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Review of Junior Sport Framework
Draft Briefing Paper: Positive Youth
Development through Sport

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**Title**

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**Author's Declaration**

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Junior Sport Framework
(JSF) Project

# Positive Youth Development through Sport

## Jean Côté & Clifford J Mallett

### 1.    BACKGROUND

In the development of sport policy and practice we should be mindful of the key purposes of sport in Australian society. Developmental psychologists have shown through many years of research that extra-curricular activities, like sport, provide an ideal context to develop thriving youth who will eventually give back to their community. Larson (2000) reviewed

> Optimal development in youth "enables individuals to lead a healthy, satisfying, and productive life as youth, and later as adults, because they gain the competence to earn a living, to engage in civic activities, to nurture others, and to participate in social relations and cultural activities" Hamilton et al., (p. 3).

several studies and showed that sport activities provide youth with a context that they enjoy, and requires sustained concentration. He suggested that these two characteristics of organized activities are critical to the development of initiative and overall positive life skills.

The sporting context is different from other time consuming activities of youth such as school or media consumption and networking. For instance, in school, youth experience concentration often without a great deal of enjoyment while media consumption and networking (e.g., face book, videogames, and television) provides an enjoyable and often multitasking experience but often lacking in extended concentration. Although sport has been shown to be an ideal activity to develop personal assets in youth, there is growing concern around the world that youth sport programs are becoming institutionalized and over-organized focusing mainly on the development of sport skills and performance outcomes often at the cost of personal development and continued participation for a large number of young people.

The reality of adult performance sports is that there are limited numbers of available positions in professional leagues or Olympic teams. This suggests that earlier and increased training during childhood provides an advantage to children by allowing them to be chosen for "select" teams, eventually increasing their chance to climb to the top of the pyramid in adult sports. The application of a pyramid approach to youth sport programs may arguably be effective for

the development of talent in sports with a large base of participants; however, it is often detrimental to the children that are progressively excluded from these programs (Fraser-Thomas & Côté, 2009). Furthermore, the identification of "talented athletes" in selected youth sport programs is unreliable; especially when detection of talent is attempted during the prepubertal and pubertal periods of growth (see Régnier et al., 1993 for a review). Yet, despite the evidence against the reliability of talent identification, and the fact that adult expert performance in sports is difficult to predict from characteristics of sport performance in childhood, the quality of effective youth sport programs continues to be measured by the performance of a few athletes who reach the top of the pyramid while little attention is paid to young people who fail to reach an elite level of performance.

Sport programs with a strict emphasis on early selection, skill acquisition and training during childhood run the risk of eliminating someone who, through growth, maturation, and training, later develops into an elite level athlete. The underpinning principle of a positive youth development (PYD) approach to sport programs is to provide space, playing and training opportunities, and equipment for a large number of children across various sports. This creates a large pool of motivated adolescents by keeping a larger number of participants within the "participation" pyramid, which enables performance coaches to eventually choose and select the best athletes for the elite pathway.

In this paper, we outline the components of a positive development framework for youth sport that focus on the development of the youth including elite performance. The PYD perspective means that adults involved in organised sports could have a positive impact through intervention at the policy, programs, and individual levels of sport. The model emphasises the vital role of policy makers in assuring a common infrastructure and accessibility of youth sport programs to all youth. The model also highlights the setting features of youth sport programs that should be put in place to develop better people through sport. Finally, the framework proposes concrete outcomes that should be the focus of any sport programs that aim to develop positive assets, performance, and continued participation in youth sport.

## 2.    AN INTEGRATED APPROACH TO PYD IN SPORT

A model of how sport programs can nurture the development of positive assets in youth is presented in Figure 1. The figure summarizes the results of several studies conducted in sport within a PYD-related perspective. Figure 1 describes (i) the essential general policies required for sport programs, (ii) the setting features of sport programs that promote PYD, and (iii) the outcomes that result from involvement in assets promoting youth sport programs.

**Policies of Organized Sport Programs the Capacity for PYD**

- Emphasis on sampling different sports during childhood
- Emphasis on fun
- Mastery climate (improvement)
- Autonomy supportive
- No talent identification before age 13

**Sport Programs Built Around Eight Setting Features**

1. Physical and psychological safety
2. Appropriate structure
3. Supportive relationships
4. Opportunities to belong
5. Positive social norms
6. Support for efficacy and mattering
7. Opportunities for skill building
8. Integration of family, school, and community efforts

Contribution back to Sport

**Outcomes for Youth in Sport**

- Competence
- Confidence
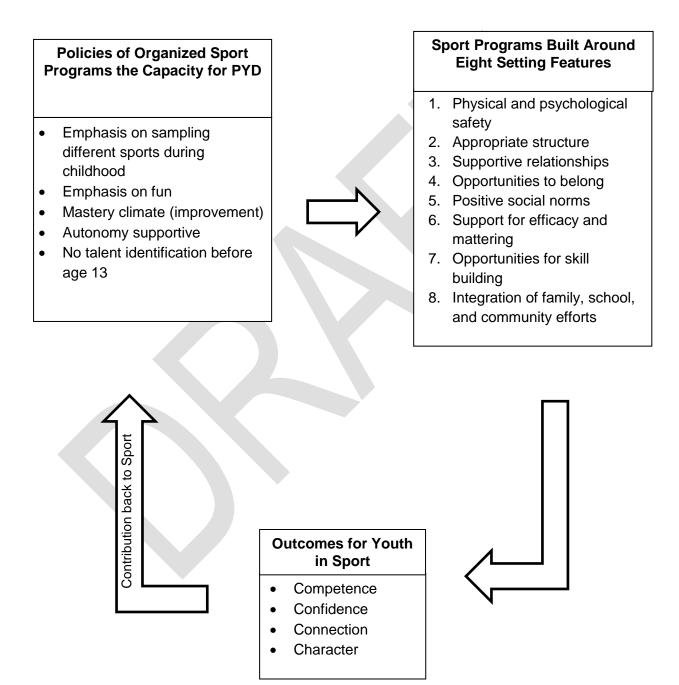- Connection
- Character

**Figure 1 - Model of how sport programs can nurture the development of positive assets in youth**

## 2.1    Policies

The first box in Figure 1 suggest that sport policies should be aimed at ensuring that youth sport programs have the capacity to provide opportunities for youth to sample different sports during childhood, play sport for fun, be involved in sport programs that emphasize a climate of self-improvement (e.g., mastery climate) and autonomy and have equal opportunities to participate. Coaches and resources should be put in place to promote these policies in youth sport programs so that positive experiences and growth occur through participation in sport. These five basic policies if implemented and reinforced will create a youth sport climate that will allow coaches, parents, and community to focus on young athletes' holistic development.

## 2.2    Policy 1:  Sampling Different Sports During Childhood

Both early specialisation and sampling can lead to elite performance in adult sports. However, research suggests that sampling is likely to lead to a number of positive outcomes for athletes including: continued and sustained engagement in sport, and positive youth development. In contrast, early specialisation has been shown to lead to more negative athlete outcomes such as: overuse injuries, burnout, and attrition from sport. Sampling during childhood allows individuals to experience the context of various sports; for example, being involved in basketball, soccer, tennis, golf, and track and field have distinctive features that can potentially lead to very different sport experiences and outcomes. Sampling various sports allow individuals to establish different relationships with coaches, teammates, and other adults that have the potential to positively shape the course of development of youth. The following assets have been identified from a sampling environment during childhood, (i) prosocial behaviour, (ii) healthy identity, (iii) diverse peer groups, and (iv) social capital.

## 2.3    Policy 2:  Emphasis on Fun

If youth experience sport as fun, chances are they will continue to participate in sport and possibly invest more hours to perfect their skills. Youth sport programs should promote a balance of different types of activities (i.e., adult-led and child-led) performed for different reasons (i.e., for enjoyment or to improve performance) to produce learning situations that are fun and challenging. A mix of coach-led practice and child-led play activities appears to be important for the development of talent and the retention of youth in any youth sport programs. Although there are basic contradictions between the promotion of activities such as practice or play in youth sport, participation in a range of different developmental activities exposes youth to a variety of learning environments, the combination of which is most beneficial for promoting

fun and sustaining motivation in children's participation, performance, and development in sport.

## 2.4  Policy 3:  Mastery or Task Climate

Motivational climate is another important factor that is known to influence the quality of the youth sport experience. Motivational climate reflects an individual's perception of the sport setting and can be described as either mastery (task) or ego. A mastery climate is created when the focus is on personal skill development regardless of how others perform. On the other hand, an ego climate is described as an environment in which the focus is on demonstrating superior ability over others. In general, research on motivational climate suggests that a mastery/task climate has a positive effect on athletes and lead to indicators of positive youth development. A sport policy that focuses on self-referenced competency within a task climate while de-emphasizing winning and competing with others will increase the likelihood that sport programs lay the appropriate foundation for PYD to occur.

## 2.5  Policy 4:  Autonomy Supportive

Ryan and Deci (2000) suggested that building a solid foundation of intrinsic motivation through involvement in activities that promote intrinsic regulation and provide participants with the opportunity to make autonomous decisions, develop competence, and feel connected to others is paramount in the development of highly motivated, self-determined individuals. Highly structured training in which control is passed to an outside agent (most often the coach) reduces intrinsically motivated behaviour and ultimately leads to more youth sport dropout/burnout and lower positive personal and interpersonal development. Research has shown that when an autonomy supportive environment is present in youth sport, indicators of positive development such as teamwork, initiative, and positive identity are more likely to blossom in youth. Accordingly, creating policies that create autonomy supportive sport programs would involve the promotion of choices, being less controlling of athletes' behaviours, and focusing on the needs of each individual involved in the program.

## 2.6  Policy 5:  No "Talent" Identification Before Age 13

Research indicates that attempts of talent identification during childhood are rarely successful. Selecting certain players because of a particular talent or physical characteristic necessarily excludes a potentially successful portion of the talent pool, likely late maturing athletes. A particular mental or physical characteristic that a young athlete possesses at a certain age is

not guaranteed to be present later in development. At the same time, the desired trait may not be of benefit at a later stage of competition.

## 3.    FEATURES OF YOUTH SPORT SETTINGS

Once policies are established, sport programs must be delivered in an appropriate context (box 2 of Figure 1). After examining the impact of the physical environment on youth, the National Research Council Institute of Medicine (NRCIM; 2002, 2004) suggested eight main features that should be present in the context of community programs in order to facilitate positive youth development. These features have received increasing support from youth sport research as they offer additional understanding of the context in which youth sport should be promoted. Central to the development of performance is sustained sport engagement and personal development, which requires youth sporting environments to be characterised by key supportive elements.

### 3.1    Physical and psychological safety

Physical and psychological safety in youth sport settings refers to the existence of safe and healthy facilities and practices that encourage secure and respectful interactions. Physical safety refers to ensuring that the sport venue is free of distractions and obstacles that can interfere with the normal activities of training and competing. Psychological safety focuses on adult-athletes interactions and peer interactions. Assuring psychological safety means that parents, coaches, and officials encourage interactions that are respectful, caring, and appropriate to each athlete's specific needs. These types of relationships are in order to build confidence in youth and allow them to enjoy their participation in sport.

### 3.2    Appropriate structure

This feature suggests the existence of clear and consistent expectations regarding rules, behaviours, and training structure. Providing activities that are properly structured and adapted to the age and specific context of a young athlete have the potential to develop positive and well-adjusted youth.

### 3.3    Supportive relationships

The third setting feature relates to strong support, positive communication, and connectedness. Parents, coaches, and officials, through their supportive behaviours, can influence a young athlete's perceived competence, enjoyment, and motivation and play a role in his or her psychological, social, and physical growth. Adults' behaviours that focus on

positive interactions within the training and competition environments and facilitate youth responsibilities are likely to result in better youth sport programs and sporting settings.

### 3.4   Opportunities to belong

The fourth setting feature highlights the importance of meaningful inclusion, social engagement, and cultural competence in youth sport programs. Feeling a sense of belonging (i.e., being part of a team, developing friendships) is important in maintaining a child's motivation and interest in sport.

### 3.5   Positive social norms

This feature relates to the development of pro-social values and morals rather than antisocial behaviours. Although a growing body of literature highlights some of the potential negative social norms associated with youth sport participation (e.g., violence, aggression, poor sportspersonship, and low morality reasoning), youth sport programs have the potential to develop positive values such as fair play, sportspersonship, cooperation, assertion, responsibility, empathy, and self-control. Adult expectations and reinforcement of respect for others and sportspersonships behaviours among the junior sportspeople through appropriate modelling are the foundation of social norms in youth sport.

### 3.6   Support of efficacy and mattering

This feature focuses on the importance of empowering youth and supporting their autonomy as they work to build their community. Research in sport emphasizes the need for coaches to develop autonomous athletes; giving youth the opportunity to choose their level of involvement in sport or contribution within a sport will empower them and also increase their intrinsic motivation for sport. Youth want some say about their sport participation, including choice of sport, training, and competitions.

### 3.7   Opportunities for skill building

The seventh setting feature emphasises the importance of learning experiences. When engaging in sport, young people should be provided with opportunities to learn a variety of sport skills and to meet and interact with a variety of different people (i.e., peers, coaches) to learn sport skills as well as personal and social skills.

## 3.8    Integration of family, school, and community efforts

This feature promotes the melding of the youths' environments to increase communication and lessen conflicts and dissonance. The size and structure of a community and sport program appear to play a role in youth's persistence and development through sport. Keeping the number of participants in sport programs small and communicating values that are consistent with other learning environments (e.g. family, school) are keys to PYD through sport.

## 4.   POSITIVE OUTCOMES

If sport programs are delivered effectively they should lead to positive developmental outcomes among youth. The 4Cs model of PYD has significant support from the sport literature as key outcomes for positive youth. These 4Cs are clusters of individual attributes that result from involvement in activities that are enjoyable and challenging and represent a higher order system of individual attributes such as self-efficacy, empathy, initiative, and positive bonds with people.

It is important that sport programs focus on sport-related developmental outcomes. In this regard, those responsible for policy and delivery should directly account for the personal development of participants though sport and specifically the contribution to competence, confidence, connection, and character.

### 4.1   Competence

In sport, competence can be conceptualized as a high level of achievement, performance, or athletic ability. More specifically, sport competence can be broken down into three main dimensions: technical skills, tactical skills, and physical skills. Technical skills refer to an athlete's ability to move and perform the tasks necessary to achieve success in their sport (e.g., passing, shooting, guarding, and skating). Tactical skills focus on the specific actions and decisions that athletes make during competition to gain an advantage over their opponents (e.g., decision-making, reading the play, and strategy). Finally, physical skills refer to physical fitness and functional qualities that allow athletes to the perform sports skills and meet the sport's physical demands (e.g., speed, agility, and endurance).

### 4.2   Confidence

According to Vealey (1986), sport confidence is defined as the "belief or degree of certainty individuals possess about their ability to be successful in sport" (p. 222).  Within a PYD framework it is important to account for the long-term changes in the confidence level of athletes - or the trait level of confidence.

### 4.3   Connection

Connection is conceptualised as a measure of the quality of relationships and degree of interaction with peers and coaches in the immediate sport environment. In order to promote

PYD, young people need to engage in meaningful and positive relationships with the individuals in their environments. Given the significant differences between peer and coach-athlete relationships in sport, these two outcomes should be treated separately.

## 4.4    Character

Character in sport can be defined in terms of moral development and sportspersonship. Specifically, character in sport is generally typified by the engagement in pro-social behaviour's and avoidance of antisocial behaviours. Pro-social behaviours are voluntary actions intending to help or benefit others; for example helping an injured opponent. Antisocial behaviours, on the other hand, are voluntary actions intending to harm or disadvantage others, such as deliberately injuring an opponent.

If sport programs adhere to policies that promote PYD and train coaches and officials that can implement the eight setting features in their interaction with young athletes, more young athletes will develop into physically, socially, and psychologically healthy people. Collectively, these processes will lead to the fifth "C" of positive youth development: contribution. As physically, socially, psychologically, emotionally, and intellectually healthy youth develop into adults, they will choose to contribute or "give back" to civil society (including sport), and in doing so, be promoting the positive development of the next generation of youth.

The majority of youth sport programs around the world continue to measure their success using performance measures of a few adult athletes. Current trends in sport programming are continuing to promote institutionalisation, elitism, early selection, and early specialisation and the exclusion of the "less talented." Many sport programs are requiring higher levels of investment from earlier ages and discouraging children from participating in a diversity of activities. However, there is clear evidence suggesting that sport programs such as these may not be providing optimal environments for youth's lifelong involvement in sport and elite performance.

A growing body of literature on sport and PYD emphasised that sport programs are most likely to result in the development of performance and participation when they involve positive coach-athletes relationships, enjoyable and challenging sporting activities, and opportunities for youth to improve their skills in a non-threatening environment. By considering factors other than performance and skill acquisition, this paper provides an integrative approach to youth sport that require concerted effort from physical education teachers, coaches, and parents to

ensure that youth learn skills through sport that allow them to continue their participation at either an elite or recreational level.

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