CHAPTER 1: ORGANIZED YOUTH SPORTS – background, trends, benefits and risks

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INTRODUCTION

Sport is perhaps the most visible form of physical activity and is also a primary context for activity for the majority of youth of both sexes. Youth also generally identify physical activity as sport.

Sport participation also has high social valence which is evident in the fact that participation in sport is a feature of daily living for many children and adolescents the world over. Further, the number of adolescents competing in sports at national and international levels continues to increase and significant numbers of children and adolescents of both sexes begin systematic training and specialization in a sport at relatively young ages with the goal of attaining elite status. The success of youth at elite levels of sport, which is in reality a very small proportion of participants, highlights the need to distinguish discussion of youth sport between the overwhelming majority who participate and never attain elite levels and the highly visible talented minority. Unfortunately, attention and often resources, as well as commentaries in the print and electronic media, focus on this exceptional minority!

There is a need to better understand the role of organized sport in the lives of youth - the general population of children and adolescents who fill the rosters of youth sports programs throughout the world. Organized sport is only one of many demands in the daily lives of children and adolescents. Demands associated with family, friends, school, study, play, non-sport interests, among others, are realities of childhood and adolescence. These demands are superimposed on the process of “growing up” – physical growth, biological maturation and behavioral development. Where does sport fit into the process of “growing up”? Or, where does sport fit into the daily lives of children and adolescents?

On the other hand, there is also a need to better understand the role of sport in the lives of youth aspiring for elite status. Talented young athletes are a select group which differs from the general population in many domains. Nevertheless, they are children and adolescents with the needs of children and adolescents!
“Growing Up”

The processes underlying growth, maturation and development comprise the universal business of “growing up”. These terms are often treated as the same; yet, they are three distinct tasks in the daily lives of children and youth for approximately the first two decades of life (Malina et al., 2004). Details of the three processes are discussed in Chapter 15 (Volume 2). Of importance to those who work with young athletes is the need to recognize that the three processes, growth, maturation and development, occur simultaneously and interact to influence self-concept, self-esteem, body image and perceived competence and also skills and behaviors related to a sport or sport discipline. The three processes vary considerably within and among individuals, especially during the adolescent growth spurt and sexual maturation. The demands of sport are superimposed upon those associated with normal growth, maturation and development. A mismatch between demands of a sport, which are largely regulated by adults, and those of normal growth, maturation and development may be a source of stress among young athletes.

Historical Roots and Types of Programs

Sport can be informal or formal. Informal or “pick-up” sports are neighborhood competitions organized by and for children. They include the many street, lot and/or playground activities based on major sports, for example, street football (soccer), stickball (modification of baseball), street (roller) hockey, two on two basketball, and any number of ball games adapted by children to local neighborhood conditions. Informal sports have historically been a part of childhood and adolescence although the nature of the activities varied with cultural settings and changed over time.

Formal sports for youth, on the other hand, are organized which implies the presence of a coach and regular practices and competitions during the course of a season. Using the United States as an example, organized sport activities and eventually competitions for children and adolescents had their roots in two developments related to child welfare late in rapidly growing cities in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The first was concern for the behavior of boys, specifically delinquency, and the second was the play movement and its concern with keeping children busy during free time. Sport activities were used to occupy the leisure time of boys and to keep them out of trouble. Some organized sport programs has their origins in the 1920s and 1930s. They were largely community based, including churches. Baseball and American football were the common sports. School sport also emerged at