Sport and Education

Tribute to Martin Lee
BENEFITS AND RISKS OF PARTICIPATION IN ORGANIZED YOUTH SPORTS

1. Introduction

Participation in sport is perhaps the primary form of physical activity for youth of both sexes. Indeed, youth often identify physical activity with sport (Malina, in press). Sport participation by youth also has high social valence in many societies throughout the world. Given the value placed upon sport, questions often arise about the place of organized sport in the lives of youth. This is often reflected in commentaries in the print and electronic media, which often focus on the negative. To this end, this report offers a synopsis of evidence on the benefits and risks associated with participation in organized youth sports. Participation statistics, age trends, and the place of sport among the many demands of childhood and adolescence are initially reviewed.

2. Participation Statistics

According to the National Council on Youth Sports (2001), approximately 38.3 million youth 6-18 years of age participated in organized sports in the United States in 2000. About 63% of the participants were male and 37% were female. Using enrollment estimates for American schools (US Department of Education, 2005), the total number of participants represented about 72% of school age youth (kindergarten through 12th grade) in 2000. The Sporting Goods Manufacturers’ Association (2001) estimated that about 54% of United States youth 6-17 years of age participated in organized team sports in 2000; this represented about 29 million youth based on national school enrollment estimates. Variation by team sport is summarized in Table 1. About 54% of participants in team sports were males and 44% were females. Of interest, 44% played only one team sport, 30% played two sports and 26% played three or more sports. These figures are likely overestimates since many youth participate in more than one program or in more than one sport. Nevertheless, they highlight the involvement of United States children and adolescents in organized sport programs.

Data for other countries use different estimating strategies. Sport England (2003) surveyed a sample of 3028 youth in school years 2-11 (approximately 6-16 years of age).