Recognize poor performance in a nonpunitive, specific way (put your arm around the child and say, "It can be really tough out there"), but also offer some encouragement ("Stick with it; it will come").

4. Develop realistic expectations. Realistic expectations appropriate to the child's age and ability level make it much easier for a coach to offer sincere praise. You can't expect of an 11-year-old what you might of a 16-year-old.

5. Reward effort as much as outcome. It's easy to be positive when everything is going well. Unfortunately, things don't always go well—teams lose and sometimes perform poorly. However, if a youngster gives 100% effort, what more can you ask? Reward efforts of young athletes as much as—or even more than—game outcomes.

6. Focus on teaching and practicing skills. All the positive coaching techniques in the world will do little good unless youngsters see improvement in their physical skills. Design practice sessions that maximize participation and include plenty of activity and drill variety. Keep instructions short and simple. Give plenty of demonstrations from multiple angles. Maximize equipment and facility use.

7. Modify skills and activities. One of our goals is for children to have successes in performance. Modifying activities so they are developmentally appropriate is an excellent way to ensure success. For example, make sure that baskets are lowered, batting tees are used, and field distances are modified. "Match the activity to the child, not the child to the activity" (Weiss, 1991, p. 347). Use appropriate skill progressions. An excellent example of this comes from the U.S. Tennis Association, which has reformatted tennis for children under 10 years of age, changing from adult equipment, courts, and scoring to equipment scaled to the size of the child, smaller courts, and age-appropriate instruction and play formats. (For more details see www.10andundertennis.com.)

8. Modify rules to maximize action and participation. Rules can also be modified to ensure success and enhance motivation. You might modify the traditional baseball or softball rules so that coaches pitch to their own teams, which greatly increases the probability of hits. In basketball, instruct referees to call only the most obvious fouls until the child becomes more skilled. Children can rotate positions to give everyone a chance to be in the action. Modify rules to increase scoring and action. This will keep scores close and games exciting.

9. Reward correct technique, not just outcome. A common mistake in coaching youngsters is to reward the outcome of a skill (e.g., getting a base hit in baseball or softball) even when the skill is executed incorrectly (e.g., poor swing). In the long run,

this isn't helpful: Proper form is usually needed to achieve desirable outcomes consistently. Encourage and reward correct technique regardless of outcome.

10. Use a positive "sandwich" approach, as discussed in chapter 10, when you correct errors. How can you give frequent praise when young athletes are learning and making many mistakes? When a child makes a mistake, first mention something she did correctly ("Good try; you didn't give up on the dive"). This will help reduce her frustration in making the error. Second, provide information to correct the error made (e.g., "Tuck earlier and tighter"). Then end positively with an encouraging remark ("Stick with it—it's a tough dive, but you'll get it"). Of course, the sandwich approach is much more likely to work if you are sincere in your remarks.

11. Create an environment that reduces the fear of trying new skills. Mistakes are a natural part of the learning process and what UCLA basketball coach John Wooden called the "building blocks of success." Provide an encouraging atmosphere in which ridicule is not tolerated.

12. Be enthusiastic! Children respond well to positive, stimulating environments. Breed enthusiasm in the pool, in the gym, or on the playing field. As Maureen Weiss says, enthusiasm is contagious! Smile, interact, and listen.

Finally, coaches have been found to have limited awareness of their actual coaching behaviors (Cushion, Ford, & Williams, 2012). It is very important that youth sport coaches understand the ways they are behaving, perhaps through the use of techniques such as video analysis, and take the time to reflect on their coaching actions.

Role of Parents

In recent years considerable attention has been given to better understanding and identifying the role that parents play in youth sport and physical activity participation. Much of this increased interest has been stirred by accounts in the popular press of the negative side effects that children's participation in sport can cause. For example, Joan Ryan's (1995) bestselling

Parents can have a positive effect on their children's sporting experiences when they use appropriate practices and guard against the creation of a negative environment.

book *Little Girls in Pretty Boxes* presented heartbreaking stories of young girls whose dreams of becoming Olympic gymnasts and figure skaters were shattered by unhealthy and abusive training environments, often fueled by overly involved, pushy parents. Parental concerns are not limited to elite youth sport: Accounts of overzealous "Little League" parents pushing their children on the playing field or in the gym are all too common in every community. One national survey of junior tennis coaches, for example, found that 3 of 10 parents do things that interfere with their child's development (Gould, Lauer, Rolo, Jannes, & Pennisi, 2006).

Parenting Research in Youth Sport

Responding to these concerns, sport psychologists have begun to examine the role of parents in children's sport. Krane, Greenleaf, and Snow (1997), for example, conducted a case study of a former elite youth gymnast. The researchers found that this athlete participated in an overly competitive, ego goal-oriented environment (e.g., an environment created by coaches and parents who emphasized winning, perfect performance, and performing with or despite pain), which led to an overreliance on social comparison, a need to demonstrate her superiority, and an emphasis on external rewards and feedback. Another result was unhealthy behaviors, such as practicing when seriously injured, disordered eating, overtraining, and refusing to listen to medical advice.

On a more positive note, Fredricks and Eccles (2004) found that parents play a critical role as socializers, role models, providers, and interpreters of their children's sport experience. Brustad (1993), for example, studied male and female youth basketball participants and their parents and found that parental enjoyment of physical activity was related to parents encouraging their children's involvement and, in turn, that the encouragement influenced the child's perceived competence and actual participation. In a study of adolescent elite soccer players, VanYperen (1995) found that parental support buffered the youngsters who might otherwise have suffered adverse, stress-related effects after their below-average soccer performances. Duda and Hom (1993) demonstrated that children's goal orientations were significantly related to those adopted by their parents. Finally, Wuerth, Lee, and Alfermann (2004) found that pressure perceived by young athletes was related to directing and controlling parental behaviors. These studies all showed ways in which the climate provided by the parents influenced (positively or negatively) the child's sport experience.

One final example of parental influence appears in an interview study of youth sport coaches. Strean (1995) identified instances of parents interfering with or facilitating children's involvement in a sport program. Negative interference included parents coaching their child from the sidelines in ways that contradicted what the child was told by the official coach, encouraging their child to fight, or saying vicious things to opposing players. Facilitating actions included parents positively affecting the motivation of their children and disciplining their child for misbehaving in practices.

Although research has documented increasing issues with youth sport parents, this does not explain why parents are behaving the way they are. Coakley (2006) suggests that family life expectations have changed dramatically over the past several decades and that today's parents are held increasingly responsible for the actions of their children. This standard, then, forms a basis of what society views as good parenting; parents' success is tied to the achievements and success of their children. Because sport provides objective measures of success, parents invest tremendous amounts of time and money in their child athletes. This causes the parents to become overly involved and do things that interfere with healthy development. Thus, Coakley contends that because their child's success reflects their worth as parents, parents are becoming overinvolved in their children's sport experiences.

Sport parenting research has flourished in recent years: A recent review of the literature shows that more than 100 studies have been conducted on the topic (Gould, Cowburn, & Pierce, 2013). Key conclusions include the following:

1. Sport parenting matters and has important influences on young athletes' attitudes, dispositions, motivation, affective responses, and behavior at all stages of the athletic talent development process.

2. Factors influencing sport parenting include parents' personality dispositions, parenting styles, expectations, attitudes, and behaviors and the climates they help create.

3. Sport parenting is a complex process that changes as the child matures physically, psychologically, and socially and depends on what type of

program the child enters and his or her stage of athlete talent development.

4. Although it is clear that the actions of parents have a number of important consequences on child athletes and that certain types of sport parenting practices are correlated with positive and negative developmental outcomes, there is no one correct way to sport parent. Effective sport parenting depends on the child, his or her stage of development, the parent, and the context. Because these variables constantly change, effective parenting practices are likely to change as well.

5. The majority of young athletes believe that their parents have a positive influence on their sporting experience. However, some parents are overbearing, and they often damage the relationship they have with their child or cause problems related to longer term athletic and personal development.

6. The more aligned parent and child perceptions, attitudes, and belief are, the more likely the child will have a positive youth sport experience.

7. Parents have stereotypes about youths and sport; for example, football is appropriate for boys but not girls. These stereotypes influence the parents' own perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors and then those of their child.

8. Parents have a strong influence in creating and altering the motivational climate for youths in sport. A mastery, task-oriented climate is most often found to create the most beneficial experience for youths in sport, whereas ego-oriented climates are most often associated with less positive behaviors and affect.

9. Parental pressure is a major issue in youth sport. Some pressure may be beneficial for young athletes. For example, highly supportive parents of many elite athletes were found to challenge their child to push themselves and do their best (e.g., high support/high challenge). Yet too much pressure is consistently reported to have negative effects on young athletes. Unfortunately, although the idea of optimal parental push has been identified, no complete or definitive understanding of what this entails exists.

10. Sport parenting behaviors, attitudes, and expectations that help youths enjoy the athletic experience and enhance their learning and performance include providing financial, logistical, and socioemotional support and sport opportunities; exhibiting unconditional love; making sacrifices for the player; and emphasizing hard work and maintaining a positive attitude.

11. Competitive success can be achieved with both developmentally appropriate and inappropriate sport parenting. However, developmentally inappropriate sport parenting often is associated with some type of negative consequence, such as damaged parent–child relationships or fluctuations in player motivation and burnout.

Researchers, then, have found that parents can play a highly positive or a highly negative role in the youth sport experience. The challenge for people involved in youth sport is to identify the precise ways in which parents can positively affect the experience for youngsters and to encourage parents to use these practices. Simultaneously, we must identify negative actions and facilitate efforts to eliminate them.

Educating Parents

Although negative parental behaviors will never be completely eliminated from youth sport, much can be accomplished by educating parents and improving the lines of communication among parents, coaches, and league organizers. The American Sport Education Program (1994), for instance, has developed a sport parent program that offers excellent suggestions concerning parental responsibilities and practices (see "Sport Parent Responsibilities and Code of Conduct"). Additionally, parent orientation meetings should take place at the start of the season to inform parents and to discuss such things as the coach's qualifications; program philosophy; the roles played by coach, parent, and athlete; good sporting behavior; and team rules. Having an assistant coach or parent as a liaison is also an excellent way to maintain good lines of communication (Strean, 1995).

VIEW Activity 22.2 helps you determine what to include in a youth sport parent orientation program.

The Professionalization of Children's Sports

Although sport certainly has a number of benefits for youths, concern is growing on the part of athletic administrators (e.g., Roberts, 2001), sport psychologists (e.g., Gould, 2009), and journalists (e.g., Farrey, 2008) that youth sport is becoming increasing professionalized in the sense that the focus is shifting

from physical, social, and psychological development to more extrinsic goals such as winning, rankings, renown, and earning college athletic scholarships. A professionalized approach to youth sport is also characterized by **early sport specialization**, year-round intense training, and private coaching. In his provocative book *Game On: The All-American Race to Make Champions of Our Children,* journalist Tom Farrey (2008) provides evidence of professionalization by discussing the world golf championships for children aged 6 years and under, examples of parents going to sperm banks and buying elite athlete sperm in the hopes of producing more athletic offspring, and coaches recruiting children to build powerhouse teams to compete in the Little League World Series of baseball.

Most sport scientists are opposed to taking a professionalized approach to youth sport because this focuses the majority of resources on only the most talented children and ignores the majority of young people who can physically, psychologically, and socially develop through sport but won't become elite athletes. The professionalized approach is typically based on folklore and not on a scientific understanding of athletic talent development and may actually impede the long-term development of athletic talent (see "Stages of Athletic Talent Development" and "Sport Specialization Guidelines"). Gould and Carson (2004) identified a number

Sport Parent Responsibilities and Code of Conduct

Responsibilities

1. Encourage your children to play sports, but don't pressure them. Let your child choose to play and to quit if he or she wants to.
2. Understand what your child wants from sport, and provide a supportive atmosphere for achieving those goals.
3. Set limits on your child's participation in sport. Determine when your child is physically and emotionally ready to play and ensure that the conditions for playing are safe.
4. Make sure that the coach is qualified to guide your child through the sport experience.
5. Keep winning in perspective, and help your child do the same.
6. Help your child set realistic performance goals.
7. Help your child understand the valuable lessons sports can teach.
8. Help your child meet his or her responsibilities to the team and the coach.
9. Discipline your child appropriately when necessary.
10. Turn your child over to the coach at practices and games; don't meddle or coach from the stands.
11. Supply the coach with information regarding any allergies or special health conditions your child has. Make sure your child takes any necessary medications to games and practices.

Code of Conduct

1. Remain in the spectator area during games.
2. Don't advise the coach on how to coach.
3. Don't make derogatory comments to coaches, officials, or parents of either team.
4. Don't try to coach your child during the contest.
5. Don't drink alcohol at contests or come to a contest having drunk too much.
6. Cheer for your child's team.
7. Show interest, enthusiasm, and support for your child.
8. Be in control of your emotions.
9. Help when asked to do so by coaches or officials.
10. Thank coaches, officials, and other volunteers who conduct the event.

Adapted, by permission, from American Sports Education Program, 1994, *SportParent* (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics), 29, 30.

of myths associated with the professionalized approach to athletic talent development in youths. Those interested in working with talented young athletes should keep these myths in mind.

• *Myth 1: Athletic talent can be accurately predicted at a young age.* Because of variations in children's maturational, motivational, and learning rates, it is very difficult to accurately predict before puberty which children will become the most talented adult athletes. Children should be encouraged to try multiple sports and develop a wide array of fundamental motor skills.

• *Myth 2: More is always better!* Although research shows it takes thousands of hours of deliberate practice and play to become an expert athlete, amounts of practice must be developmentally appropriate in order to prevent injury and burnout. Adult dosages of practices and competitions are inappropriate for children and youths.

• *Myth 3: Stages of talent development can be skipped.* To tolerate the high dosages of intense training and competition at elite levels of sport, athletes must first develop fundamentals and a love of the game. They must progress through the stages of athletic talent development in developmentally appropriate ways.

• *Myth 4: Intense training will lead to a college athletic scholarship.* Well under 5% of young athletes will earn college scholarships, and even fewer will play at the professional levels. Having the goal of earning a college athletic scholarship as the sole focus of youth sport participation is simply a bad bet!

• *Myth 5: Early single-sport specialization is essential.* Although most elite athletes begin playing their primary sport at a young age, they typically play a number of sports and in doing so stay motivated and develop fundamental physical proficiencies that underlie elite athletic development.

• *Myth 6: A child cannot have fun if he is going to be an elite athlete.* Although elite sport requires tremendous effort and focus, enjoyment, fun, and love of the game are essential to sustaining motivation and controlling anxiety. Finding ways to make sport fun is essential at all levels of athletic talent development.

• *Myth 7: Talented children need different entry programs and coaching approaches than their less talented counterparts.* All children need to develop fundamental skills in an enjoyable atmosphere at the entry levels of sport. Only later are special programs and coaching needed.

Sport psychologists are not suggesting that opportunities for athletic talent development should not be provided for young people but rather that programs must be carried out in developmentally appropriate ways, guided by scientific evidence, and not pushed on children at younger and younger ages.

An excellent example of how talent can be appropriately developed comes from women's tennis today, though we would not have seen it in the past. In the 1990s, female tennis players were turning professional at very young ages, and major concerns were being voiced about stress, injuries, exploitation, and burnout. To ensure the safety of the players, the Women's Tennis Association Tour consulted with experts and instituted an age-eligibility rule that restricted the amount of play for the youngest participants and increased the amounts of tournament play allowed as the players aged.

In 2004, the WTA Professional Development Advisory Panel evaluated the success of the rule in ensuring the psychological and physical health of players over its 10 years of existence (Otis et al., 2006). Surveys were administered, experts were interviewed, and data on players' careers were statistically analyzed. The findings supported the effectiveness of the rule: More than 75% of the more than 600 survey respondents supported the principles of the rule, and 90% indicated a need for it. The survey also showed that stress was reduced, players had longer careers (career length increased by 43%), and premature retirement declined (7% of players left the tour before age 21 before the rule was implemented and less than 1% after). Using a sport science approach to talent development, then, was shown to counteract negative effects of youth sport participation, protect the health of players, and strengthen the game at the professional ranks.

Understanding the Tricky Business of Parental Support

Finally, as professionals we must appreciate how difficult the job of successful sport parenting really is. It is easy to blame parents for inappropriate actions and problems in our programs. Unfortunately, however, when children are born they do not come with a sport involvement instruction manual, and most parents have had scant training in sport parenting. Moreover, as the child grows and develops, the role of the sport

parent changes. For instance, research has shown that before age 10, youngsters feel a much greater effect from parental feedback, whereas after age 10, peer feedback becomes much more important to them (Horn & Weiss, 1991).

An excellent example of the tricky business of parental support comes from the youth sport burnout research discussed in chapter 21. Junior tennis players who had burned out from tennis indicated that an optimal amount of parental push exists. That is, these young athletes indicated that at times they needed their parents to push them—for example, getting them out of bed to practice when they were being lazy. However, the players also mentioned that such pushing was appropriate only up to a point and that parents who became overly involved in tennis created a great deal of stress and contributed to burnout. A critical role for the exercise and sport science professional, then, is to educate parents about how they can help optimize their child's sport experience.

Sport Specialization Guidelines

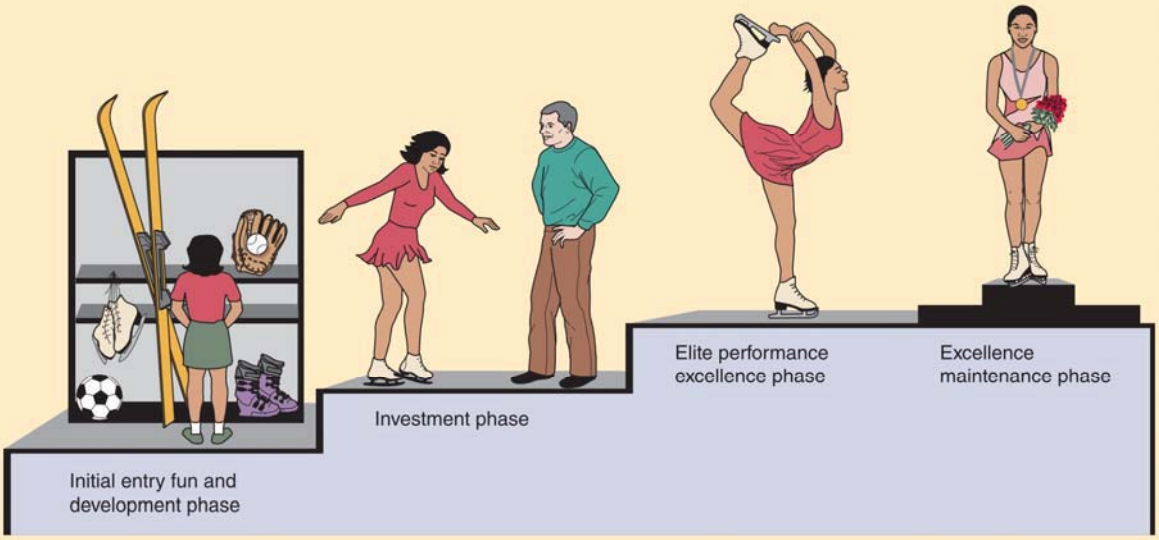
The International Society of Sport Psychology published a position stand on sport specialization (Côté, Lidor, & Hackfort, 2009) that advances seven postulates. These postulates, based on existing research in the area, are as follows:

1. Early diversification (sampling a number of different sports) does not hinder elite sport participation in sports in which peak performance is reached after maturation.
2. Early diversification (sampling) is linked to a longer sport career and has positive implications for long-term sport involvement.
3. Early diversification (sampling) allows participation in a range of contexts that most favorably affects positive youth development.
4. High amounts of deliberate play during the sampling years build a solid foundation of intrinsic motivation through involvement in activities that are enjoyable and promote intrinsic regulation.
5. A high amount of deliberate play during the sampling years establishes a range of motor and cognitive experiences that children can ultimately bring to their principal sport interest.
6. Around the end of primary school (about age 13), children should have the opportunity to either choose to specialize in their favorite sport or to continue in sport at a recreational level.
7. Late adolescents (around age 16) have developed the physical, cognitive, social, emotional, and motor skills needed to invest their effort into highly specialized training in one sport.

Postulates reprinted from Côté, Lidor, and Hackfort, 2009.

Stages of Athletic Talent Development

Extending the classic research of Bloom (1985), several investigators (Côté, 1999; Durand-Bush & Salmela, 2002; Gould, Dieffenbach, & Moffett, 2002) examined the history of talent development in elite athletes and found that champion athletes go through various phases of involvement, as follows.



1. *Entry or initial phase*—The child tries various sports and develops a love of the sport that she ends up specializing in later. The focus of participation is on fun and development, and the child receives encouragement from significant others, is free to explore the activity, and achieves a good deal of success. Parents instill the value of hard work and doing things well but typically do not emphasize winning as the primary goal of participation.

2. *Investment phase*—Talent is recognized, and the child begins to specialize in one sport. An expert coach or teacher promotes long-term systematic talent development in the individual. The focus is on technical mastery, tactical development, and excellence in skill development. Parents provide extensive logistical, time, emotional, and financial support.

3. *Elite performance excellence phase*—The athlete is recognized as truly elite and practices many hours a day under the supervision of a master coach. The goal is to turn training and technical skills into personalized performance excellence. Everyone involved realizes that the activity is very significant in the athlete's life. Parents are less involved but are an important source of social support.

4. *Excellence maintenance phase*—The athlete is recognized as exceptional and focuses on maintaining the excellence he has achieved. Considerable demands are placed on the athlete.

Most interesting in this research is the finding that most champion athletes did not start out their sport careers with aspirations to be elite champions (nor did the parents have these aspirations for the child). Instead, these individuals were exposed to active lifestyles and numerous sports and were encouraged to participate for fun and development. They participated in many sports and then found the right sport for their body type and mental makeup. Only later, after they fell in love with the activity and showed talent, did they develop elite sport aspirations. Moreover, once these athletes developed elite competitor dreams, parents and coaches provided them with the support they needed to turn dreams into reality. This research, then, emphasizes the importance of children *not* specializing in sports too early, of focusing on fun and development early, and of having highly supportive but not overbearing parents.

LEARNING AIDS

SUMMARY

1. **Discuss the importance of studying the psychology of the young athlete.**
   Applying strategies from sport psychology is vital in youth sport settings because children are at such critical points in their developmental cycles. Qualified adult leadership is crucial to ensure a beneficial experience. Moreover, the youth sport experience can have important lifelong effects on the personality and psychological development of children.
2. **Explain the major reasons children participate in and drop out of sport.**
   Children cite many reasons for sport participation, including having fun, improving skills, and being with friends. They also have various reasons for dropping out of sport, including new or additional interests in other activities. Underlying these motives is the young athlete's need to feel worthy and competent. Children who perceive themselves as competent seek out participation and stay involved in sport, whereas children who see themselves as failing often drop out. Adult leaders can facilitate children's participation in sport activity and deter withdrawal in a number of ways: structuring the environment to encourage the young athletes' motivation, enhancing self-worth by focusing on individual performance goals and downplaying social comparison or outcome goals, tracking participation and dropout statistics, and conducting exit interviews to determine why youngsters discontinue program involvement.
3. **Discuss the importance of peer relationships in youth sport.**
   Peer relationships in youth sport affect a child's sense of acceptance, level of motivation, and self-esteem. Adult leaders should provide time for children to be with friends and make new friends, encourage positive peer reinforcement, emphasize teamwork and the pursuit of group goals, and teach children to respect others and refrain from verbal aggression.
4. **Describe stress and burnout effects in young athletes.**
   Most young athletes do not have excessive levels of competitive stress in sport, but a significant minority do. High trait anxiety, low self-esteem, low self-performance expectations, frequent worry about evaluation, less fun and satisfaction, and parental pressure combine to put children at risk for excessive state anxiety. Losing a competition, attaching great importance to an event, and individual events are situational factors that add to stress. Stress-induced burnout is a specialized withdrawal in which a young athlete discontinues or curtails involvement in response to long-term stress. Knowing potential causes of burnout helps adults teach children to cope with stress. Arousal management techniques can be adapted for use with children.
5. **Identify and explain how to apply effective coaching practices with youngsters.**
   Research findings in sport psychology have clearly shown that certain coaching behaviors are associated with positive psychological development in children. Effective coaching behaviors include having realistic expectations; using techniques that provide youngsters with positive, encouraging, and sincere feedback; rewarding effort and correct technique as much as outcomes; modifying skill requirements and rules; and using a positive approach to error correction. Following the 12 guidelines in this chapter can create a good sport environment for children.
6. **Discuss the role of parental involvement in youth sport.**
   Parents play a particularly important role in the youth sport experience. Parental attitudes and behaviors have major effects, both positive and negative, on young athletes' sport involvement, motivation, self-esteem, and mental health. Educating parents and maintaining open lines of coach–parent communication are important ways to ensure beneficial parental influence in children's sport. Successful parenting for youth sport can be difficult but is worthwhile.

KEY TERMS

perceived competence
sport-specific dropouts
sport-general dropouts
affiliation motive
early sport specialization

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Why is it important for people who work with young athletes to know sport psychology?
2. What reasons do children cite for sport participation and withdrawal? How does a child's level of perceived athletic competence relate to participation and withdrawal?
3. Distinguish between sport-specific and sport-general withdrawal. Why is this distinction important?
4. What are the positive and negative components of peer relationships in young athletes? Why are these important?
5. Are young athletes placed under too much stress in sport? What children in what situations are at risk of experiencing the highest levels of stress?
6. What is burnout? What causes young athletes to burn out of sport?
7. What can be done to help young athletes cope with stress? What strategies can be used?
8. What were the major findings of the research by Smith, Smoll, and their colleagues?
9. Describe how parents influence the youth sport experience.
10. Discuss four myths surrounding young athletes, including how they might be used by a coach.

CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS

1. You are working as a youth sport director of a YMCA that sponsors numerous sport programs. Based on what you learned in this chapter, what policies and programs would you initiate to ensure positive psychological experiences for the children involved?
2. You are the coach of a middle school basketball program. Identify and outline topics that would be important to discuss in a parent orientation meeting for a team of 10- to 12-year-old athletes.
3. You are thinking about some early specialization training for your athletic child. Using the research and guidelines presented regarding early specialization in sport, discuss why you would or would not involve your child in early specialization.

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