

## Results Bob Bigelow's Youth Sports Survey Summary of over 700 Responses, 2015

### Types of people responding:

- **Length of involvement:** 95% were involved in youth sports for 4 years or more; nearly one-half for 10 years or more, which means the base of experience is very high.
- **Gender and age:** 3/4 were male and 1/4 female; one-half were between 36 and 45 years old while a 1/3 were between 46 to 55 years old. Therefore, the vast majority were in the primary age groups for parents.
- **Positions – share of respondents:** coaches and/or referees/umpires – 80%; general volunteers – 39%; team parents or parents only – 56%; administrators or board members – 38%; part of an organization dedicated to improving youth sports – 26%; other – 10% (such as athletic directors, fund raisers, P-E teachers, and park and rec directors). *(answers are greater than 100% as people may participate in multiple positions).*
- **Team sports involved in:** Basketball – 59%; Baseball – 43%; Soccer – 39%; Football – 20%; Hockey – 15%; Softball – 14%; Lacrosse – 12%; Volleyball – 5%; Other – 9% (swimming, track, ice skating, field hockey, tennis, wrestling, etc.). *(answers are greater than 100% as people may participate in multiple sports).*
- **Type of youth sports programs:** Affiliated Youth Sports Organizations (YSOs – such as Little League, USYSA Youth Soccer, Pop Warner, AAU Basketball, etc.) – 79%; Town Park and Rec Dept. programs – 33%; Independent, non affiliated programs – 16%; Agency sponsored programs (such as PALs, YMCAs, JCCs, etc.) – 12%; Church Leagues – 7%; Other – 9% (school-based). *(answers greater 100% as people may participate in multiple programs).*
- **70 % indicated that a talk by Bob Bigelow would definitely or probably be helpful to their community!**

### Ratings of Aspects of Local Programs on a Scale of Positive to Negative:

The survey asked people to rate 16 different aspects of their local youth sports program(s) on across a 4-factor scale: mostly positive, somewhat positive, somewhat negative, or mostly negative. The average across all areas was only 25% for mostly positive, while 37% overall viewed youth sports as either somewhat or mostly negative. This shows that there is a real need to improve youth sports in many ways. Important highlights:

### **The 6 best areas by percent rating *mostly positive*:**

1. 40% - Equitable playing time
2. 35% - Fairness of referees/officials
3. 34% - Number of games
4. 31% - Emphasis on fun
5. 30% - Number of practices
6. 28% - Child safety programs

The better news is that over 4 in 10 people believed play time is equitable; this is the single most important aspect as far as kids (and most parents) are concerned. Studies clearly show kids want to play and not sit excessively on the sidelines and watch others play. The highest rated “behavioral” area by adults was 35% for fairness of referees. We expect referees to be fair yet 2/3 believed this cannot be rated mostly positive, which is unfortunate.

Meanwhile, ratings of behavior by coaches (only 25% = mostly positive) and parents (only 21% = mostly positive) was far lower. In addition, less than 1 in 3 survey takers rated the emphasis on fun as mostly positive. Research over the years has consistently shown that having fun is the number one reason kids play, and not to win. No areas received even a 50% mostly positive rating, and this is a huge concern!

### **The 6 worst areas by percent rating *somewhat or mostly negative*:**

1. 59% - Opportunities for later bloomers
2. 55% - Retention of kids as they get older
3. 51% - Training of coaches
4. 45% - Impact of travel programs on kids
5. 42% - Behavior of parents at games
6. 40% - Emphasis on winning
6. 40% - Fairness of teams (tied for sixth)

Over half are concerned that kids are not being retained and poor coaching can be a big factor, evidenced by 51% rating the training of coaches as somewhat to mostly negative. This is a common complaint among parents. Other well known data shows they are right, as 7 in 10 kids quit organized youth sports by age 13 (source: National Alliance for Youth Sports - NAYS). While most volunteer parents who coach are mostly well intentioned and nice folks, most are just not adequately trained in how to coach children in youth sports. Children’s needs for fun and skill building should be the top priority. Winning typically is much more important in sports for adults but youth coaches can perceive that their performance is judged by parents based on how the team does in terms of wins and losses.

Slightly less than half thought travel sports were an issue. Travel sports often add up to increased pressure on not only kids, but also parents and coaches alike. Studies indicate that excess pressure is a key reason kids quit. Four in 10 saw the emphasis on winning as a negative and also bemoaned the behavior of parents at games. Concern with winning is a big factor contributing to poor behavior by many parents. While coaches’ behavior was seen as slightly less negative, 38% still rated the behavior of coaches at games as mostly or somewhat negative.

Another issue is the impact of travel teams, and early selection of the “best” players at young ages. Kids grow and develop at very different rates, and the better players at age 10 may not be the better ones after puberty. This leads then into the issue of reduction of opportunities for later bloomers and almost 60% agreed this is an issue.

## Which of the following are the most important overall ways to improve youth sports?

Respondents were asked to rate a variety of factors on a scale of “very important”, “important”, “somewhat important”, “not sure” and “not really important”. These were the top 8 approaches based on percent rating as either “very important” or “important”:

- Better training for coaches about child development needs – 95%
- Ways to make the program more fun – 94%
- Ways to keep more kids playing as they get older – 93%
- Better training for coaches in teaching sports skills – 92%
- Promote sports as education and not just competition – 92%
- Rules to enforce better parent and coach behavior at games – 88%
- Rules to promote fairer teams – 81%
- Rules to ensure equitable playing time – 78%

Surveys have consistently shown that kids want to have fun and learn, and coach training is a key ingredient. This not only includes how to teach skills but also to see youth sports as child development and education, not just competition and winning. More fun and skills also helps to keep kids playing longer, a key objective versus the 70% dropout rate by age 13. Good parent and coach behavior, fair teams and balanced playing time are also important components of good youth sports programs that seek to meet *children’s* needs.

Children want to play in an environment where mom and dad appropriately attend but don’t embarrass them by going over the top, in one where they learn new skills at the hands of good coaches, *and above all they want to play!* Some programs require coaches to be trained while others simply allow coaches “take the field or court” with little or no training. And while many parent coaches are well intentioned to have everyone play, organizations like the American Youth Soccer Organization mandate 50% minimum playing time as rule with its “Everyone Plays” philosophy. Other leagues may mandate a minimum number of innings in baseball, minutes in football, etc. but that may not add up to half the game.

Little League for example states that all players have to play at least 6 defensive outs (2 innings worth) and get one at bat. With games typically at 6 innings, this adds up to only one-third of a game, not one-half. Pop Warner football mandates 10 plays for teams of 16-25 players, but these drop to 8 plays for 26-30 player teams, and 6 plays for 31-35 player teams. This is also well below half a game.

## Ratings of the perceived effectiveness of specific ways to make youth sports a better experience

The following are the percentages who rated these approaches as either “very effective” or “effective” (other choices were “somewhat effective”, “not sure” or “not really effective”):

- Information for both parents and coaches on why children’s sports are different than sports for adults – 81%
- Training courses for coaches on how to be positive – 80%

- Convincing league administrators that change is needed and showing them how – 74%
- Information for parents on how to behave better – 65%
- Letting kids have more of a say in their sports – 62%
- Place less emphasis on winning – 60%

Meanwhile, other approaches that have received popular press over the years were not thought of as being as effective, including good behavior pledges (54%), and silent sidelines (32%). Behavior pledges and silent sidelines are one-time events versus training and the dissemination of information on how sports for kids is different than what we see on TV for college and pro events.

## The “model” used to construct youth sports programs

One of the interesting questions asked was “Do you think communities should consider ways to change youth sports programs (or add new programs) where the structure of kids' sports is less formal, less driven by teams and standings, and/or more like pick-up play?” This gets at the notion that when youth sports programs and leagues over-emphasize standings, winning, and how teams perform versus development of individual skills, the impact can be to substitute too much pressure on both kids and coaches for the objective of just having fun.

Almost 6 in 10 respondents (57%) strongly agreed or agreed with this. Meanwhile only 20% indicated they were not sure or did not agree. The implication is that people are open to considering alternate ways to structure the program itself, so that might result in a better environment for the kids.

## What should be improved upon to make your sports program better for the kids involved? (open-ended comments):

The final question asked of respondents was simply to provide thoughts on how to improve programs. There were over 550 comments total. The comments fell into six major areas, in order of how often they were mentioned:

**Structure:** Changes to the “play models”, structures and/or rules of programs: such as making them less formal, eliminating standings, not having player drafts, changes to systems of travel/elite teams, reducing overspecialization and ensuring late bloomers are not left out.

**Training:** The need for more/better coach training and/or parent education.

**Fun and Skills:** Greater emphasis on having fun, learning skills, and participation – with reduced emphasis on winning and less pressure on kids.

**Equality:** More equitable opportunities including playing time, fairness of teams, and more availability for programs for kids recreationally and as they get older.

**Monitoring and Controls:** better involvement by volunteers, better administration, less politics, and ways communities can monitor and implement better oversight/controls on youth sports programs.

**Time:** Less time commitment (e.g., year-around programs) especially for programs above the recreational level.

## The top three categories of suggestions for improvements were:

(1) **changes to how programs are set-up and structured** (the “play model”) including the rules and policies so the emphasis on winning is reduced, there is less pressure and kids’ needs to have fun and learn are better met. This category was mentioned by nearly 1 in 4 survey takers.

(2) **better training for coaches and education for parents** relative to expectations for their kids and the program itself, how youth sports is different from adult sports, and the need to be properly trained to coach kids. Parent education on how to properly support children and not live through their sports accomplishments is also part of the equation. Nearly 1 in 3 mentioned these issues!

(3) **having a greater focus on learning and skill development**, participation, and just plain old fun, mentioned by about 1 in 5 respondents. Too often a focus on winning and pressure to perform can take some of the fun out of the experience as well as stress game tactics versus just increasing fundamental skills.

Among those talking about play models, a number of survey takers also bemoaned the current system of travel teams, wanting to see these reduced, not introduced until older ages, or even eliminated altogether. One of the key issues is how these types of teams can cause early over-specialization, anoint kids at young ages, and reduce opportunities for later bloomers.

More training for coaches and parents is a very common recommendation. It seems though that with increasing problems in youth sports, more and more participants want solutions that go beyond traditional education, and address rules to govern behavior and / or program structures (play models) that reduce the role of parents and increase the benefits for kids. This was evident in a number of comments about how communities themselves could provide more monitoring and oversight of their youth sports programs.

Better opportunities for kids in recreational sports and for kids as they get older was mentioned a number of times, along with ensuring fair playing time and balanced teams. Sometimes in the “old boy networks” of team selection, teams get stacked and the focus becomes the win-loss record, and not fun and learning and sportsmanship.

**As a final note, before the selection of representative comments following, 70% of all respondents indicated they believed that a talk by Bob Bigelow, to build awareness of issues and opportunities to improve youth sports, would “definitely” or “probably” be helpful.**

To contact Bob, please visit his web site at [www.bob-bigelow.com](http://www.bob-bigelow.com).

## REPRESENTATIVE COMMENTS

What follows is a selection of actual comments in each of these categories, to give a good sense of the issues and opportunities brought up.

### Play model and/or rules:

- More after-school “free play”, managed by a trained coach or educator.
- I like the idea of giving the kids a day to play with no coaching officiating or parental input from the side lines.

- One thing I know for sure is that kids do not have enough time to just play games with each other.
- Eliminate travel at young ages, mix up teams.
- Focus on development not winning. Stop cutting kids and stealing the best kids to make the best teams to win.
- Stop the insane drive to turn youth sports into "select" and "competitive" teams at younger and younger ages.
- Less structure, more "pick up" play Adults need to think like a 9 yr old. What's fun? No tournaments. Just play games and go home. Small rosters and creative ways to play games.
- Eliminate the "cutting" of kids before age 13 or 14....crazy to eliminate kids from sports before they are close to developed.
- More practice, more scrimmages with small numbers of players per side, fewer formal games. But "practice" needs to be fun; it should not be only sport skill repetition, but should include age-appropriate games which directly or indirectly help with general skills.
- More intramural-type sports, and less league sports.
- Take the emphasis away from organized leagues and place them or more of a pick-up or open gym format.
- We need a complete overhaul of travel/competitive teams. Children in our community are starting to fall off the radar as early as 10 and 11 due to emphasis on elite players.
- Less emphasis on travel or elite teams and less focus on college scholarships.
- I truly believe that there should be more pick-up style games and less emphasis on highly structured organized sports.
- The elite travel teams are the ones ruining kids sports. Most of the problem parents in youth sports orgs have kids who are also on these elite travel programs. Frequently, the community board members are the worst offenders of their own codes of conduct.
- I like sports to be more inclusive and to get rid of the travel teams. We are a smaller community and I believe we should spread the talent and let every kid have a chance in experiencing sports. I believe our youth sports programs are out of control and we need to get the adults under control.
- I have also coached summer pick-up leagues. Very informal, very nostalgic and Very well received. The kids are so used to everything being so structured that it takes them some time before they get it. No set teams, no standings, no set positions and no coaches!! Plenty of parent involvement but the kids were in control. We had more kids than we could handle. We had to add fields. We needed more parents just to keep things moving. At the end of the summer no one knew who one because there were no set teams.
- At the lower age groups 4th 5th and 6th grade there should only be recreational leagues not classic or AAU. Seasons become too long, it is a drain on families and the athlete. I feel it is a recipe for burn out.
- The only sports outlets are competitive or semi-competitive. There are no local recreational/instructional leagues for kids past the third-grade. The problem with our basketball league is that the "instructional league is not instructional. From the first exposure, kids are placed in a competitive environment with no practice time.
- Eliminate all-star teams for kids until age 13-14. They cause too much undue stress on both parents and kids.

## More coach training, parent education:

- As Bob said so eloquently, "Adults want to win. Kids want to play." I think trying to get knowledgeable coaches in the sport to provide instruction yet ensure that kids are having fun and getting beneficial playing time.
- Not treat kids as a mini adults or even worse good investment.
- Better preparation by the coaches. A coaches' clinic for each sport.
- Parent education about the downside of being so competitive at sporting events.
- Get coaches and parents to understand the game is not for them but for the development of the child.
- Getting parents to buy in that more is not always better and that "winning" does not equal success.
- Ways for coaches with limited knowledge to learn how to teach better skills and prepare children.
- Educating coaches on fundamentals.
- Kids need to be well informed that it is not about winning and competition it is about having fun and doing what you like.
- Kids know the score and most want to win. But they forget about the game as soon as it is over. They also do not care if it is a formal game or a pick-up. It is the parents that demand more structure, formal games and rankings. Parents are the problem, and the key to solving the problem.
- Training for coaches in child development!!! I am a teacher and am amazed by some of the bad things I have seen.
- Unfortunately adults continue to ruin sports for the kids. The paradigm shift will be very difficult.
- Parent education because it is the engine that pulls the train off track. De-emphasizing winning, even for coaches who are paid (non-volunteer), as a measure of their success and instead focus on player development
- I believe the parents need to be in more control. They believe because they have paid, they get the last say in their child's role in the program. They don't care about "rules" anymore. It's becoming less about the children playing. We find the parents the issue, not the children.
- I think that Coaches should be trained to understand that kids learn differently and mature at a different rates. Coaches should have guidelines especially for equal playing time because most are parents.
- To change the mindset that youth sports are NOT a minor league for the high school varsity...there are freshmen and JV teams for that.
- Coaches must embrace the following: Give the game back to the kids. Let the game itself be the teacher. Teach "CHARACTER" more than the sport itself. Equal playing time regardless!
- We need to have more uniform training for the coaches in all sports. we need to teach the coaches how to better teach the kids.
- I firmly believe that educating the adults concerning the needs and desires of the kids is the best way to reverse the current condition of youth sports.
- Coaches need to understand the "needs" of their players as individuals/team especially under 14 yrs and try to tailor an experience around that "need" so their sports experience is a great one.

### **Emphasis on skill development and/or fun:**

- Teach fundamentals, and instill a love of the game in the children.
- I think the biggest problem is that we are not concerned for the development of young players. Our club representatives are focused on the first team and not on children.
- Focus on fun and that what's paramount is that each and every participant regardless of perceived ability is challenged and encouraged in a very positive way to reach his/her own potential. That coaches celebrate the success of effort, passion and fun and lose the insecurity associated with evaluating success based on winning or results.
- Greater emphasis on the fundamentals.
- More skill development and less leagues - wait to have leagues when kids can play.
- De-emphasize keeping score and winning, focusing more on coach development, building fundamentals & focusing on fun!
- Make sure the experience is fun for all participants
- Live by the philosophy that the highest and most important mission of youth sports is positive youth development.
- Just let the kids play and have the coaches not constantly yelling what to do every second the kids are on the field.
- Making the sports experience fun for ALL the kids, not just the more talented kids.

### **More equitable opportunities and/or play time:**

- Reduce "travel" teams and field a greater number of balanced teams with greater emphasis on equal playing time.
- More leagues for kids in middle school through high school outside of the local school teams. For kids who aren't good enough to make the teams but still want to play.
- Eliminate cutting and ranking of kids at young ages and even at high school level; all kids should be allowed to be on some team. Focus more on fun, less on ability.
- Teams should be picked more fairly. Tryouts are conducted and players "drafted" by coaches. It always seems that one team is always "stacked" compared to the others.
- More equitable playing time, more practicing and less games
- Make sports available for every skill level and age level and encourage participation.
- More opportunity for older kids to continue playing youth sports.
- Need stricter guidelines on playing time, as a parent we all pay the same amount for playing time but unfortunately the coaches only care about winning.
- Equal or fairer play time for the kids.
- Coaches need to understand that all kids even at age 13 need playing time.

### **Better volunteerism, facilities:**

- Make it all blind drafts in youth sports.
- Coaches need to be SUPERVISED & counseled on where they are missing the mark. Parents need to be told that sideline coaching and harassing officials is inappropriate and not allowed!
- Annual elections for all youth sports boards of directors seats. Formal open board meetings with all families having a vote on all decisions.
- LESS parental agendas/involvement/politics!
- The sports organizations should be regulated, the same way the schools are. If you want to look at the kids experience as one in which it is a learning, cognitive lesson and should be to develop better kids than you have to regulate it, otherwise there is no way it can be enforced.
- The people that run the organization (baseball and basketball) need to stop loading their teams up with the better talent every year so that their teams continue to win all, or almost all of their games and the championships.
- Unified youth sports board to oversee the consistency of all youth sports organizations in town. Right now, they all have different philosophies about what is right.
- Not sure how to fix youth sports until the adults with agendas go away. Need to somehow get the city or county to take some responsibility in administration of our sport.
- Change leadership to people that have the interest of ALL kids in mind. We really need to break thru the "Good Old Boys" club and get new people more involved.
- Get the city involved in the assessment of sport programs its citizens have in place for them. More control ...finances, policies from the city with all its sport groups.

### **Less time commitment:**

- I find it even more astounding what sacrifices families will make to cater to one kid while the other kids take a backseat. It's kind of crazy and maybe pathological.
- Decrease the 10-month hold soccer has on parents and kids. The local soccer association makes it clear they take priority over all other sports, and your child will be dropped / replaced if they don't participate in ALL soccer activities.
- Change structure of leagues especially hockey to reduce the length of the season.
- Seasons should be shorter for sports at younger ages to permit participation in multiple sports without conflict.
- Encourage seasons as opposed to year round play and encourage multiple sports.