



The Role of Sports in Developing Life Skills in Children

Senior Project

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By

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Abstract

Physical activity during a child's early life is an essential way to enhance health in adulthood. Movement through the participation in sports is one of the best ways to increase physical activity levels within children. Children can be easily persuaded to participate in activities and sports that allow them to play and socialize with their friends. Sports are known to increase physical activity in children, but they can do so much more for children. Introducing sports at a young age can positively impact future lifestyle habits and help children develop life skills. Coaches can be positive mentors and teach children the importance of eating a well-balanced diet, not smoking, drinking alcohol in moderation, and engaging in physical activity. Life skills and core values that children can acquire from sports include social skills, personal development, confidence, responsibility, and more. The likelihood of children developing more life skills and healthy lifestyle habits in adulthood will increase when coaches and adult volunteers invest more time and effort to promote these habits and skills to young participants.

The Role of Sports in Developing Life Skills in Children

Physical inactivity has been a concern in the United States for over 20 years and can lead to childhood obesity (Vidoni & Ignico, 2011). In 2016, it was found that 41 million children under the age of five worldwide are overweight or obese (Cloutier et al., 2018). In order to help solve childhood obesity, physical activity needs to be increased by introducing children to sports. Sports allow children to obtain physical activity while also gaining other valuable life lessons. When children compete with others, they enhance their interpersonal skills and learn how to work together as a team. Children also learn the importance of healthy lifestyle habits, such as eating a balanced diet and not participating in unhealthy behaviors, by coaches setting an example of these healthy habits. Sports teams and coaches need to learn how to promote healthy habits and skills to children. The likelihood of children developing more life skills and healthy lifestyle habits in adulthood will increase due to their participation in sports.

Palomäki et al. (2018) explored the relationship between youth sport participation and healthy lifestyle habits in adulthood, such as not smoking regularly, moderate alcohol consumption, high physical activity, and eating fruits and vegetables. They specifically looked at these habits within children that participated in at least three years of organized sports. Palomäki et al. (2018) used data from the Cardiovascular Risk in Young Finns Study (YFS) in 1983, 1986, and 2011, which included a sample of 1,285 individuals. These participants reported that they were a part of an organized sport in 1983 and 1986. In 2011, when these same participants were 25 years older, they answered questions on their smoking

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habits, alcohol consumption, fruits and vegetable consumption, and amount of physical activity. Palomäki et al. (2018) split participants into the following groups:

Those who participated in sport-club training at least once a week in 1983, and also 3 years later [in] 1986 (actives), those who participated in 1983 but not [in] 1986 (dropouts), those who did not participate in 1983 but did in 1986 (beginners), and those who participated in neither 1983 nor [in] 1986 (non-actives) (p. 1910).

Palomäki et al. (2018) collected all the answers to the questionnaires and compiled the statistics into Figure 1. In Figure 1 below, the percentages of participants with each healthy habit in 2011 can be seen organized by the four

Figure 1

Figure Showing Percentages of Participants with Each Healthy Habit in Adulthood

Participation in organized youth sport	Healthy habits in adulthood			
	No regular smoking (%)	Infrequent heavy drinking (%)	Recommended fruit & vegetable consumption (%)	Recommended physical activity level (%)
All				
Actives (n = 103-124)	91.9	83.7	37.9	30.6
Dropouts (n = 86-96)	82.3	82.1	29.1	16.8
Beginners (n = 59-78)	82.1	73.1	25.4	17.9
Non-actives (n = 466-631)	85.4	84.3	33.2	17.6
Total	85.7	82.8	32.6	19.9
Differences between groups ^a	Actives vs Dropouts $P = .031$ vs Beginners $P = .035$	Non-actives vs Beginners $P = .015$	NS ^b	Actives vs Dropouts $P = .020$ vs Beginners $P = .046$ vs Non-actives $P = .002$
Females				
Actives (n = 54-61)	93.4	93.4	46.3	30.0
Dropouts (n = 47-54)	81.5	87.0	40.4	14.8
Beginners (n = 38-45)	84.4	82.2	34.2	17.8
Non-actives (n = 234-280)	86.1	88.5	36.3	22.9
Total	86.4	88.4	38.1	22.4
Differences between groups ^a	Actives vs Dropouts $P = .050$	NS ^b	NS ^b	Actives vs Dropouts $P = .054$
Males				
Actives (n = 49-63)	90.5	74.2	28.6	31.1
Dropouts (n = 39-42)	83.3	75.6	15.4	19.5
Beginners (n = 21-33)	78.8	60.6	9.5	18.2
Non-actives (n = 149-193)	84.5	78.2	28.2	9.9
Total	84.9	75.3	24.8	16.0
Differences between groups ^a	NS ^b	Non-actives vs Beginners $P = .030$	NS ^b	Actives vs Non-actives $P < .001$

^aChi square-test pairwise between groups.

^bNo significant differences between groups.

Note. Percentages are organized by the amount of participation in organized youth sports in 1983-1986). The percentages of male and female participants are also shown.

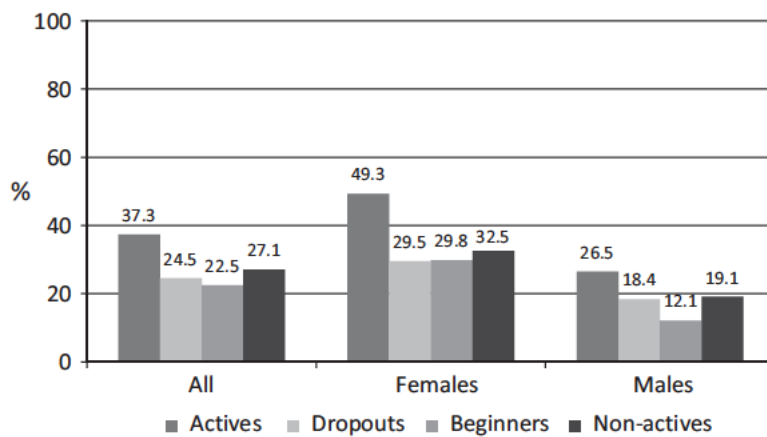
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groups that had different amounts of participation in youth sports. Actives, who participated in organized youth sports for at least three years, significantly smoked less than Dropouts, and Beginners in adulthood. Actives also completed the recommended amount of physical activity at least 10.7% more often than Dropouts, Beginners, and Non-actives. Between the men, the Actives completed the recommended amount of physical activity level more often than the Non-actives by 21%. For the women, the Actives recorded 7.6% more physical activity than the Non-actives.

Since there were four healthy habits total, the researchers divided the participants into two groups by the number of healthy habits they had as adults, 0-2 or 3-4 healthy habits. Figure 2 shown below displays data on the participants, who had three or four healthy habits after participating in organized youth sports for at least three years. Among all participants that had three or four healthy habits, the actives (37.3%) had more participants compared to the other groups (24.5%,

Figure 2

Figure Showing Participation in Youth Sports Led to Three or Four Healthy Habits



Note. Percentages of participants that had three or four health habits as adults in 2011, who participated in organized youth sports in 1983-1986.

22.5%, 27.1%). Between the women, 49.3% had three or more healthy habits, which was nearly 20% more than the dropouts, beginners, and non-actives. The male actives had a higher percentage of participants, who had three or four healthy habits as adults as well, but the difference was smaller between the actives and the other three groups. This study performed by Palomäki et al. (2018) found that participation in organized youth sports for at least three years was related to a greater amount of healthy habits as adults.

My goal was to create a golf field day event for boys and girls in Pembroke, North Carolina to test the idea that sport participation helps young children learn healthy habits. I originally planned to partner with *The First Tee* of Sandhills to execute the event. The golf field day event was intended to promote healthy lifestyles amongst young children in the local, underserved community. The event would've given children an opportunity to engage in physical activity through sport participation. *The First Tee's* mission is, "To impact the lives of young people by providing educational programs that build character, instill life-enhancing values and promote healthy choices through the game of golf" (Weiss et al., 2016, p. 272-273). *The First Tee* provides golf clinics for children ages 4-18, while also teaching them healthy habits and life lessons. They use golf as a way to teach life skills to children in a fun way. These life skills can be seen in *The First Tee Nine Core Values*: respect, responsibility, courtesy, honesty, integrity, sportsmanship, confidence, judgement and perseverance. Weiss et al. (2013) stated, "Golf and life skills are taught in an integrated manner using systematic and progressive lessons that address interpersonal, self-management, goal setting and advanced personal and

interpersonal skills (e.g. making healthy choices and seeking social support)” (p. 217). Their coaches are specifically trained in *The First Tee Coach Program*, which focuses on the four major points of *The First Tee Coach Philosophy*. The four points coaches learn through completing the coaching program are activity-based, mastery-driven, empower youth, and continuous learning (Weiss et al., 2013). Unfortunately, this golf field day event was unable to take place due to the COVID-19 pandemic during the Spring 2020 semester. My research was extended further on *The First Tee* to determine if they are effective in promoting youth development skills.

Weiss et al. (2013) performed multiple studies on *The First Tee*. I focused on two of articles written by Weiss et al. to complete this literature review. The first article titled, “‘More Than a Game’: Impact of *The First Tee* Life Skills Programme on Positive Youth Development: Project Introduction and Year 1 Findings”, is about the data collected from year one of the three-year study on evaluating the effectiveness of *The First Tee* in promoting positive youth development. The researchers evaluated what skills were learned, how coaches taught them, and whether the children were able to take these life skills into other aspects of their own lives. Year one focused on studying interpersonal skills, such as showing respect and meeting new people, and self-management skills, such as remaining calm under pressure and dealing with negative emotions. The following standards were used to pick the six locations of *The First Tee* that were used in the study: (a) they were from different regions of the US, (b) they have had the program for at least two years, (c) they have diverse participants, (d) their chapter leaders had a lot of experience in coaching

golf, and (e) they were confident in teaching the life skills program. The study was performed through interviews that asked participants to recall the skills they learned from *The First Tee* and how they used these skills in other parts of their lives. Coaches were interviewed on examples of how they teach the skills to the youth and if they had seen evidence of their athletes using these skills in settings other than the golf course. Parents were asked similar questions regarding their children and if they had learned these skills.

Participants, coaches, and parents answered questions based on three main topics: meeting and greeting skills, showing respect, and emotion management skills. In order to quantify qualitative data, researchers found common themes throughout the answers from the participants and grouped similar answers together. The themes researchers found in the meeting and greeting skills topic can be seen below in Figure 3. All 95 youth participants were able to talk about skills they had learned from *The First Tee* and start conversations with other people in school, sports, and other public places. Weiss et al. (2013) wrote about a 15-year-old girl, who discussed using the meeting and greeting skills that she learned from *The First Tee* at school:

We had orientation for new freshmen coming in... you're trying to reinforce the training [from *The First Tee*] ...shaking their hand...be friendly, be sociable to them... it's just something that you'll use over and over and over again when you're meeting people for the very first time...when you're being acquainted with some friend. (p. 226)

Figure 3*Figure Showing Common Themes to Meeting and Greeting Questions*

Dimension	Higher order theme
The Meet and Greet	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Face the person, look him/her in the eye, shake hands, state name clearly, ask a question or state what you want
Introduce Myself	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Say 'hi' • Say my name • Tell a little bit about me • Shake hands
Ask Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Golf-related • School-related • Family-related • Interests and hobbies
Talk with Each Other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • While playing during lessons • While playing tournaments • When grouped or partnered
Other Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make jokes • Be friendly • 'Getting to know you' games • Opportunities at <i>The First Tee Academy</i>

Most of the coaches' responses were not first-hand experiences of witnessing their athletes transfer their learned skills to other places, instead they retold stories they heard from parents. Parents were excellent sources for evidence of children using their knowledge to meeting new people in places other than the golf course. One parent shared:

Just with the confidence they have, it's okay to go up and extend your hand ...

I moved into a new office and the kids came in and they reached their hand out to shake the hand of my partner and it was just because they'd done it before, you know, it's okay to reach your hand out and make contact with someone and introduce yourself. (Weiss et al., 2013, p. 228)

In total, the responses showed that participants were able to learn meeting and greeting skills from *The First Tee* and reuse them in other settings.

The study was carried out the same way for showing respect. The higher order themes that were found from the participants' answers of showing respect were respect others, respect yourself, respect your surroundings, and respect the game of golf. Ninety-nine percent of the participants showed experience of respecting others or the golden rule, treating others the way you want to be treated (Weiss et al., 2013). One coach recalled a conversation he had with a parent:

Sometimes from the parents I'll get ... 'he was having trouble with his teacher and ... all of a sudden, the teacher has stopped sending notes home,' and I [parent] said, 'you're doing better with your teacher' ... (kid says) 'well, I just tried to show them some respect' ... it's nice when you hear from the parents because that means the kids ... they're learning this stuff [in *The First Tee*] ... it makes sense to them ... when you get the feedback ... that this stuff really works ... that's kind of neat to see. (Weiss et al., 2013, p. 232)

Coaches and parents gave lots of evidence of children being able to recall examples of showing respect.

The last main topic that participants, coaches, and parents were interviewed about was emotion management skills. The common themes found in the emotion management skills interviews were the *4Rs*, *STAR*, let anger out, and be patient, be positive, and ask for help. The *4Rs* is an acronym for a list of steps to follow – replay, relax, ready, and redo. *STAR* is another acronym that gives a similar strategy as the *4Rs* that helps someone through a situation, where they need to manage their

emotions. *STAR* stands for stop, think, anticipate, and respond. One of the most clever uses of the *4Rs* came from a 14-year-old boy:

When I go to McDonald's ... many times I don't get what I ordered ... like they don't put the right sauce on it or they put onions ... instead of like getting mad, I just have to relax and then just go tell them calmly if they can do it again ... because if I came and I was angry at them they'd be reluctant to do what I asked ... they might just mess up again. (Weiss et al., 2013, pp. 235, 237)

Participants' responses revealed that they learned how to manage their emotions in different types of settings. Coaches and parents gave evidence to validate these responses.

The data found in this study showed that many of the children could remember key concepts that *The First Tee* used to develop their self-management and interpersonal skills. They also provided evidence of taking these skills and conveying it in other aspects of their lives, such as school, family, and friends. *The First Tee's* program was effective because their curriculum was intentional and provided a positive climate with caring leaders. Coaches were an important part in this effectiveness because they are the ones teaching this information to the children. Another reason why *The First Tee* is successful in encouraging positive youth development is their approach to combining golf and life skills into one program. The training programs that *The First Tee* offer are a great guide for new coaches on how to do things, such as using role play, humor, and modeling. One of the limitations of this study is that *The First Tee* selected sites that had two or more

years of experience. Other chapters that do not have as much experience may not see the same level of results compared to sites with more experience.

The second article by Weiss et al. (2016) titled, "Evaluation of *The First Tee* in Promoting Positive Youth Development: Group Comparisons and Longitudinal Trends," is the summary article of all three years of their study and final experiments. This article took the previous article's information a step further. In study one of this article, the purpose was to compare *The First Tee* participants to a group of children in other activities. There were 405 children in *The First Tee* group compared to the other group, which had 159 children. The mean age and percentage of boys vs. girls in the two groups were very similar, but participants in *The First Tee* averaged two years of participation, where the other group averaged three years. Participants took the *Life Skills Transfer Survey* that consisted of 50 questions on eight of the life skills taught by *The First Tee* – meeting and greeting, managing emotions, goal setting, resolving conflicts, healthy choices, diversity, getting help from others, and helping others. Then they also assessed participants' developmental outcomes by giving different surveys on seven of *The First Tee Nine Core Values* – confidence, integrity, respect, responsibility, honesty, judgement and perseverance. The results can be seen below in Figure 4. The children in *The First Tee* had higher scores than the other group in five of the eight categories of life skills: meeting and greeting, managing emotions, resolving conflicts, appreciating diversity, and getting help from others. For developmental outcomes, *The First Tee* participants had higher scores in six of the eight categories: perceived academic

Figure 4

Figure Showing The First Tee Group Compared to the Other Group on Life Skills and Development Outcomes

Life skill/Developmental outcome	The First Tee (n = 405)		Comparison group (n = 159)		Effect size
	M	SD	M	SD	d
Meeting and greeting*	3.43	0.79	2.97	0.88	0.54
Managing emotions*	3.19	0.82	2.94	0.82	0.29
Goal setting	3.23	0.92	3.27	0.92	-0.04
Resolving conflicts*	3.03	0.88	2.77	0.92	0.29
Making healthy choices	2.96	0.80	3.15	0.84	-0.23
Appreciating diversity*	3.32	0.86	3.19	0.90	0.14
Getting help*	3.35	0.81	3.17	0.92	0.20
Helping others	3.20	0.81	3.14	0.89	0.07
Perceived academic competence*	3.14	0.59	2.92	0.67	0.32
Perceived social acceptance	3.21	0.64	3.19	0.65	0.02
Perceived behavioral conduct*	3.13	0.55	2.87	0.67	0.41
Respect	3.92	0.78	3.78	0.94	0.15
Responsibility*	3.83	0.79	3.69	1.0	0.14
Honesty*	4.02	0.76	3.75	0.95	0.29
Preference for challenging skills*	3.09	0.65	2.79	0.84	0.38
Self-regulated learning*	5.42	0.98	5.13	1.2	0.19

Note. Means are adjusted for differences in free/reduced-cost lunch and parent education.

* $p < .05$.

competence, perceived behavioral conduct, responsibility, honesty, preference for challenging skills, and self-regulated learning.

In study two of this article, the purpose was to evaluate the stability of the life skills children learned in *The First Tee* and determine if their skills transferred over three years. The longitudinal sample included 192 children, who were active in *The First Tee*. The participants completed the same *Life Skills Transfer Survey* as they did in study one once a year for three years (Time 1, Time 2, Time 3 seen in figure 5 below). Figure 5 shows the descriptive statistics for the transfer of life skills over three years. For the life skills of meeting and greeting, appreciating diversity, getting help from others, and helping others, the mean values increased over time, which means these life skills increased in the participants over the three years. Making healthy choices decreased the most over time with a mean of 3.04 at Time 1 and

Figure 5

Figure Showing Statistics of the Transfer of Life Skills Over Three Years

Life skill	Time 1			Time 2			Time 3		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>α</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>α</i>
Meeting and greeting	3.57	0.78	.84	3.72	0.79	.86	3.91	0.70	.83
Managing emotions	3.34	0.81	.91	3.32	0.81	.92	3.27	0.75	.92
Goal setting	3.41	0.88	.89	3.46	0.89	.92	3.42	0.84	.91
Resolving conflicts	3.17	0.88	.86	3.17	0.86	.89	3.14	0.83	.89
Making healthy choices	3.04	0.78	.76	3.01	0.77	.79	2.91	0.83	.82
Appreciating diversity	3.44	0.89	.87	3.51	0.86	.88	3.68	0.86	.90
Getting help from others	3.45	0.81	.82	3.53	0.76	.82	3.58	0.72	.83
Helping others	3.31	0.84	.84	3.35	0.79	.84	3.36	0.72	.81

Note. Study was done over three years. Time 1, 2, and 3 are all one year apart.

then 3.01 and 2.91 at Time 2 and 3, respectively. The findings for making healthy choices were surprising because this skill was tested due to it being a part of *The First Tee* curriculum. They teach that during the day children need to drink lots of water, pick healthy foods, and exercise daily. These findings could be influenced by the parents and homelife of children within the study. Children will most likely not follow the teachings from *The First Tee* if parents do not encourage healthy choices. Further research needs to be conducted on the effect of parents on children's healthy choices to determine if this factor impacts the results of the study. It was found that if participants started with a lower score for Time 1, then they were more likely to make a larger increase in life skills transfer than participants with higher scores at Time 1. The difference between *The First Tee* group and the other group were significant even though the children in the other group participated in sports for one year longer. This strengthened the fact that an intentional program taught by qualified coaches will lead to more life skills learned than just participation. It also showed that these skills were stable through three years. This article was

successful in evaluating the comparative and long-term impact of *The First Tee* in promoting life skills.

According to research conducted by Weiss et al. (2013, 2016), sports can help children develop life skills, but coaches and sports programs need to use their facilities to promote healthy lifestyle skills more. Kokko (2014) describes this best by stating, “A club is more than a place for physical activity; a youth sports club is a setting in which children and adolescents are influenced by the people within that setting and receive advice on many health issues” (p. 375). It was seen in *The First Tee* program that providing emphasis on developing life skills in sports programs helped more than what was described by Palomäki et. al. (2018), where children only participated in organized sports. Coaches are important role models in childrens’ lives and they may not realize the influence they have on their young athletes. Coaches need to understand how to use their leadership in a positive way to strengthen their young athletes’ development skills.

There was a significant amount of research on how sports programs outside of schools can help promote physical activity and how it can lead to children obtaining life skills for adulthood. Further research needs to be conducted to determine how schools can help promote healthy lifestyles and teach crucial life skills to young children. Some parents may not have the financial ability to enroll their children in organized youth programs, so schools could implement strategies used by youth sports development programs to ensure all students gain life skills and healthy habits without additional cost to parents. Weiss et al. (2013) stated, “Many studies have shown negative psychosocial (e.g. performance anxiety and low

self-perceptions) and behavioural (e.g. physical and verbal aggression) outcomes within particular sport contexts” (p. 215). *The First Tee* studies can only be related to golf sports programs, and more research should be conducted to determine if certain sports are less likely to promote positive life skills than others.

Physical activity is essential because it can lead to improved health as an adult. Participation in organized sports is the easiest way to get children moving. Sports can do more than just increase physical activity levels within young children. Palomäki et al. (2018) and *The First Tee* showed that sports can also help children develop future healthy lifestyle habits and life skills. *The First Tee* offers a great guide on teaching strategies that facilitate positive youth development that other programs could follow. A 14-year-old girl gave significant evidence on the impact of *The First Tee* in developing her life skills:

I've gotten a lot of confidence in *The First Tee* and that's probably the most important thing ... it's made me think about myself higher and other people better and it's improved a lot of other areas besides just golf ... my grades at school have gotten better and I've made more friends and I get along better with my sisters ... they've given me different little tricks, like *STAR* and the *4Rs*. you stop and think about what you're doing and anticipate the results and then respond to what your actions are ... if you're arguing with one of your friends ... you think about what you're going to say before you say it so you don't make anything worse. (Weiss et al., 2013, p. 241)

Participation in sports can lead to healthy habits and life skills, but when coaches invest more time and effort into promoting these skills, it can have a greater impact than

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participation alone. Sports programs and coaches should understand their role and implement strategies to improve life skills and promote healthy habits amongst sport participants.

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