

PREFACE

If you are reading this book, there is a good chance you have a child involved in youth sports. And you may be feeling curious, uncertain, or even a bit overwhelmed. I know I was when my kids were playing sports.

Consider these statistics that paint the picture of youth sports in the United States today:

- The National Survey of Children's Health noted that 53.8 percent of youth aged six to seventeen (about 26.8 million kids) participated in sports (team or lessons) in 2022.
- The Aspen Institute's State of Play 2024 report says that when it comes to total participation (playing at least once a year), the rate was approximately 63 percent for ages six to twelve in 2022.¹
- Aspen Institute's Project Play also estimates that US families spend between \$30 and \$40 billion a year on their children's sports activities.²

Millions of US children play youth sports annually. And youth sports have become an industry—a growing economic sector in the United States. Unfortunately, when adults around these children focus on corporate interests, the child’s developmental needs are often not prioritized.

This book is a little different from what you may have seen out there before. I won’t give you advice on how to raise elite elementary school or middle school athletes. I won’t tell you how to instill grit, mental toughness, or other traits in your elite youth athlete to help guide them to collegiate or professional sport success. You won’t learn how to become the ideal sports parent as defined by some coaches and organizations that consider themselves child development experts qualified to guide your child to athletic stardom (and that don’t value parental input or questions).

Rather than thinking of your child as an athlete on their way to athletic greatness, this book considers your son or daughter as a child first—one who is developing physically, cognitively, socially, and emotionally. One who, through youth sports, can learn, grow, and have fun.

I believe it is important to consider the youth sport environment from a developmental perspective. As a developmental psychologist who taught university-level child development courses for years, I observed that my children’s youth sport experience was not meshing with what I knew about child development.

Every time I teach developmental concepts and theories, students—especially adults—say:

“I wish I knew this information when raising my kids.”

“I’m saving this information for when I have kids.”

“I’m saving this information for when I work with kids.”

Such feedback continues to show me that this information is important. Yet not everyone is familiar with it.

When I began thinking of the child’s developmental needs first—rather than thinking of my child as a youth athlete like the coaches and organizations were encouraging parents to do—it helped me make sense of what I was seeing. Understanding developmental psychology helps parents prioritize their child’s needs, no matter the environment.

This book also recognizes that parents play an important role in their child’s development. They help create a supportive environment where their child can enjoy sports for their own sake. They also help make sure that their child is playing sports in a developmentally appropriate and psychologically healthy place.

I’ll wear two hats in this book: one of a youth sport parent and another of an academic. My family’s experiences were in youth soccer, and that’s where most of my observations come from. But the developmental concepts apply to all types of youth sports. And much of the sport psychology research I present describes results from studies that looked at a variety of youth sports.

I've changed personal details to protect individuals' privacy. In some instances, I combined multiple people or experiences into one to help clarify key points. Some of my observations have been reconstructed from memory and are presented as accurately as possible.

This book is divided into three sections. The first, “Developmental Psychology 101—A Crash Course on Some of the Basics,” lays out basic developmental psychology ideas, concepts, and theories that you would learn about in a developmental psychology class. You may be familiar with some of this information thanks to your own parenting, but it provides a good base for interpreting what is going on in youth sports.

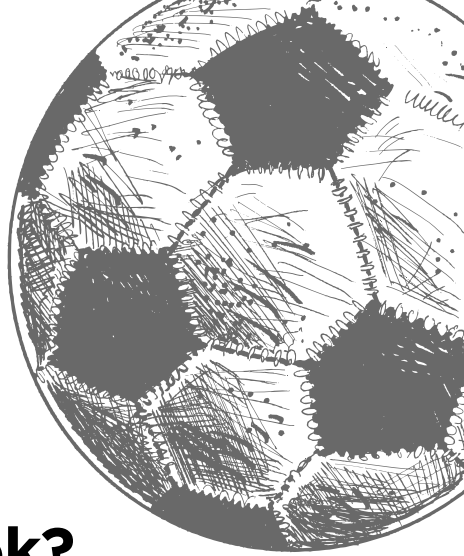
In Section 2, “The Youth Sport Child’s Development,” I apply the concepts and theories from Section 1 to a child’s sport experiences. We’ll also take a look at a child’s emotional, social, cognitive, and physical development.

In Section 3, “The Role of Significant Others in the Youth Sport Environment,” we’ll cover parents, coaches, and organizations, including the relationship between parents and coaches.

Asking legitimate questions of your child's coach or organization is a theme that pops up several times in this book. Want to start thinking about questions you can ask to ensure that your child is in a developmentally appropriate environment? Consider the following:

- What questions did you ask your child's coach or organization before signing up?
- What questions did you ask your child's coach or organization while your child was playing sports?

For a preview of questions that correspond with the material in this book, check out www.youthsportschildfirst.com



INTRODUCTION

Why This Book?

I started writing this book the day my youngest daughter had her last club soccer practice. We were officially done with youth sports. The earlier years had been fun—Saturday mornings at the fields and the kids enjoying a game with teammates who quickly became close friends. My husband and I also liked socializing with the other parents. Some are even close friends to this day.

There are certainly pros to kids' sports. But as my kids got older and entered the elite youth sport environment, there were more cons than pros. Youth sports became less enjoyable for all of us. I was not the biggest fan of elite youth soccer. I saw many tears, serious injuries, and stressed-out kids trying to please both their coaches (who often seemed to lack a basic understanding of child development) and their overbearing parents (who often were not on the same page as the coaches). Just stress all over the place. This made me feel uncomfortable

and concerned as a parent and curious as a child development expert. I wanted to know why the environment seemed so unfriendly to children.

These games became more tolerable when I realized that developmental psychology principles play a *big* role in youth sports. I did hours of research to make sense of some of these interesting and, at times, worrisome observations. This ultimately led me to the following conclusions:

- The youth sport environment should be developmentally appropriate and fun, no matter the age and level of play.
- Well-meaning and reasonable parents should play a role.
- It's okay for parents to ask their child's coach and organization legitimate questions, especially if they feel that something developmentally inappropriate is going on.

These are all commonsense conclusions. But shockingly, all of them were called into question as my kids participated in youth sports.

MY FAMILY'S EXPERIENCES WITH YOUTH SPORTS

The link between developmental psychology principles and youth soccer really hit me when my son was ten. His team was attending a national youth soccer showcase over Thanksgiving. These were precocious nine- and ten-year-olds who had been playing soccer up an age group together for over a year. They'd

had many successes, winning every game easily, and they were confident they would succeed in the showcase. During the finals that determined the first- and second-place winners, they faced some tough competition from a Florida team. They were well-matched, but when the Florida team started moving ahead in the score, the panic set in on my son's team. Players started making silly mistakes and played much rougher than usual. It was as if they did not know what to do to change the trajectory of the game. In the end, they lost. After some tears before the awards ceremony, they went home with their second-place medals.

Soon after, the coach had a parent meeting. My husband usually attended these. But he was busy, so I went and was impressed. The coach let the parents know that he believed the kids were not used to losing and that he wanted to work on this over the next year. His goal: attend the same showcase the next year and come in first place. The coach had a plan. He placed the kids in a harder league. They would face tough competition, be challenged, and most likely lose some games. They were going to have to put in a lot of effort. They would play some older and stronger teams. And our kids needed a certain number of wins to qualify for the showcase.

The coach was very clear and addressed all parent questions. He expected our support in this plan and valued the encouragement we would give our sons when things got tough.

A year later, the boys attended the showcase. And, just like in a Hollywood movie, they made it into the finals and played that same Florida team. It was a well-matched, tough game.

The big difference—our team stayed calm when things were not going their way. They were able to keep their composure and adapt if mistakes were made. In the end, they clinched the first-place medal.

This was exciting! Now, our boys might have been lucky. They might have been stronger and more skilled from playing together for another year. But there was also a clear change in attitude from one year to the next. This time, rather than panicking and giving up when faced with a challenge, the players embraced the challenge and used their mistakes on the field as opportunities to adapt and succeed.

The coach knew what he was doing. He empowered the kids to change their way of thinking about mistakes, failure, and losing. He encouraged them to put in their best effort and included the parents. In my opinion, it all contributed to their success. In other words, he created a psychologically favorable environment for everyone. To this day, we still have warm feelings about and great memories of that team's coach, players, and families.

I came to learn that such an environment was rare, at least in our experiences. My son's team played together for one more year before all the players moved on to different teams. Some left the club altogether. For his remaining years playing youth soccer, my son never had such a positive and psychologically healthy environment again. During the thirteen years my three children played in rec, club, and high school soccer—with a total of forty coaches—we encountered maybe three coaches who seemed to understand child development and tried to

create a developmentally appropriate environment. The rest—not so much so. We had coaches who didn't seem like they wanted to work with kids at all, as well as some who tried but could not motivate kids or manage extreme parents. We saw some whose agenda seemed to be to prop up their own kid as the team superstar at the expense of their teammates. There was even an actual child sex predator.

My son's great experiences when he was around ten contrasted starkly with the experiences one of my daughters had. She certainly had some positive experiences. She enjoyed playing soccer and keeping active, her skills improved over time, and she made some friends. But as she got older, the cons started to outweigh the pros. She had some coaches who threw around buzzwords (*growth mindset*, *grit*, *mental toughness*, and *FAIL – First Attempt in Learning*) but did not seem to understand what these concepts meant. They actually coached in the direct opposite of what these concepts dictated. Coaches did a lot of yelling and expressed disappointment and blame when players made mistakes. One coach stormed off the field, angry that the team had tied and forgetting that they were supposed to celebrate my daughter's eleventh birthday right after the game. She came off the field in tears, dragging the full cooler of birthday treats that were left uneaten because everyone had left immediately, very upset.

There were a lot of tears in general as the years went on. She came off the field in tears after practice, claiming she'd played horribly. She came off in tears after a game, shouldering all the blame for a loss. She came off in tears after a teammate

told her that over half the team hated her and thought there was no place for her on the team. Once the bullying, rumor spreading, and exclusion started rearing their ugly heads, the team cohesion went downhill. The coaches likely could have stopped this unpleasantness earlier had they noticed what was going on or created an environment where such behavior was not allowed. But they didn't notice it or the environment they created that bred it.

We also ran into some coach and club policies that were concerning and deserved some questioning. When the girls were ten, eleven, and twelve years old, they traveled to weekend games with their families and stayed in a hotel room with their parents. They received multipage itineraries for the weekend that scheduled nearly every hour for each player, including when to shower. Attendance at several team meetings throughout the day was mandatory. For example, after a three-and-a-half-hour car ride on a Friday (yes, parents were expected to leave work early to make the drive), the itinerary showed a six p.m. team meeting at the field, a seven p.m. game, and another team meeting at nine p.m. in the hotel. This was followed by an 8:30 a.m. team meeting the next day (after the girls were instructed to wake up at 6:30 a.m. and shower). And no information was provided to parents about what was being discussed at any of these meetings. All we knew was that we had to get our children to the meetings and then leave because parents were not welcome.

After we asked some questions, the coach explained that the itineraries we parents received were consistent with the

expectations the club would have of the girls if they moved on to a national program. So, the girls were being prepared for this next step. Our daughter had just turned eleven when we received this explanation. She was traveling with her family and was not in a national program. We had not even decided yet if she was going to go that route, which was several years away.

The coach explained that having many team events in a single day, rather than letting the kids rest, helped build team cohesion and avoided cliques. But this wasn't a great strategy. There already were unhealthy cliques on this team, and team cohesion was never achieved; in fact, team cohesion declined to dysfunctional levels as the years went on, and some of the cliques grew stronger and meaner.

The coach's explanation for his shower schedule did not sit right with us either. He claimed he was simply helping wake them up in the morning so they would be alert and ready to engage and take on the information. This did not ring true because some of the itineraries included both morning and afternoon showers. We were very uncomfortable with having a twentysomething adult nonrelative male advising our daughter when to shower when she was on a trip with us. By including the shower advice in the itinerary, he was teaching the children that this was normal advice from a coach.

But it is not! A youth coach should never function in the place of a parent when players are off the field, especially when they are on their own time and in their hotel rooms with their

families. The fact that this was happening and that the coach tried to justify his questionable itineraries was unsettling.

Then there was the coup de grace that made us question the safety of the environment we were sending our daughter into and the adults she was interacting with. This happened when we realized that these all-important mandatory team meetings and team dinners were to be held unchaperoned in the coach's hotel room. That meant there would be one twentysomething male with fourteen ten- and eleven-year-old girls, discussing who knows what while lounging in his small hotel room. He expected parents to just deliver their child to his room and leave her there for hours.

There was no way we would allow our daughter to attend such a meeting. When we questioned the coach about this, he angrily told us it was mandatory. If our daughter did not attend all scheduled itinerary events, it would affect her playing time during games. We escalated the issue to his boss, who told us that although our daughter's coach could not threaten her playing time, player meetings in a coach's hotel room were common practice at this club. He let us know that he himself had held such meetings with his team of older girls and had never had a complaint from parents. He claimed that attending such meetings demonstrated trust in the coach.

Nope. We found this to be unconvincing and disturbing justification for such a meeting, and we informed him that our daughter would never attend such meetings. In the end, the meetings for that tournament were moved to a public location, and the itinerary was eased. But the boss coach let

us know that the changes were due to changes in our coach's obligations rather than our concerns.

For the next few tournaments, the girls got less taxing itineraries. And all team dinners and meetings were held in public locations. We hoped that maybe our concerns were taken into consideration and understood. But we learned this was not the case when, at their final tournament four months later, our daughter's coach called my husband to ask if he would be comfortable with the coach holding the team dinner and meeting in a team father's hotel room. The coach confirmed that this would be a hotel room team dinner and meeting with only the coach and the girls. No other adults would be present. My husband was clearly uncomfortable, and the coach canceled both the dinner and the meeting soon after that call. He also obviously let other parents know that the meetings were canceled because of our family. Several parents came up to my husband and me, telling us that we needed to "get in line," or our daughter's "soccer career" would suffer.

We escalated our concerns as high as we could go at the club. Why did these coaches insist on holding unsupervised dinners and team meetings with young girls in hotel rooms? We should be teaching our children how to identify a safe environment and modeling healthy physical and emotional boundaries. The coach's hotel room should not be considered a safe space by any child (or adolescent). Were these coaches not aware that these meetings would be considered inappropriate? Why were we feeling pressure to "get in line" with something we were fundamentally opposed to and believed could possibly

be detrimental to our child? Even if the coach had no bad intentions, false allegations of child sexual abuse are not unheard of. Neither are false rumors. You would think that, in this day and age, a coach would not put himself in any situation where such false allegations could be made. Meeting in a hotel room, unchaperoned, with young girls seems like a risk not worth taking.

The higher-ups responded to our concerns almost immediately. No surprise. Coaches meeting with young girls in their hotel rooms was *not* a club policy, and we received a guarantee that this would never happen again. The club made changes to the coaches' contract to ensure this. We felt this was a good enough response, but it was shocking to think such policies had not been in place at the club from the start.

Overall, these experiences planted the seed. Did these youth sport coaches know enough about child development to interact appropriately and safely with, motivate, and teach the kids they were coaching? And are these youth-serving sport organizations doing all they can to ensure a safe and developmentally appropriate environment for the children?

FINDING THE IDEAL YOUTH SPORT ENVIRONMENT

While trying to understand my kids' experiences in youth sports, I learned that a lot of interesting and well-conducted research addresses many of my questions. Surprisingly, such research was difficult to find in the developmental psychology arena. For example, the 650-page textbook I use in my child and adolescent development classes mentions youth sports

in a couple of sentences on five pages. In contrast, decades and decades of sport psychology research addresses youth sport participation. There is so much research that it has gone through phases over the years. We are at a point where different lines of research can be considered subdisciplines in sports psychology: youth sport participation, athlete motivation, parental involvement, burnout, and athlete identity development. This research, which applies to many different sports, often relates these topics to developmental principles and suggests best practices for youth sport organizations, coaches, and even parents. However, this information is not widely known.

Why? In general, access is restricted. The research is published in academic journals that can be retrieved only through university libraries or behind paywalls. The general public—including parents, coaches, and youth sport administrators—often does not have access to these research reports. They are also written in technical language, making them tedious to interpret and difficult to relate to everyday experiences.

There are national youth sport organizations (e.g., US Youth Soccer and Aspen Institute's Project Play) that disseminate research-based best practices, but the uptake of this research varies across sports, regions, and organizations. Many youth sport organizations are underfunded, and implementing evidence-based practices may require resources they don't have.

But these organizations serve children, and their focus should be on the child. A good start would be gaining sufficient knowledge of child development. Once the basics

are understood, they can be applied to the youth sport environment, ultimately maximizing the experience. Coaches often undergo training before working with kids, but many certification programs barely cover child development. Unless a coach seeks out advanced training, they may never be exposed to useful child development research.

Many youth sport organizations don't take on a developmentally appropriate, child-first model. Instead, they use a performance-oriented, professional sports model. Sport psychologists acknowledge it is hard to make sport organizations listen to their suggestions.³ And when I think about many of the coaches my family has encountered, it seems hard to make some coaches listen too.

As a parent involved in youth sports, I found that a deeper knowledge of developmental psychology helped me realize there can be issues with the youth sport environment. It also gave me the confidence to question and challenge some of the inappropriateness my kids were experiencing. The following pages include a crash course on how developmental psychology concepts relate to the youth sport environment. This is information my kids' coaches should have had but seemed to lack. Had they been informed, our experiences would have been better.

Although many youth sport organizations and coaches try to minimize the parents' role, parents are important influences on their child's development. Some sport psychology researchers consider parents "the linchpins in youth sport."⁴ I wrote this book for them, be they parents who are new to youth sports

or well-immersed parents who are uncomfortable with what they are seeing and have trouble knowing why or what to do.

This book will arm you with the basic developmental psychology knowledge you need to navigate the youth sport environment and make sure your child is in a developmentally appropriate and psychologically healthy place. Educating yourself on what an ideal environment should look like will allow you to identify a good environment for your child while also questioning or calling out anything that may be a little off, unusual, or inappropriate.

POSTSCRIPT

I keep coming back to one nagging thought: *We should have pulled our daughter out of the environment much sooner.* This is easy to say in hindsight. But in reality, it was a “drip, drip, drip” scenario over a couple of years that followed a predictable pattern. We observed something that did not sit right with us, and we questioned it. Initially, the club rebuffed us or told us we were misinformed. But we kept asking because we knew we were right. Eventually, we were able to shine a light on the weirdness or inappropriateness, which resulted in some reactive changes on the club’s part. Over time, as our experiences built on each other, it became clear that there were pervasive issues in that overall youth sport environment. We got tired of having to constantly monitor our daughter’s environment and make sure our voice was heard when we observed things that did not make sense. And thankfully, our daughter had enough too. In the end, we decided to leave the club.

On a whim, she decided to try out for a new club that had just formed—one that preached that the usual way of doing things was broken and sold themselves as being “different.” As luck would have it, true to their word, they *were* different—in a good way. Some thought was put into their approach to dealing with kids. Age was considered, compassion and kindness were demonstrated from the top, respectful interactions among the kids were demanded, and the importance of kids having fun while working hard and learning seemed to be a priority. My daughter had the best year of soccer in a long time and had the kind of fun she’d had during her rec years. And we had a relaxing year. We were able to not worry about what our child was being exposed to by people who probably should not be working with kids. We were able to socialize with like-minded parents. And, once again, we all made some friends.

Child-focused, developmentally appropriate youth sport environments appear to be rare, at least in my area—but they are out there. It is on the parents to identify them and choose them as the appropriate place for their kids.

INTRODUCTION TAKEAWAYS

- There are ways to structure a developmentally ideal youth sport environment and ways to structure a not developmentally appropriate youth sport environment. Basic knowledge of developmental psychology will help identify the difference.
- Well-meaning and reasonable parents play an integral role in monitoring their child's youth sport experience.