



STATE OF PLAY 2016

TRENDS AND DEVELOPMENTS

THE ASPEN INSTITUTE
PROJECT PLAY





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THE VISION

An America in which all children have the opportunity to be active through sports

THE FRAMEWORK

Sport for All, Play for Life: A Playbook to Get Every Kid in the Game

by the Aspen Institute
Project Play

youthreport.projectplay.us



INTRODUCTION

If you're reading this, odds are you believe in the power of sports to change lives.

The Aspen Institute's Project Play aims to help make that happen, at scale. It is founded on the notion that anecdotal successes are great, but the progress we need lies in providing all people, starting with children, access to sport activity that builds healthy, vibrant communities. It is an act of collective impact, an understanding that no organization – sport or otherwise – can do this alone.

So, we convene. Jim Whitehead, CEO of the American College of Sports Medicine, calls Project Play “the aggregator, the unifier, the commons for all honorable” initiatives that serve children through sports. We smash together leaders, pump big ideas into the bloodstream, and organize the best of them in a manner that allows stakeholders to shape policies and programs, create innovative partnerships, and move in a coherent manner.

Eight breakthrough strategies are identified in the report we released last year, *Sport for All, Play for Life: A Playbook to Get Every Kid in the Game*, a framework for action for the eight sectors that touch the lives of children. Each borrows from common sense and research, but in sum the playbook is an audacious bid for systems-level change that makes room for all children, regardless of zip code or ability. It's what good looks like in youth sports, a model developed with inputs from hundreds of thought leaders at ten roundtables held over two years.

At the launch summit for the report in 2015, Surgeon General Vivek Murthy challenged leaders to activate around the framework, which focuses on children ages 12 and under because that's the best window to develop healthy habits.

How are stakeholders doing, one year in? Taking measure is *State of Play: 2016*, our first annual snapshot of how many – and how well – children are being served through sports. The report presents the latest participation rates and identifies five key developments in the past year in each of the focus areas within the framework. Grades are offered on the performance of stakeholders, as determined through online polling of the thought leaders who attended the 2016 Project Play Summit on May 17 at the Newseum in Washington D.C. Their insights also shape the section of this report called Next, which is inspired, in part, by a powerful call to action made by first lady Michelle Obama at the Summit.

As you can see, a groundswell of efforts have begun to reimagine youth sports in America – made urgent by recognition of how much still needs to improve. We hope you find the report useful in your work.

SPORT as defined by Project Play

All forms of physical activity which, through organized or casual play, aim to express or improve physical fitness and mental well-being. Participants may be motivated by internal or external rewards, and competition may be with others or themselves (personal challenge).

THE NUMBERS

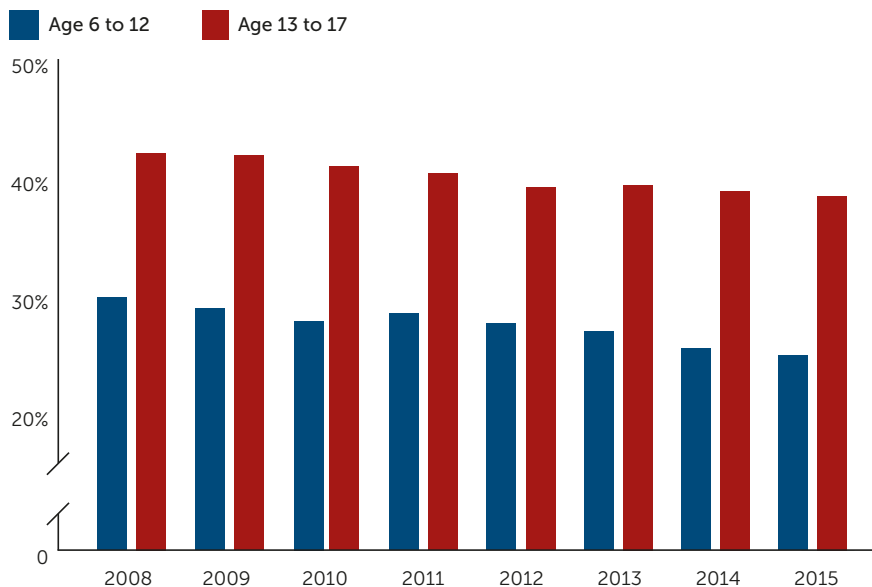
The Aspen Institute Sports & Society Program recognizes that at its best, sport offers myriad physical, social, emotional and cognitive benefits. The challenge for stakeholders: No metric currently exists to measure how many children have consistent access to quality sport activity. A variety of organizations conduct occasional surveys, using a variety of methodologies, to estimate sport participation rates, with some showing that as many as three-quarters of children play sports. But that engagement might be for just one season or even one time during the year, hardly an ideal measure of sports' contribution to the health of children and communities.

In the absence of comprehensive surveillance tools by public health agencies, we find the data produced annually by the Sports & Fitness Industry Association (SFIA) to be most useful in tracking trends.¹ Each year, SFIA produces a series of reports based on an online survey of 32,658 households commissioned through Sports Marketing Surveys (SMS), capturing the participation rates in 120 sports by age, gender, income level, and other criteria. As a contribution to the work of Project Play, SFIA and SMS queried their database for deep-dive insights on the sport activity of children.

In the context of Project Play, the most relevant SFIA statistic is called "Active to a Healthy Level and Beyond," defined as those engaged in high-calorie burning activities a minimum of 151 times during the year. Based on guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 55 sport and fitness activities qualify. Included are the vast majority of popular team sports plus other recreational activities that can prompt a good sweat (sorry, bowling).

As you can see below, youth ages 6 to 12 who were active through sports on a regular basis fell again, to 26.6 percent, down from 30.2 percent in 2008. As a window into how the slide plays out as youth move into the teenage years, we're also including the SFIA data for youth ages 13-17 years old, which reflects the same trend (from 42.7 percent to 39.3 percent).²

FIG.1 | ACTIVE TO A HEALTHY LEVEL AND BEYOND



The good news:

Regular team sport participation for kids was up in 2015, to 40%

The bad:

Kids active to a healthy level through sports fell again, to 26.6%



Girls were less active to a healthy level than boys, but the strongest differentiator was family income. Only one in five children 6 to 12 years old from homes with less than \$25,000 in income reached that mark; and while activity levels were higher for youth ages 13 to 17 (27.5 percent), the gap widens between them and kids from the wealthiest homes, those with \$100,000 or more in income (45.5 percent). In today’s youth sports landscape, those who have the greatest opportunity to continue playing into adolescence are those who can afford the club teams, training, and equipment required to advance through the system – or even play in high school, many of which provide sport opportunities for only the better athletes. At the 2016 Project Play Summit, first lady Michelle Obama noted the disparities in access by community, and called on the sports industry and stakeholders broadly to address the gap (see Next section at end of this report for her extended comments).

But there is some good news, too: Participation in team sports is up slightly from 2014 among children 6 to 12. While still not back to the levels of 2008, rates jumped last year more than three points, to 56.6 percent of kids. Among “core participants,” those who play on a regular basis, the rate moved from 37.3 percent to 40 percent.³

FIG. 2 | CORE PARTICIPATION IN TEAM SPORTS

Percent of children ages 6 to 12 who played these sports on a regular basis

	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2008-15	2014-15
BASKETBALL	16.6	14.4	15.3	15.5	14.1	16.0	14.7	14.7	▼	►
BASEBALL	16.5	14.5	14.1	14.9	12.5	14.2	12.9	13.2	▼	▲
OUTDOOR SOCCER	10.4	10.4	10.9	11.2	9.2	9.3	9.1	8.9	▼	▼
TACKLE FOOTBALL	3.7	4.0	3.8	3.2	3.6	3.5	3.3	3.3	▼	►
GYMNASTICS	2.3	2.9	2.8	4.1	3.5	2.9	3.0	2.7	▲	▼
FLAG FOOTBALL	4.5	3.3	3.0	3.0	2.8	2.8	2.4	2.6	▼	▲
VOLLEYBALL (COURT)	2.9	2.2	2.6	1.8	2.4	2.7	2.8	2.5	▼	▼
ICE HOCKEY	0.5	0.7	0.7	0.9	0.8	1.1	1.1	1.1	▲	►
TRACK AND FIELD	1.0	0.8	1.2	1.5	1.7	1.1	1.2	1.0	►	▼
LACROSSE	0.4	0.7	0.6	0.9	0.7	0.8	0.9	0.7	▲	▼
WRESTLING	1.1	1.1	1.1	1.0	0.8	0.7	0.6	0.7	▼	▲
FIELD HOCKEY	0.4	0.7	0.6	0.3	0.5	0.6	0.4	0.5	▲	▲

The stabilization of team sport participation rates is important, as that form of play is often what kids want – opportunities to play with friends. How much of the stabilization is due to the economy recovering, thus providing more families more resources to play organized sports? Hard to know, but it’s worth noting that leading organizations in several sports had introduced policies, media campaigns, and other initiatives in recent years that were designed to grow youth participation. Tom Cove, CEO of SFIA, notes that while one year does not make a trend, it’s something to build on.

What grade do you give stakeholders in getting kids active through sports?

As determined by thought leaders at the 2016 Project Play Summit⁴

C-



PHYSICAL LITERACY

In the *Sport for All, Play for Life* report, quality sport participation for children is defined as that which promotes physical literacy. It proposes that youth sport providers and stakeholders from other sectors collaborate to help every child in America be physically literate by age 12. That is, every 12-year-old should have the ability, confidence, and desire to be physically active for life.

As recognized in the *Sport for All, Play for Life* report, each of these components builds upon the others to give children the foundation to be active for life.

Components of Physical Literacy

As defined by the Aspen Institute

Ability

Ability refers to competency in basic movement skills and an overall fitness that allows individuals to engage in a variety of games and activities. This outcome is achieved through a mix of informal play and intentional teaching of movement skills, among them running, balancing, gliding, hopping, skipping, jumping, dodging, falling, swimming, kicking, throwing, and a range of skills that require general hand-eye coordination.

Confidence

Confidence is knowing that you have the ability to play sports or enjoy other physical activities. It is the result of programs and venues that are inclusive of people with differing abilities, and the support and encouragement from parents, guardians, coaches, administrators, teammates, and peers throughout the development process.

Desire

Desire is the intrinsic enthusiasm for physical activity, whether in organized or unstructured formats, in traditional or alternative sport. This result is achieved through early positive experiences that are fun and motivate children to do their best.

Aspen Institute Project Play white paper on Physical Literacy in the U.S., and global scan of other countries' efforts:

plreport.projectplay.us

FIVE DEVELOPMENTS IN THE PAST YEAR:

- In June 2015, the **Aspen Institute released a white paper – a deep dive – on the challenges and opportunities before stakeholders, *Physical Literacy in the United States: A Model, Strategic Plan, and Call to Action***. The 36-page report, supported by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, identifies programs leading the way in promoting physical literacy, populations in greatest need, and guidance on developing the tools and resources to measure physical literacy and bring efforts to scale. The Aspen Institute also released the first-ever catalogue of physical literacy efforts around the world, *Physical Literacy: A Global Environmental Scan*.
- Providers such as the Reebok-based BOKS program, Connecticut-based 2-4-1 Sports, and the Stoughton (Wisc.) Parks and Recreation Department created **programming that intentionally develops physical literacy**. Also, working with local providers and underserved populations, the University of Florida has begun developing tools to measure physical literacy in children.⁵ In Canada, University of Manitoba professor and Project Play physical literacy work group member Dean Kriellaars used physical literacy assessments to discover why girls lag behind boys in physical activity, and introduced essential research showing that physical literacy can be developed through a quality physical education experience.⁶
- **The term “physical literacy” increasingly has become baked into the DNA of national organizations** that can drive systems change. The Society of Health and Physical Educators (SHAPE America) now includes the term in each of its four recommended physical education standards, and has in the past year published articles or initiated research offering guidance for specific sports, as well as those serving children with developmental disabilities. The US Olympic Committee offered guidance for sport providers on how to embrace the American Development Model, with physical literacy a priority.⁷
- Broadly, the **evidence for promoting physical activity in the population has grown**. Of special note is the relationship between exercise and prevention of cancer. In May 2016, the National Institutes of Health released a study showing that leisure-time physical activity is associated with lower risk of 13 different types of cancer, including breast, colon, liver and myeloid leukemia.⁸
- Despite these developments, champions of physical activity still have a long way to go in getting stakeholder groups, from education to public health, to appreciate its benefits. **Most policies related to health care remain focused on sick care more than disease prevention**. Physical literacy is a newer concept, with many challenges ahead in embedding itself into the structure of sport delivery. A decade after Canada began promoting physical literacy, Kriellaars said major gaps remain in providing PE teachers and other providers with the necessary training and support.

What grade do you give stakeholders in fostering physical literacy in youth?

As determined by thought leaders at the 2016 Project Play Summit⁴

D+

THE 8 PLAYS

Key developments in the past year within the eight strategies for the eight sectors that touch the lives of children

1. ASK KIDS WHAT THEY WANT
2. REINTRODUCE FREE PLAY
3. ENCOURAGE SPORT SAMPLING
4. REVITALIZE IN-TOWN LEAGUES
5. THINK SMALL
6. DESIGN FOR DEVELOPMENT
7. TRAIN ALL COACHES
8. EMPHASIZE PREVENTION



Challenge: Youth sport is organized by adults 1 | THE PLAY: ASK KIDS WHAT THEY WANT

From the *Sport for All, Play for Life* report:

It's Rule No. 1 in business: know your customer. Video games (and the technology industry more broadly) often get blamed for our kids' sedentary habits, yet they provide much of what children want out of a sport experience, including: lots of action, freedom to experiment, competition without exclusion, social connection with friends as co-players, customization, and a measure of control over the activity – plus, no parents critiquing their every move. Simply put, the child is at the center of the video game experience, all made possible by research and feedback loops that seek input from its young customers. Now imagine if youth sport providers worked half as hard to understand the needs of kids, especially those who are left out or who opt out of sports.

Five developments:

- **Say hello to e-sports**, young people watching other young people play video games – the latest success of the industry in giving kids what they want, and thus a potential competitor for kids' attention. E-sports are not sports anymore than poker is, as there's little to no physical activity involved, but they're branded that way, and over the past year these streamed and televised competitions have gained the attention of media companies because of their ability to attract the eyeballs of the young. In fact, among youth ages 12 to 19, 51 percent of males and 20 percent of females say they are fans of e-sports, more than a third of them "avid fans," according to 2016 ESPN research shared with the Aspen Institute. No data is available on younger children. It's a trend worth watching, given that 23 percent of youth ages 5 to 16 say "playing a computer game with friends is a form of exercise."⁹
- **Sports organizations largely continue to design policies with little input from children.** Of note: The US Soccer Federation mandated that affiliated youth organizations move to the birth year in assigning players to teams, as is done in Europe.¹⁰ Until this year, most teams were segmented by school calendar year, allowing classmates to play together. "I believe this will significantly impact the number of kids we have playing soccer," said Skye Eddy Bruce of the Institute for Soccer Parenting. In academic surveys, playing with friends is recognized as a priority with many kids.
- **The US Tennis Association hosted a record 10,598 Play Days**, a low-pressure format introduced in 2012 with many short matches in a short amount of time. These three- to four-hour events allow kids to play with a large number of children with no documented results or rankings. "The emphasis is on fun play and parents know when the event begins and ends, a huge improvement (on) traditional two- or three-day tournaments," said Kirk Anderson, USTA director of coaching.
- **The NCAA added questions to its GOALS survey of college athletes that, for the first time, captures opinion on their youth sports experience.** The research, of course, is limited to athletes who advance to the college level, but the findings are useful as youth sport as an institution has been reshaped over the past generation by the chase for the athletic scholarship and preferential admission to selective universities. Among the findings: In baseball, soccer, basketball, and football, nearly half of male athletes said they played too many games as kids; among women, tennis was tops at 44 percent. More than half of athletes in many sports said their families expected them to become college athletes "since I was young."¹¹
- **Wearable physical activity trackers grew in popularity.** While not available to many kids, especially those from low-income homes, experts theorize that, as costs come down, these devices could be used to motivate kids to set custom goals and get moving.



Challenge: Overstructured experiences
2 | THE PLAY: REINTRODUCE FREE PLAY

From the *Sport for All, Play for Life* report:

Today, many parents are reluctant to let children ride bikes across town to play games with friends. Fear of child abductions, while extremely rare, is a psychological barrier, and crime and traffic concerns are real issues in some neighborhoods. Families are smaller, so there are often fewer siblings to play with at home. But experts recognize the need to reintroduce free play where possible, given the science. “To promote lifelong, intrinsically motivated sport participation, it is imperative to build a foundation during childhood,” sports psychologist Jean Coté writes. “Inclusion of high amounts of deliberate play activities early in development provides that motivational foundation.”

Five developments:

- **The academic, social, and sport performance benefits of free play became a topic of interest for many major media outlets** including *NPR*, *Washington Post*, *Psychology Today*, and others. Rising public awareness has empowered some grassroots sport providers to carve out kid-led activities. At Giraldo Elite Futbol club, in Corpus Christi, TX, every fourth training session is organized by kids, and winter league is entirely run by them. “They can mix/trade players, change rules, whatever, as long as everyone agrees to it,” said University of Texas professor Matt Bowers. Pressure is also growing from parents for schools to add daily recess; a 2016 report found only eight states require elementary schools to offer as much, largely unchanged from 2012.¹² “You will see more states and (local districts) add recess next year,” said Jayne Greenberg, an expert in school-based physical activity programs.
- Last June, **Major League Baseball and USA Baseball introduced Play Ball**, part of a new, \$30 million initiative designed to encourage participation in all forms of baseball activities. Whiffle ball, stickball, skills competitions like Pitch, Hit & Run, home run derby, and just playing catch in the backyard are at the center of the effort, a response to the sport increasingly being dominated by organized leagues and travel team ball that can ask a lot of families in terms of financial and time commitments. The program was introduced in 140 cities through the US Conference of Mayors, which distributed toolkits created by MLB. The effort is backed by a robust television and social media campaign.
- **Support appeared to grow for festival-type events** such as Street Games, an initiative of the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation held on a weekend day in April at a park in Manhattan. The goal of Street Games is to reintroduce classic, low-tech games played in the city in the ‘60s and ‘70s – street hockey, skateboarding, pogo sticks, ultimate disc, wheelchair basketball, and Double Dutch, among others – to a new generation of kids. Kids who try at least four of the activities during the four-hour event receive a prize.
- **FIVB, the international volleyball federation, introduced a fundamental shift in its approach to engaging youth.** Under the concept of Volleyball Your Way, affiliate organizations are encouraged to move away from traditional, drill-focused courses and clinics in gyms and instead ask children to make up games in a variety of forms on a range of outdoor surfaces (grass, dirt, sand).¹⁴ The ideas build on the work of John Kessel, director of sport development for USA Volleyball.¹⁵
- The above efforts face stiff headwinds. While core participation stabilized in several of the largest sports, **casual participation continued to fall in several of the most popular sports**, according to the SFIA data on youth ages 6 to 12. Between 2014 and 2015, volleyball, baseball, basketball, soccer, gymnastics, ice hockey, and lacrosse all experienced drops in the percentage of kids (core and casual participants) who played those games, in any form, at least once. Casual, or pickup, play is recognized as important in creating enthusiasm to play more regularly.



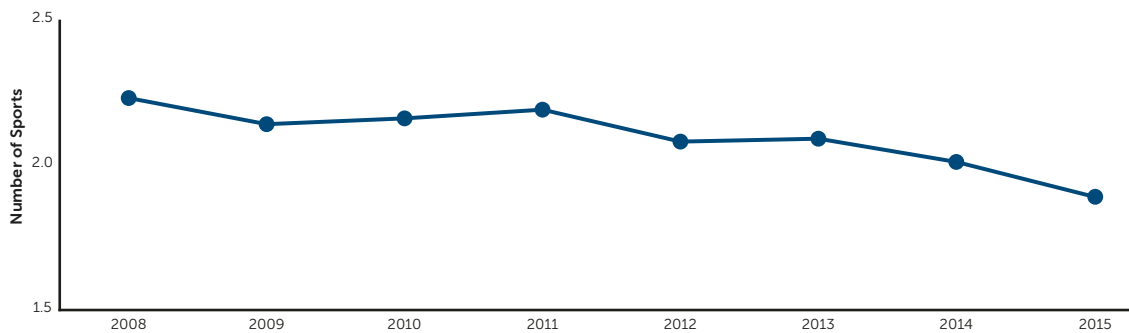
Challenge: Sameness and specialization

3 | THE PLAY: ENCOURAGE SPORT SAMPLING

From the *Sport for All, Play for Life* report:

Most children flow into only a handful of the more than 120 sports played in the United States. And, as early as the grade school years, those identified as having the most promise get the message from coaches and others that they must specialize in one sport at the exclusion of others in order to fully develop their talents and play at a college, pro, or other elite level. It's a myth. ... Grow the menu of sport options, create better connections to vulnerable populations, and more athletes-for-life will emerge.

FIG 3. | AVERAGE KID ATHLETE NOW PLAYS FEWER THAN TWO TEAM SPORTS



Five developments:

- Multisport athletes became less common.** As reflected in the above chart, data from the SFIA survey shows that the average kid between the ages of 6 and 17 played less than two team sports (1.89). The downward slide continued even though the evidence base grew that specializing in one sport is harmful to the body, and playing multiple sports is protective. A 2016 University of Wisconsin study of more than 1,000 athletes at 27 high schools found that 49 percent of specialized athletes sustained an injury, compared with only 23 percent of multisport athletes. The numbers did not differ much for athletes who specialized but played a more limited number of games (46 percent for specialized athletes and only 23 percent for multisport athletes).¹⁶
- We can now quantify the pressure on athletes to specialize early, by gender and sport.** The Wisconsin study found that 39 percent of female athletes specialized, as did 25 percent of male athletes. An additional finding, from the NCAA's GOALS survey, is that among top college athletes, females were more likely to train in just one sport by age 12 than males. The highest rates among Division I women were in gymnastics (87), tennis (72), soccer (62), basketball (55), swimming (55), and ice hockey (51). Among DI men, only soccer, tennis and ice hockey had more athletes than not who specialized that early. Many athletes, especially men, said they "wish they had spent more time sampling other sports when they were young," the NCAA research team wrote.
- In response to the Project Play report, the US Tennis Association rallied more than 45 national sport bodies to take a mutual action – endorsing multisport play for all children at least through age 12** in a PSA placed in the *Sports Business Journal* (see Appendix A). Signing on to the endorsement were the US Olympic Committee, NCAA, most of the national sport governing bodies (NGBs), and all the major professional leagues, as well as the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, NBC Sports, ESPN, and President's Council on Fitness, Sports & Nutrition. The PSA led to the formation of a working group that produced a resource released at the 2016 Project Play Summit, "Creating Multi-Sport Venues," identifying leading club and other models.¹⁷
- In April 2016, the White House and First Lady's Let's Move! initiative announced an agreement with the USOC and 16 NGBs to provide beginner athletic programming throughout the next year.**¹⁸
- Physical education, a critical component and site for introducing a variety of sports to kids of all abilities, received a boost** in 2016 with the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act. Programs are now eligible for new sources of funding that was not the case under No Child Left Behind. Still, there remains a lot of room for progress. Only Oregon and the District of Columbia meet the PE guidelines, by SHAPE America and the American Heart Association, of a minimum 150 minutes a week in elementary school and 225 minutes in middle school, according to a 2016 report.¹⁹

Challenge: Rising costs and commitment

4 | THE PLAY: REVITALIZE IN-TOWN LEAGUES

From the *Sport for All, Play for Life* report:

It's been a setting where kids of all skill levels and backgrounds play at the same local field or gym, rarely roaming beyond the town borders. But today, house leagues can be stigmatized as inferior; a casualty of tryout-based, early-forming travel teams that cater to the "best" child athletes. ... Revitalizing recreational leagues depends on improving both the quality of the offering and the quantity of available kids. Parents with means must be given a reason not to flee early for travel teams, through programming that develops their child's skills and provides opportunities for advancement, with fewer impacts on family time. Sport providers need to develop business models that wring less money out of more participants. And organizers must look in new places to grow the pool of players.

Five developments:

- At the 2016 Project Play Summit, **YMCA of USA announced a commitment to “establish a new vision” and a “major upgrade of our youth sports approach and programs”** modeled on the *Sport for All, Play for Life* strategies. The upgrade, to be developed and scaled nationally over the next two to three years, holds the potential to be a game-changer, as local Ys serve 10,000 communities and often are a family's first point of contact with sports. High-quality programs may provide kids with alternatives to jumping to travel teams.
- **Major gaps in access were revealed.** In 2015, only 38 percent of kids from homes with \$25,000 or less in income played team sports, compared to 67 percent of kids from \$100,000+ homes.²⁰
- **Momentum has grown to close the equipment gap between the sport haves and have-nots.** Nonprofits that collect and redistribute used equipment to underserved kids have grown. A front-page article in *The Washington Post* reported that DC-based Leveling the Playing Field has now donated \$1.4 million to 250 sports programs in the region.²¹
- **Some municipalities are acting more intentionally to engage low-income children.** In Salida, CO, the local rec department has created a fund that provides up to \$100 in program fees to any child who qualifies for free or reduced-price lunch at school.²¹ Sylvania, OH, analyzed its participation numbers against the economic data from seven neighborhoods, found disparities by income, and created new programs to engage underserved children more effectively.²² In Lancaster, PA, the parks and rec department teamed up with the school district, Police Athletic League and other local sport providers to leverage the assets of each (facilities, high school athletes as coaches, curricula, scholarships) and create joint programming. The partnership has increased sports opportunities in four sports, with more planned.²³
- **The sports industry started to engage more intentionally in community sports.** ESPN partnered with the National Recreation and Park Association to award grants to expand youth sports programs in underserved communities. The NBA relaunched its Junior NBA program, supporting community-based leagues with free gear, curriculums, and other resources; its network reaches 3,300 organizations and 1.3 million kids. Nike created the Nike Zoom League, a co-ed basketball league for middle-school-aged youth in all five boroughs of New York City. Building on its Access to Sport efforts, Under Armour announced it will refurbish a community center in East Baltimore and work with local organizations and the Aspen Institute to measurably lift sport participation rates among youth, the learnings from which can be shared with other urban communities.



Challenge: Not enough places to play 5 | THE PLAY: THINK SMALL

From the *Sport for All, Play for Life* report:

Growing access to play spaces for most children starts with the small—simple, smart moves that hold great promise. In urban areas, this may mean finding small spaces to develop quarter-sized courts for small-sided play. ... When schools agree to share their playing fields and facilities, it gives families and kids, especially those in underserved communities, more places to play in the evenings, on weekends, and during summer. ... Transportation to parks and school sites is vital, especially in predominantly African American and Hispanic neighborhoods, which often have fewer nearby recreation facilities than other areas. That's significant, because people living within a mile of a park are four times more likely to use it than those who live farther away. Funding enables, but so do small gestures of other types of support. Which is another way of saying: be creative.

Five developments:

- **The US Soccer Foundation, based on response to the 41 mini-pitches it has already built around the country, committed to creating 1,000 of them by 2026.** These small playing spaces on turf are ideal for urban neighborhoods, transforming abandoned courts, empty schoolyards, and vacant lots and the like for as little as \$50,000.²⁴ Pushing the creativity envelope, KaBOOM! launched a \$1 million national competition for the best ideas that make cities more engaging for kids through playful installations in unexpected places, like bus stops and sidewalks.
- **We now know the prevalence of Shared Use Agreements,** allowing communities to use the 6.6 million square feet of recreation space on the nation's school properties. In February 2016, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released results of a survey showing that only four in ten municipalities had such agreements. They are most common in the West and Midwest and in metropolitan areas with higher education levels. Identified barriers to greater adoption include liability and insurance concerns, cost, lack of partnerships, and lack of skilled staff.²⁵
- **Progress was made on addressing transportation barriers,** with passage of the Fixing America's Surface Transportation (FAST) Act, signed into law by President Obama in December 2015. Though primarily a highway funding law, it includes up to \$800 million in annual funding through 2020 to create safe routes to schools and active transportation pathways, including bike lanes, recreational trails, and sidewalks.²⁶ The Surgeon General issued a symbiotic Call to Action around walking and walkability in communities, which can guide states as they decide how to spend the money.²⁷
- **About \$100 million in federal funding for parks, gyms, and other recreation spaces was provided through Community Development Block Grants.** In addition, support flowing to states through another key mechanism rose slightly. The Land & Water Conservation Fund State Assistance Program, which over the past half century has provided matching funds to develop 40,000 state and local projects, disbursed \$45 million in 2015. This year, the commitment jumps to \$110 million, the most in more than a decade. The LWCF, however, is scheduled to expire in 2018.²⁸
- **Meanwhile, private and public investment in so-called "megafacilities" has grown.** In 2016, at least seven new, sprawling athletic complexes are due to open around the country, up from two in 2015, each costing between \$5 million and \$50 million. Most are placed in suburbs or rural areas and some have dozens of fields or courts. Developing sports tourism – tournaments catering to travel teams – is the objective.²⁹ Some facilities are setting aside inventory for underserved populations, but only those that build as much into the planning process, said Dev Pathik, CEO of Sports Facilities Advisory | Sports Facilities Management.



Challenge: Too much, too soon

6 | THE PLAY: DESIGN FOR DEVELOPMENT

From the *Sport for All, Play for Life* report:

If a local facility is the hardware in a child's sport experience, then a developmentally appropriate program is the software. Leading sport governing bodies recognize it as the organizing framework to deliver what kids need to grow as both athletes and people. Adoption of it is seen as a tool to stem attrition, advance physical literacy, and debunk misperceptions that parents and coaches have about athletic development.

Five developments:

- In January, the US Olympic Committee released guidance for stakeholders to implement its American Development Model (ADM). An essential document in encouraging best practices in youth sports, the ADM describes athlete development principles that “allow American youth to utilize sport as a path toward an active and healthy lifestyle, and create opportunities for athletes to maximize their full potential.”



Universal access for all athletes is the top priority, and stage one, for children ages zero to 12, is called Discover, Learn & Play. The new brochure offers specific guidance for five constituencies: national governing bodies, sport clubs, coaches, parents, and athletes. An ADM program for Paralympic athletes was also launched, supported by webinar tutorials.³⁰

- A handful of the 48 NGBs sanctioned by the USOC are taking the critical next step, creating sport-specific ADM frameworks. To date, the USOC has not required it as a condition of membership. The NGBs that have created their own frameworks include wrestling, hockey, basketball, tennis, skiing/snowboarding, rugby, soccer, volleyball, track and field, and weightlifting. Baseball, lacrosse, and football are in progress.³¹ The NCAA also hosted summits to bring together NGBs, coaches, sport scientists and others to develop “clear and inclusive pathways” in soccer, men’s basketball, and wrestling that support “wellness for life for all participants while allowing a pathway for elite sport development.”³² A women’s basketball summit is planned.

- Notably, NGBs advanced efforts to institutionalize small-sided play. Building on USA Hockey’s success with cross-ice hockey that divides a sheet of ice into three spaces and gets more kids on skates at lower cost per family, US Lacrosse recommended small-sided play from U7 to U15, starting with 3 V 3 play.³³ The US Soccer Federation went a step further and mandated such formats through U12, with kids moving from 4 V 4 to 7 V 7 to 9 V 9 as they age up.³⁴ Mandates from NGBs to affiliate youth-serving organizations have been rare, so observers are watching the move.

- More attempts are being made by NGBs to accredit programs, providing a Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval of sorts for those that meet national standards. One of the key efforts launched in 2015 was by USA Basketball, given that basketball is the top sport for kids and the Wild West landscape of the youth circuit. Teams, leagues, associations, camps, clinics, event operators, schools, clubs, and other groups can apply. For organizations with more than 30 coaches, it’s free.³⁵

- The nascent Sport-Based Youth Development (SBYD) methodology made strides in taking its place globally as a key agent in addressing a range of social issues, including health but also equity, crime reduction, and employability. UNESCO recognized as much in November 2015, adopting a revised International Charter on Physical Education, Physical Activity and Sport that has a more significant focus on sport as a tool for development and inclusion.³⁶

“The revised Charter ... highlights the benefits of physical activity, the sustainability of sport, the inclusion of persons with disabilities and the protection of children.”

- UNESCO revised charter

Challenge: Well-meaning but untrained volunteers
7 | TRAIN ALL COACHES

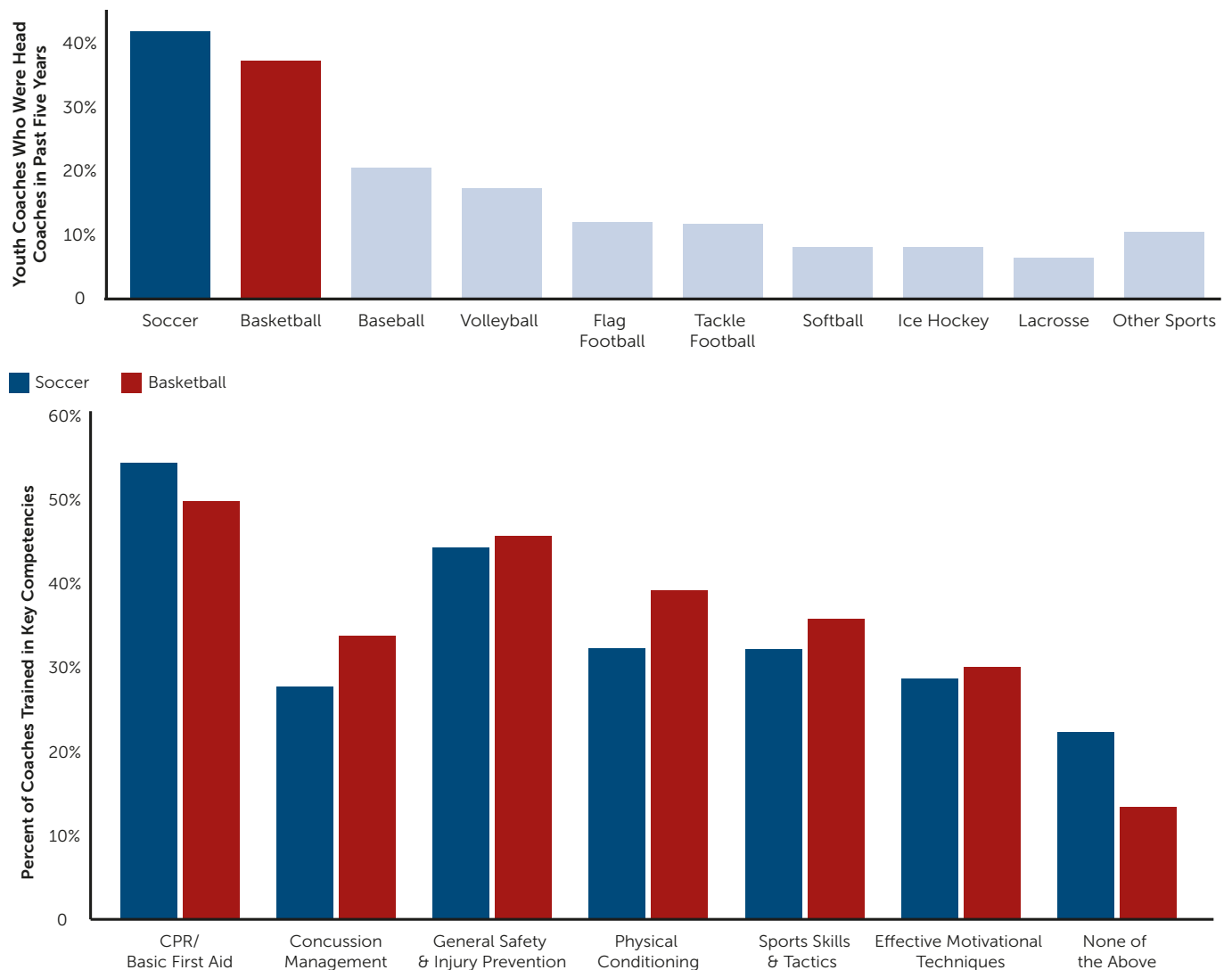
From the *Sport for All, Play for Life* report:

Coaches are the delivery mechanism for quality sport programming. They determine how much exercise occurs during practice. Research aggregated by the President’s Council on Fitness, Sports & Nutrition shows that good coaches also lower kids’ anxiety levels and lift their self-esteem. They help boys and girls enjoy the sport. They can make an athlete for life – or wreck enthusiasm for sport altogether. ... Trained coaches do best. One study found that only 5 percent of kids who played for trained coaches quit the sport the next year; the attrition rate was 26 percent otherwise.

Five developments:

- **The sport that’s made the most progress in growing the number of trained coaches is baseball**, according to SFIA data. In 2012, Little League Baseball began to focus on coach education, and MLB began helping a couple years later. Three in four baseball coaches remained untrained in motivational technique, and nearly two in three say they’ve received no training in skills and tactics. But the upward trend is important, as only soccer and basketball have more coaches. And those sports need help as well, as the below charts show.

FIG. 4 | SOCCER, BASKETBALL HAVE MOST YOUTH COACHES...BUT MOST REMAINED UNTRAINED

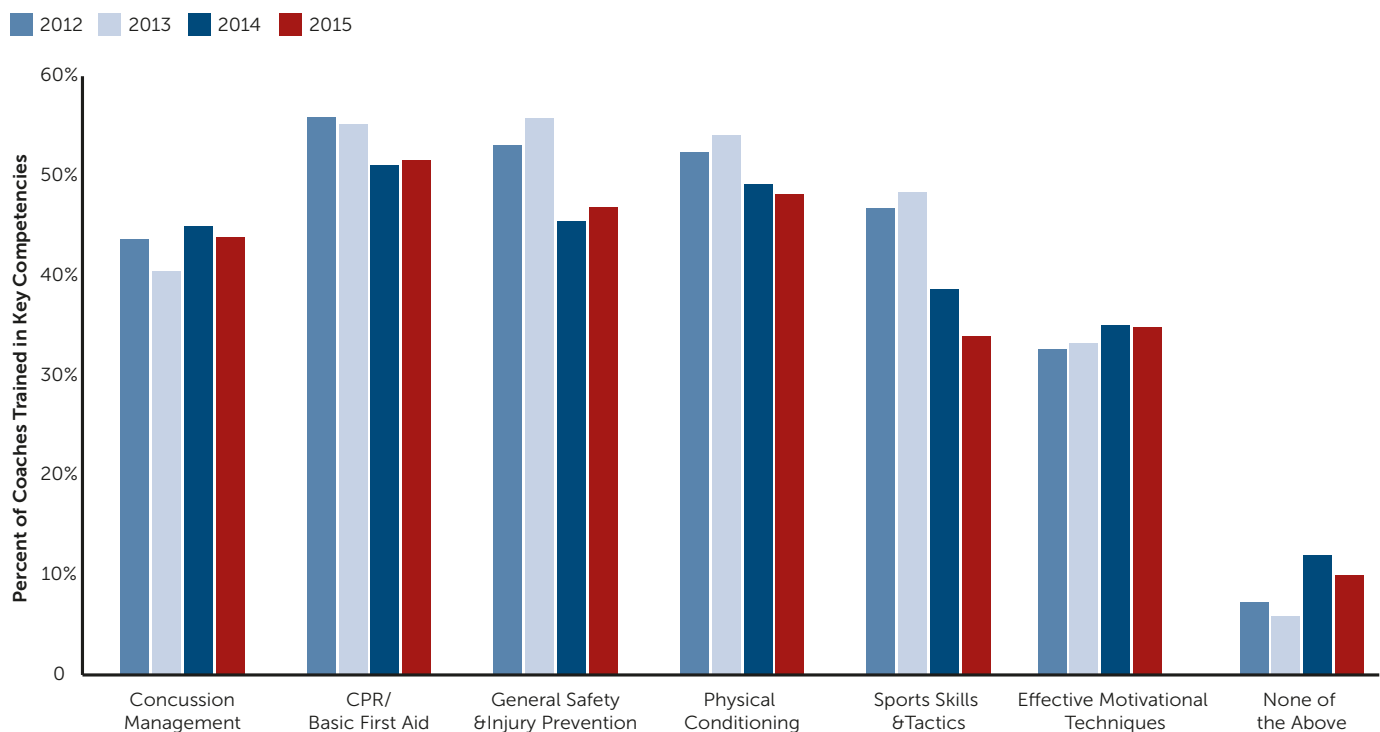


Five developments (cont'd):

- **The best-trained coaches in youth team sports are now in lacrosse** – ironic because it’s still new in many communities. In 2015, according to SFIA survey data, the game led the way with 55.6 percent of coaches trained in sport skills and tactics, and at least half of its coaches were trained in general safety and injury prevention, physical conditioning, concussion management, and CPR/first aid. More than 42 percent of coaches are trained in effective motivational technique, just below volleyball (43.8 percent). Only 1.3 percent of lacrosse coaches are not trained in any competency.
- **More organizations are creating coach training programs that offer all key competencies in one comprehensive package.** Among them: Minnesota Youth Athletic Services, which built the Trusted Coaches online program that includes a national background check, a concussion training course that follows CDC guidelines, a Double-Goal Coaching workshop administered by the Positive Coaching Alliance, and a first-aid seminar that addresses injury prevention, emergency treatment, hydration, and nutrition. We’re also seeing more training programs tailored to vulnerable populations, including kids with autism (Ascendigo Autism Services) and LGBTQ youth (Athlete Ally).
- **Youth coaches remain overwhelmingly male, from upper-income homes.** Despite the success of Title IX in introducing girls to sports over the past generation, only 27 percent of youth coaches were female in 2015 – as was the case every year back to 2012. And more than 45 percent of coaches had household incomes of \$100,000 or more last year. Only one in five coaches are from lower-income homes (\$50,000 or less).³⁷
- **The promise of deploying young, current athletes as youth coaches received a boost.** In Rhode Island, a training program for Olympic hopefuls and other elite runners, NE Distance, moved into Providence, having found success in a small-town pilot. It partnered with the school district to create seven track and cross country programs for middle school youth, allowing city kids to participate in a state meet for the first time in years.³⁸

FIG. 5 | TACKLE FOOTBALL

Percent of youth coaches trained in key competencies



Challenge: Safety concerns among parents 8 | EMPHASIZE PREVENTION

From the *Sport for All, Play for Life* report:

Among the many issues facing youth sports, injury risks trouble parents the most. The espnW/Aspen Institute Project Play survey showed that nine out of ten parents have safety concerns – and half of those describe safety as a major concern. Both mothers and fathers said that concussions are the most worrisome and one-quarter of parents have considered keeping a child from playing because of that. Football, by far, gave parents the most cause for concern. ... Youth sport organizations should err on the side of caution – and ultimately participation – and embrace policies that eliminate or greatly reduce head contact at the 12-and-under level.

Five developments:

- **Core participation in flag football grew last year for the first time in many years**, to 2.6 percent of children age six to 12, according to SFIA. Tackle football remained flat, at 3.3 percent (while total participants grew, in part due to a baby boom entering youth sports age after the 2008 peak year for births). Football officials celebrated the development after pouring considerable resources into promoting flag and safety measures in tackle. Participation remains down from 2008.
- **After the 2015 season, Pop Warner settled two lawsuits with families who blamed the nation's oldest youth football organization for playing a role in their sons' injuries.** One involved a former player who killed himself at 25; an autopsy found chronic traumatic encephalopathy, a brain disease caused by repeated head hits.³⁹ The other involved an athlete paralyzed on field at age 13. In that lawsuit, a judge rejected Pop Warner's argument that it could not be held responsible for local coaches failing to get trained in recommended tackling technique. The plaintiff's lawyer, Robert Carey, said, "Any governing body in the youth sports industry, especially those in contact sports, should be paying attention. In a football context, that means training coaches in tackling, at a minimum."⁴⁰
- In 2015, USA Football says it trained just under half of the nation's 270,000 youth football coaches in Heads Up Football, which promotes a tackling technique that leads with the shoulder.⁴¹ Still, **just one in three football coaches say they are trained in skills and tactics by any group, and only 43.8 percent say they have received training in concussion management** – no better than four years earlier (see chart on page 14).⁴² Minimal pressure is being exerted by municipal park and recreation departments to improve standards; a new University of Florida study found only one-third of them required coaches to be trained in concussion safety as a condition of using public facilities.⁴³
- **In the medical community, debate intensified over whether to move away from tackle football for children.** One study found that former NFL players who played football before high school were more likely to have thinking and memory problems as adults.⁴⁴ Another study found Heads Up Football training was only useful in reducing concussions when tied to leagues with practice contact restrictions.⁴⁵ When the movie *Concussion* was released, Dr. Bennet Omalu called for a ban on tackle football through high school.⁴⁶ The American Academy of Pediatrics issued a position paper saying there wasn't sufficient evidence yet to justify such a move, at any age level, instead calling for better coach training and expansion of flag football as an alternative. "Removing tackling would dramatically reduce the risk of serious injuries to players, but it would fundamentally change the sport of football," said co-author William Meehan.⁴⁷ Pop Warner later banned kickoffs.
- In other sports, the **US Soccer Federation banned heading for children 10 and under and limited the amount of heading in practice for children between the ages of 11 and 13**, while recommending affiliate organizations follow suit.⁴⁸ The move comes in the wake of the governing bodies for hockey and rugby banning body-checking and tackling, respectively, through age 12.





A CALL FOR LEADERSHIP

From the *Sport for All, Play for Life* report:

Project Play offers a conceptual framework that helps stakeholders from across sectors understand how they can work together to serve the interests of children, communities, and public health. We hope the strategies and ideas contained in this playbook inspire organizations and individuals to take meaningful actions. At the same time, we recognize that so much more can get done with a commitment to collective impact. As the Stanford Social Innovation Review has observed, large-scale social movements – systems change – require broad cross-sector collaboration.

THE FIVE CONDITIONS FOR COLLECTIVE IMPACT – AND KEY DEVELOPMENTS IN EACH OVER THE PAST YEAR:

1 | Common Agenda

The *Sport for All, Play for Life* playbook was nothing if not an act of forging a common agenda, with its eight strategies for the eight sectors that touch the lives of children, and vision of an America in which every kid has the opportunity to be active through sports. Like the grades issued in this report, the Project Play report was an act of crowdsourcing, the product of a lot of listening to more than 300 thought leaders (and kids) who shared insights, ideas and research at more than 10 roundtables over two years. At the launch summit for the report last year, Surgeon General Murthy said to the assembled stakeholders, “You have built a very powerful roadmap” for innovation and cross-sector collaboration.

Since then, more than 100 organizations – including 96 percent of attendees of the 2016 Project Play Summit who responded to a survey – say they have used the report to shape or inform their work. More than 30 groups have initiated commitments to action directly through our “What Our Play?” process. We’ve also seen an important shared action: The multi-sport endorsement by 45-plus sport, health and media bodies, codified the PSA mentioned earlier in this report (see Appendix A). More of those will be needed for the common agenda to deliver on its full promise as a tool of systems-level change.

2 | Shared Measurement System

At this year’s summit, one measure of success met with palpable enthusiasm: the percentage of children “active to a healthy level” through sports (see *The Numbers*, showing fewer than three in ten kids ages 6 to 12 and fewer than four in ten ages 13 to 17 reached that level in 2015). At the request of the Aspen Institute, the Global Obesity Prevention Center at Johns Hopkins fired up its modeling software and laid out the health and economic benefits if stakeholders can get just half of all youth active for 25 minutes, three times a week – not a crazy ask. The results: a projected 243,830 fewer overweight/obese youth, producing \$20 billion in medical costs saved and \$32 billion in productivity losses saved (see Appendix B).

Collective impact makes room for more than one metric of focus, though. Over the past year, SFI’s sport participation rates have increasingly come to be seen by sports industry leaders as a measure of success. The focus on participation rates was elevated with new research showing that playing sports as a child is the most important factor in developing fandom,⁴⁹ an insight that prompted new Major League Baseball Commissioner Rob Manfred to make youth participation – core and casual – a top priority. This is good: While health and other outcomes from playing sports, like character development, are key, no benefits can be delivered if kids aren’t in the game. Participation matters.

3 | Mutually Reinforcing Activities

Collective impact theory holds that no single intervention can produce population-level change, and encourages leaders to look for “silver buckshot instead of the silver bullet.”⁵⁰ A positive step in that direction was made in April 2016 at the TriBeCa Film Festival release of a documentary about a girls’ lacrosse team comprised of Native Americans. Dick’s Sporting Goods CEO Edward Stack hosted a pair of panels consisting of a who’s who of league, media, and apparel company chiefs, where ideas were floated on the roles that each organization or institution could play in getting more children involved in sports. ESPN President John Skipper highlighted his company’s ability to tell stories that stimulate dialogue, among other efforts. PGA Commissioner Tim Finchem called for more government support in addressing access gaps. NFL quarterback Tom Brady discussed how his family supported him when he was young, underscoring the opportunity for athletes to use their credibility to shape the behavior of sport parents. While the circle needs to expand to include other sectors, it was promising to see key actors begin thinking about how to engage. Deeper collaboration, inclusive of other sectors, was encouraged later that month with the release of the revised National Physical Activity Plan, which for the first time included recommendations for the sport sector.⁵¹

4 | Continuous Communication

Over the past year, news media coverage of the challenges and opportunities in play has grown significantly. Organizations that have explored the topics include *National Public Radio*, *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, “CBS This Morning,” *Bloomberg Business*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Sports Business Journal*, *USA Today*, *the Huffington Post*, *SI for Kids*, and *Parents Magazine*, plus an array of local outlets. Additionally, sports event coverage that raised awareness of marginalized populations grew, with ESPN televising the Special Olympics World Games for the first time and NBC committing to a record 70 hours of coverage of the Paralympics in Brazil. Social media facilitated communication on all topics. The Aspen Institute leveraged its channels in support, and fostered dialogue for 450 leaders at the 2016 Project Play Summit, while recognizing the need for stakeholders to gather more often via focused, in-person meetings. Process and relationships are essential to collective impact.

5 | Backbone Support Organization(s)

Just over a decade ago, the government ministry Sport Canada joined with industry and leading academics to help coordinate sectors and support an array of activities aimed at growing access to quality sport, with physical literacy as a chief aim. This year, good news rolled in: Childhood overweight/obesity rates in Canada are down 3.7 percentage points, and headed back toward the levels of the 1970s.⁵² In the US, where rates have leveled off but not gone down (30 percent), the National Physical Activity Plan called for sport organizations to “establish an entity that can serve as a central resource to unify and strengthen stakeholders in the sports sector,” with the goal of “promoting and sustaining a physically active population.” The Aspen Institute plans to advance dialogue on how any such an entity might be shaped. Meanwhile, it will partner with Under Armour in East Baltimore to create a community-level resource, developing knowledge that can help other urban, low-income areas grow sport participation. In the past year, coalitions in several cities and states (Houston, Colorado, New Orleans, Illinois, among others) have emerged or expanded activities to drive collective impact locally. However, not all of them have staff project managers, and endowed backbone organizations, like the LA84 Foundation, created with surplus from the ‘84 Olympics, remain rare.





NEXT

The first lady wore sneakers, like most of the other 450 attendees at the 2016 Project Play Summit. But from the moment she took the stage with her brother Craig Robinson and his ESPN colleague Michael Wilbon, it was clear the middle word in the ascribed dress code – sneaker business casual – would define her approach. In a conversation moderated by Wilbon, which started with all three reflecting on growing up in South Side Chicago, Michelle Obama issued a call to action for stakeholders to take bold next steps in building healthy communities through greater access to quality sport activity.

In doing so, Mrs. Obama effectively teed up five questions Project Play will advance in the next year. Below are those questions, and remarks by the first lady on related topics.

Q1 *Can the willpower be mustered to address the needs of our most vulnerable communities?*

“On the South Side, we had parks, and some of those parks (today) just haven’t been maintained. The sports fields don’t work, the swings are broken. ... So many communities are becoming play deserts. But in wealthy communities, there is a wealth of resources. You can be in field hockey, or you can learn how to swim. There are aquatic centers. I’ve seen the difference. The disparities are amazing to me. So are we saying that some kids are worthy of that investment in physical activity, and millions of others aren’t? What’s the role that we as a society have for making sure kids have equal access?”

Q2 *Can affirmative steps be taken to encourage more free or loosely structured forms of play?*

“If you put a bunch of kids out in a field today, I don’t think they would know what to do. We learned all these games – Steal the Bacon and Duck, Duck, Goose – all of these things you learned at recess and in P.E., which in – let’s remember, in a lot of urban settings, those opportunities, recess and gym, don’t exist anymore for kids. So where are they even learning how to organize themselves socially so that when you put them in a field, they actually aren’t looking at the grass, but they start to, like, organize themselves?”

Q3 *Can we give parents the tools to demand standards from programs, and connect them with the full array of local options – alternatives to programs ignoring best practice in athletic and child development?*

“There are communities that are more challenged because the streets have been overrun with crime, but there are still communities out there where it is safe enough for kids to go out to play. But now, you’ve got to make sure you have enough (available kids) because if everybody is in an organized sport, and if everybody’s time is structured and you’re the parent who’s trying to put play back in, you send your kids out to play and there’s nobody to play with, because everybody is booked. They’re scheduled. And that’s where the dilemma comes in – either you can’t play outside because it’s unsafe, or you’re the only kid playing outside because everybody else is over-specialized.”



Q4 *Can access to sport be elevated on the national agenda?*

“When we look at crime rates, it’s like, these are a bunch of bored kids that are unsupervised who don’t know how to play. We start there – then we give them a gun. ... And we wonder why they just go off on society. ... This has to become a priority in our society. We can’t just sort of think that, well, kids and play, I mean ... this isn’t my problem. This is all our problems. From the government to the military ... this affects all of us. ... So whatever the dollar figure is, as a society, as taxpayers and as corporate America, we should figure out how much that costs, and then pay for it. Period.”

Q5 *How deeply will the sports industry invest in developing its own pipeline?*

“We’re not developing our next level of fans and competitors. We are missing out on a whole generation of kids who could have been like me, who could have been like Craig, but they don’t even have the opportunity. ... So it becomes even more critical for the big sports companies to be those facilitators of those activities. Because if you look at it from a business standpoint, where is your fan base going to come from? If you’ve got girls who never see sports, if you’ve got kids who’ve never touched a basketball, who are you recruiting? And who’s going to watch the Olympics if kids don’t know what half these sports are?”



Full transcript, video of the 42-minute conversation with the first lady, Robinson, and Wilbon:

<http://aspenprojectplay.org/events/2016-project-play-summit>

APPENDIX B

HEALTH AND ECONOMIC BENEFITS OF PROGRESS

At the request of the Aspen Institute, the Global Obesity Prevention Center at Johns Hopkins University simulated the physical activity behavior of youth during the years of 2010 to 2020. Included were scenarios where 50 percent, 75 percent, and 100 percent of the youth meet the standard of “Active to a Healthy Level” (25 minutes of physical activity, three times a week) and 100 percent meet the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommendation (one hour of physical activity daily), compared to current physical activity trends, as reported by the Sports & Fitness Industry Association.

COMPARED TO CURRENT PHYSICAL ACTIVITY TRENDS, WHAT SAVINGS WOULD OCCUR IF...

	Fewer Overweight and Obese Youths	Direct Medical Costs Saved	Productivity Losses Saved	Years of Life Saved
50% OF YOUTH MAINTAIN ACTIVE TO A HEALTHY LEVEL	243,830	\$20 BILLION	\$32 BILLION	4 MILLION
75% OF YOUTH MAINTAIN ACTIVE TO A HEALTHY LEVEL	624,818	\$22 BILLION	\$38 BILLION	13 MILLION
100% OF YOUTH MAINTAIN ACTIVE TO A HEALTHY LEVEL	991,019	\$26 BILLION	\$43 BILLION	20 MILLION
100% OF YOUTH MAINTAIN CDC PHYSICAL ACTIVITY RECOMMENDATIONS	3,093,196	\$35 BILLION	\$57 BILLION	33 MILLION

Fewer Overweight and Obese Youths:

Number of additional youths dropping below 85 percent BMI percentile.

Direct Medical Costs Saved:

By reducing youth’s BMI, they will be less likely to develop obesity-related health conditions later in life (e.g., stroke, cancer, heart disease, and diabetes). Avoiding such conditions will save medical costs such as hospitalizations, medications, and doctors’ visits.

Productivity Losses Saved:

Avoiding obesity-related conditions will make people more productive (e.g., less sick days and longer lives), which will provide savings for businesses and society.

Years of Life Saved:

Avoiding obesity-related health conditions will also lengthen people’s lives.

Source: Global Obesity Prevention Center (GOPC), Johns Hopkins University, www.globalobesity.org

GOPC director: Bruce Y. Lee, MD, MBA, brucelee@jhu.edu

ENDNOTES

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Figures: All data represented in the charts and graphs in this report are based on data provided by SFIA at the request of the Aspen Institute.

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The Aspen Institute is a nonpartisan forum for values-based leadership and the exchange of ideas. Based in Washington, DC, the Institute also has campuses in Aspen, CO, and on the Wye River in eastern Maryland, and maintains offices in New York City and several other cities.

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www.SportsAndSociety.org

ABOUT PROJECT PLAY

An initiative of the Sports & Society Program, Project Play is a multi-stage effort to provide stakeholders with the thought leadership to help sport build healthy communities, starting with access to quality sport activity for all children.

www.ProjectPlay.us

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All editorial content in this report was created by, and is the responsibility of, the Aspen Institute Sports & Society Program. Data and insights were collected from an array of sources, including original research by the Sports & Fitness Industry Association, NCAA and ESPN, and online surveys filled out by 80+ thought leaders.

All video, news coverage and materials from the 2015 and 2016 Project Play Summits can be found at: www.ProjectPlay.us

Special thanks to the lead sponsors of the 2016 Project Play Summit, where additional insights were gleaned:



