



Developmental psychologists have shown, through an emerging research approach called Positive Youth Development (PYD), that extra-curricular activities such as sport provide an ideal context of enjoyment and effort that develop thriving youth. Despite this, we too often hear or read about disturbingly negative aspects of youth sport – insensitive and abusive coaches, over-pressuring parents, peer victimization, misdirected aggression, concussion and decreased self-esteem as examples.

At the same time, we are bombarded by positive messages associated with youth sport involvement such as health and fitness benefits, increased self-esteem, friendships, discipline, problem-solving, teamwork and even enhanced academic success. These conflicting messages and outcomes that result from youth sport participation raise two important questions: What is youth development? How does positive youth development occur in sport?

A pragmatic view of positive youth development can be defined as the cultivation of personal assets such as Competence, Confidence, Connection and Character (4Cs). Importantly, development of these personal assets through sport does not occur automatically. The 4Cs need to be explicitly integrated and emphasized in the activities, relationships and settings in which sport takes place. Some key elements of youth sport that are known to enhance personal assets in youth include:

- **Personal Engagement in Activities.**
Sport activities that are most likely to lead to the enhancement of the 4Cs usually include a sampling of different sports during childhood and a balanced mix of adult-led and youth-led practices and play.
- **Quality Relationships.**
The quality of the relationships that athletes develop with others in sport (e.g., with coaches, parents) is more empowering when established on principles of transformational leadership that involved a “person-centered” approach.
- **Appropriate Settings.**
The social and physical settings that are known to lead to positive sport outcomes include environments that are age-appropriate, safe, accessible, inclusive and not overly populated.

References

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