

Incorporating Unstructured Free Play into Organized Sports

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ABSTRACT

PLAY IS AN ESSENTIAL ELEMENT OF POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT. YOUTH SHOULD ENGAGE IN ALL 3 TYPES OF PLAY (UNSTRUCTURED, SEMISTRUCTURED, AND STRUCTURED) TO BEST PROMOTE PHYSICAL LITERACY, MOTOR SKILL PROFICIENCY AND MUSCLE STRENGTH, LONG-TERM ATHLETIC DEVELOPMENT, AND FUN. UNFORTUNATELY, HOWEVER, EMPHASIS IS TOO OFTEN PLACED ON STRUCTURED PLAY, SUCH AS PLAYING ON A SPORTS TEAM, POTENTIALLY AT THE EXPENSE OF MOTOR SKILL MASTERY. OVERUSE, INJURY, AND DROPPING OUT OF SPORTS ARE POSSIBLE CONSEQUENCES OF SPORTS SPECIALIZATION. THIS ARTICLE DESCRIBES HOW PLAY POSITIVELY INFLUENCES ATHLETICISM AND LIFETIME PARTICIPATION IN PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND RECOMMENDS HOW TO BALANCE AND INTEGRATE FREE PLAY INTO SPORTS PRACTICE.

THE THREE TYPES OF PLAY

There exists a need for children approximately aged 6 to 11 or 12 years, and adolescents, approximately aged 11 or 12 to 18

years (collectively, youth) to increase and maintain physical activity levels (7,55). Physical activity for youth can be thought of in the context of the 3 types of play in which youth can engage: unstructured, semistructured, and structured play. Unstructured play can be defined as times when an adult is not structuring the interaction between youth (44). What separates unstructured play from other forms of play is that unstructured play is driven entirely by the youth and not the adult, giving rise to the term free play. Youth are in complete control and make all decisions such as what they play, how they play, and with whom they play. In this form of play, if an adult is present, it is only to observe the play, making sure the youth are safe and are abiding by the rules of safety—adults do not organize or structure the activities (35).

On the other end of the play spectrum is structured play. Organized sports such as football, basketball, baseball, etc. are most associated with this type of play. Structured play is regulated by adults, and adults determine how the youth interact. Adults dictate the progression of the activity, the rules, and virtually control every aspect of the youth's participation. Strength and conditioning programs are also typically structured, with the strength coach determining the warm-up protocol, the resistance training session, and the cool-down activities.

Semistructured play is the third form of play, which can be thought of as being in between the 2 previous forms of play along the play continuum. Like structured play, this form of play aims to accomplish a specific learning goal, albeit in a less structured and more youth-driven environment. An example of this form of play can be seen in many physical education classes. During such classes, the physical education teacher starts with a structured portion where the activity is demonstrated and explained followed by a portion where students will lead the activity with minimal intervention by the teacher. For instance, the teacher might start the class by demonstrating and explaining proper throwing and catching techniques, provide the students with objects of various sizes, and then introduce them to a game that involves throwing and catching. Then the teacher will step back and let the students play independently or in groups. In a strength and conditioning setting, the strength coach may have a series of warm-up drills and rotate which athlete picks which activity. For conditioning sessions where older trainees are grouped with younger ones, time can be integrated into the session for the older athletes to

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lead games that develop the fitness attribute(s) of the day.

The key differentiator between the 3 forms of play is the level of adult involvement and control (16,63). In structured play, it is the adults, not the youth, who make the rules and settle disputes (64). In unstructured play, it is the youth who make decisions about the rules and thus are given the chance to settle disputes on their own, learn to solve problems, and form relationships (30). The purpose of this paper is to compare the benefits and limitations of the different types of play, describe how play positively influences athleticism and lifetime participation in physical activity, and recommend how to balance and integrate free play into sports practice. For simplicity, the terms structured play/sports and unstructured play/free play will be used.

PLAY FROM YOUTH'S PERSPECTIVE

It is a generally accepted axiom that children are not miniature adults (51). Youth respond differently than adults to sports and exercise in physiological attributes such as cardiorespiratory fitness, neuromuscular adaptations, and motor skill abilities (46,47,49,56). Youth also have distinct psychosocial attributes that differ from adults in terms of sports and exercise participation, such as their methods and reasons for participating in and disengaging with a sport, self-efficacy, familial support systems, and types of play (41,43,67,71). Youth practitioners need to be aware of these physiological and psychological differences between youth and adults and how these differences necessitate emphasizing play for youth of all ages and abilities.

Structured and free play differ in the experience youth have during each of them. Csikszentmihalyi and Larson (18) found that youth experience the highest levels of intrinsic motivation during activity that takes place the furthest away from any adult control. Conversely, youth report the lowest levels of intrinsic motivation during times where adults

have complete control. This is important because in order for youth physical activity experiences to result in continued participation, their experiences need to be positive, and the activity has to be meaningful to them (18). This is especially important in strength and conditioning, where strength coaches are not only improving performance and reducing the risk of injury but also instilling in youngsters the intrinsic value of positive lifetime healthy habits.

At face value, it would seem that unstructured free play is the preferred method of play for youth. That does not mean, though, that we should reduce or eliminate youth sports and just let kids play on their own. In order for the experiences to be positive, the children must not only find the activity highly enjoyable, but it must require high levels of concentration and be challenging for them, resulting in them giving high levels of effort (36). Herein lies the benefit of offering both types of play. By combining the discipline and concentration required to follow adult-led instruction for skill development of structured play with the intrinsic motivation that is experienced when adults are not in complete control as in unstructured play, intentional integration of both types of play can simultaneously offer high levels of enjoyment, concentration, and effort.

ADULT PERCEPTIONS OF PLAY AND A SHIFT IN TYPE OF PLAY

Over time, there has been a decline in the amount of free, unstructured play in which children participate (30). Children have 12 percent less free time per week available to them when compared with 20 years ago (11). How children spend their free time has changed as well. There has been a 50 percent decrease in outdoor activities and a 25 percent decrease in free play overall (35,45,70). There is a host of factors that may have contributed to these shifts such as overpopulated neighborhoods, loss of community, societal overemphasis on sports, perceived unsafe neighborhoods, and single-parent families.

According to the results from the Lego Learning Institute (42), most parents

acknowledged and understood that play is a valid form of learning; however, not all forms of play were perceived the same. A significant number of the parents surveyed reported that they viewed the time a child spent in unstructured play as wasted time (42). On the other hand, the general consensus among most parents was that time spent in structured play, such as playing competitive sports, is important for children (42). This perception, that only structured play is valuable and that time spent in unstructured play is wasted time, has contributed toward the shift in how a child's time is spent in play and contributes toward the overall decline in free, unstructured play.

Play has transformed from child-organized pickup games to more adult-organized involvement in sport leagues or, in other words, has become more institutionalized (12). There is no question that youth sports are successful in America when measured by participation rates. In fact, youth sports participation is so big that it is impossible to know how big it is. There is no official census of youth sports participation, so available data are used, recognizing that the available data are flawed. Data collected by The Sports and Fitness Industry Association (76) showed that more than 21.5 million youngsters between the ages of 6 and 17 participated in youth sports in 2012. Ultimately, less of children's free time is spent involved in free play and instead is being spent in structured or educational activities (45). There is simply less play for the sake of play.

BENEFITS OF STRUCTURED AND UNSTRUCTURED PLAY

BENEFITS OF STRUCTURED PLAY

The benefits of participation in structured play include increases in health-related fitness, academic performance, social and cognitive development, enhanced self-esteem, emotional control, and greater educational aspirations (20,27,31,32,43,53). Participation in structured play, such as sport and resistance training, can help with the development of muscular fitness and

effective movement skills, which serve as the foundation for long-term athletic performance and lifelong physical activity (24). This is the major advantage of structured play over free play. It is necessary for youth to receive instruction, so that these foundational skills can be acquired. Simply moving and being active does not ensure proper development of fundamental skills. Qualified strength coaches, who understand pediatric exercise physiology and pedagogy, are critical to the success of young movers (46,48). Sports participation has also been shown to reduce stress and anxiety, incidence of risky behaviors, and depression (23,24,27–29,39,54). Social development, such as cooperation, teamwork, and conflict resolution all can be promoted through sports.

While sports participation is a means unto itself to improve fitness, socialization, conflict resolution skills, and positive youth development if coached properly (85), the global outcome of athletic readiness is to positively affect population health and wellness through purposeful participation in lifelong physical activity. Youth sport participation has been reported to positively track adult physical activity participation (75). Successful physical and psychosocial interventions such as integrative neuromuscular training (INT) (which is a conceptual exercise training model of strength and conditioning to improve health fitness, skills fitness, and fundamental motor skill development in youth) have been shown to improve motor skills and reduce movement deficits (57). Improvements in motor skills and self-efficacy lead to greater likelihood of engaging in lifelong physical activity (48,58). It is, therefore, incumbent on the strength and conditioning professional to properly integrate INT into the strength and conditioning program to help promote lifelong participation in physical activity.

BENEFITS OF UNSTRUCTURED PLAY

There are several distinct benefits of unstructured free play for child

development, including increasing intrinsic motivation for physical activity, allowing children to explore a variety of movements and physical activities without pressure from adults, and enhancing social-emotional learning (29). Côté et al. have postulated that unstructured activities, such as spontaneous skill practice in free time, youth-led pickup activities, and informal play, promote the development of innovation, creativity, adaptability, and flexibility, hallmarks of expertise in sport (15,16,19,25). The term deliberate play was coined to differentiate such unstructured activities from adult-led structured deliberate practice, indicating a shift in focus to child-led activities for enjoyment with the ability to adapt rules from the adult norms. Research on the impact of unstructured deliberate play on sport success suggests that, for children between the ages of 6 and 12 years, the amount of time children spend in unstructured play has a direct impact on continued success in sport (14,17,26). Bailey et al. (5) contend that periods of re-entry to sport are critical in the overall positive development of youth. Re-entry is a concept where intentional breaks from sports and sports seasons are included to provide deliberate play opportunities not only in one sport but in a variety of sports and games. Without providing youth opportunities to engage in deliberate, unstructured play, the multiple benefits of unstructured play on physical activity and sports participation will be diminished.

One of the important benefits of free play is that it functions as a mental break, which is necessary for individuals of all ages but notably valuable to youth because youth need these breaks more often than adults (13). A mental break is especially beneficial in situations where tasks are performed over an extended period of time such as classwork or sport-specific drills (13,63). Another benefit of participating in free play is that it creates a unique environment for children to learn and practice various social skills. When adults are not involved in the decision

making in play, youth are then empowered to work in groups, share, negotiate, and resolve conflicts (6,21,52,65,83). Without adult intervention in play, youth are able to learn decision-making skills, move at their own pace, and independently discover areas of interest to them (6,21,65). In addition to this, during free play youth develop their abilities to control their own cognitive and emotional processes, or to “self-regulate” (83). Self-regulation is an important part of child development and can serve as a predictor of a child’s academic achievement and their emotional well-being (86). Play also contributes to healthy brain development so much so that it has been recognized by the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights as a right of every child (28,66,74,79).

LIMITATIONS OF STRUCTURED PLAY AND UNSTRUCTURED PLAY

LIMITATIONS OF STRUCTURED PLAY

Although the benefits of sport participation are numerous, they are not guaranteed and often not achieved. Simply belonging to a sports team and participating during practices and games does not necessarily mean the activity levels are high enough to reap most of the health benefits and/or that the instruction is being delivered well to ensure youth development needs are being met (8). Although participation in structured sports has the potential to make significant contributions to the development of fundamental movement skills and physical competences, which are necessary precursors to lifelong participation in sporting activities, most youth sports teams use volunteer coaches who are often not adequately trained in youth development (8,40). Strength and conditioning professionals can be the source of proper methodology for movement skill and physical competency, and enhanced strength and conditioning.

Although they are not inherent risks, injury and athlete burnout leading to drop out are risks associated with the participation in youth sport, specifically

with early sport specialization (2,3,10,69,84). Specialization can be defined as intense, year-round training in one sport while excluding participation in other sports (38). Youth-specialized training centers, where children train exclusively in one sport year round, have become more common. Early sport specialization has been shown to increase the risk of injury and sport burnout, with the risk of injury being positively correlated with the degree of specialization (37). Furthermore, the risk of injury is increased when adult coaches encourage increased intensity in organized practices and competition rather than encourage unstructured free play (37). These overuse injuries have disenfranchised many youths from either starting or continuing to play and enjoy youth sports (9,32,73). For the strength and conditioning specialist, it is important to know how much time is being spent in structured sports when designing the strength and conditioning program to minimize the additional risk of overtraining.

When youth are members of these intense structured programs and become specialized athletes, there is very little to almost no time spent in unstructured or semistructured play. This creates an environment in which youth are more focused on the rules and their performance as opposed to simply enjoying playing. Early sport specialization intensifies this feeling so youth become more invested in the outcome of a game and as a result, they are more devastated when they lose. One survey found that 70% of participants dropped out of youth sports by the age of 13 mostly because playing was no longer fun (71).

With so much time spent at these centers, children have less time available to them to meet in a public space such as a park, and participate in pickup style games with their peers. This shift of early sports specialization being emphasized over free play can get compounded by other family and school obligations, which may lead to the overscheduling of the child's life.

While some children may be able to excel under these circumstances, some children fall victim to the effects of overscheduling such as depression and stress, among other health issues (42).

As mentioned earlier, volunteer youth sport coaches are often not properly trained in the development of readiness to participate in sport, and this, compounded with other factors such as limited space and resources, inappropriate expectations, and coach-to-child ratios, results in children not being engaged enough, feeling bored, and ultimately ending up less likely to remain interested and motivated to be active and continue developing motor skills leading to dropout and stopping physical activity all together (8).

LIMITATIONS OF UNSTRUCTURED FREE PLAY

Although the benefits are wide ranging, especially in areas outside of physical activity and health, there are limitations. Free play alone is not challenging enough to keep participation. As mentioned previously, the form of play must provide experiences that are both highly enjoyable and require high levels of concentration and challenge. Free play alone does not provide an experience that is challenging enough to require youth to exert high levels of effort (18).

In addition to its limitations regarding motivation, it also does not guarantee appropriate motor skill development. Motor skill development is age-related, not age-determined (60,72). In other words, many 5-year-olds can perform the locomotor skill of skipping (age-related), but not all 5-year-olds can skip just because they are 5 years old (age-determined). Without instruction, motor skill development is unlikely to occur during unstructured play.

The concept illustrated above underscores the need for qualified youth practitioners, especially during the neuroplastic formative elementary school years, when motor skills need to be taught and reinforced (59).

Strength and conditioning specialists have a unique opportunity to help children develop motor skill mastery and movement competence, precursors of athleticism. Teaching and reinforcing correct exercise technique is critically important at this stage of youth development. As children approach adolescent awkwardness, it is theorized that developmentally appropriate instruction in fundamental motor skills should continue to be emphasized in semi-structured and structured play because adolescents get accustomed to their new bodies (68). Throughout their experience in K-12 physical education, strength and conditioning, and youth sports, therefore, students need to be instructed in fundamental motor skills and guided to discover how to apply motor skills in a variety of sports and physical activities, in keeping with the basic tenets of physical literacy (87).

CONCEPTS THAT NURTURE BOTH TYPES OF PLAY

PHYSICAL LITERACY

In terms of promoting lifetime physical activity, play contributes to the accumulation of the international recommendation of 60 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity for all school-aged youth (89). Play also enhances physical literacy by promoting developmentally appropriate play in a variety of sports and activities, on a variety of surfaces, under a variety of conditions (87). The concept of physical literacy postulates that without development of the physical capacities (balance, coordination, flexibility, agility, control, precision, strength, power, endurance, and the ability to move at different speeds and distances), the ability to interact with the world would be restricted (87).

Central to the concept of physical literacy is the understanding that it is a constant journey in which every individual has the capacity to continue to improve and enrich their lives physically, mentally, socially, and emotionally. Because this proficiency of movement is unique to each youth's own level of ability, young people

may experience different potential outcomes as they relate to the context of sport and physical activity participation. Some youth may choose to participate in competitive sports and end up becoming elite athletes, whereas others may choose to participate on a recreational level or, as recent data indicates, not at all (41). But within the concept of physical literacy, the intended outcome for all youth is to value and take responsibility for maintaining purposeful physical activity pursuits throughout their life. Therefore, it is incumbent on all physical educators, coaches, strength and conditioning professionals, facilitators of physical activity and parents to support physical literacy and provide youth every opportunity to develop their physical capacities so that they can ultimately enhance their quality of life.

To promote a lifelong approach to physical literacy, experts recommend that physical education and youth sports curriculum adopt a long-term, periodized approach (48). The sequential annual curriculum should include targeted athletic development training which includes INT (22). Properly structured lessons in physical education are the only opportunity that all school-aged children receive, where certified physical education teachers provide planned, structured, and managed lessons to support physical literacy and a long-term developmental process (88). Physical activity through a combination of free play, guided play, and structured play helps children develop not only movement competence but also decision making, language, and social skills (51). Strength and conditioning professionals have a tremendous opportunity to work with youth in after-school programs, assist physical educators during the school day, and work with coaches and teachers to track youth physical literacy through childhood and adolescence.

LONG-TERM ATHLETIC DEVELOPMENT

Long-term athletic development suggests fundamental motor skills and all

fitness attributes are trainable across childhood and adolescence (48). Therefore, a planned, systematic long-term progression of skills and abilities for sports, fitness, strength and conditioning, physical education, and physical activity that matches the endowment of each youth would lead not only to better performance by those with that endowment but improved health and wellness for the entire population (48,87). The Composite Youth Development (CYD) model outlined by Lloyd et al. (48) presents a model to improve all health-fitness and skills-fitness attributes. The CYD provides a holistic approach to positive youth development for all children and adolescents with a strong emphasis on designing physical conditioning programs that emphasize general physical preparation and the development of gross movement skills. CYD offers a comprehensive approach for multi-sport participation, physical activity, fun activities, and structured play to develop athleticism for all aspiring young athletes (48).

POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT- FOCUS ON YOUTH

The number one reason youth participate in play is because it is fun, and evidence suggests that nearly 70% of participants dropped out of youth sports by the age of 13 mostly because playing was no longer fun (71). Fun has been proposed as the delicate balance between challenge and skill, and that the challenge should be matched to their abilities (82). Therefore, it is incumbent on all youth practitioners to create a variety of play environments that help all youth develop the strength and motor skills needed to promote the 3 types of play throughout the life course. Lack of strength and motor skills in youth contributes to sports injury, burnout, and discontinuation of participation in sport and physical activity (1).

A DEVELOPMENTAL APPROACH FOR CHILDREN

Using a developmental participation approach, all children should be

exposed to a variety of movement patterns, fundamental motor skills, and health- and skills-fitness instruction. In a youth-focused delivery model for children, youth sport would not need to be structured for all ages according to sport season with focus on the fundamentals of that sport, but rather would be part of the process of showcasing ability in the aforementioned skills and how they apply across a broad spectrum of sports and physical activities. For example, a system whereby a specific skill such as deceleration is taught to all children, then reinforced during drills, skills, and play (free and structured/competitive) where each child can demonstrate progressive levels of proficiency in application of deceleration for invasion games (stopping before attacking the net), running games (stopping at second base), or chasing games (stopping before overrunning an opponent), could be applied in a variety of settings and across all sport domains. Featured contests for any sport could be offered at any time, without obligation for specific uniforms, seasons, etc. (reminiscent of elementary school "Field Day"). This type of program model also de-emphasizes sport as the primary focus while at the same time promoting nationally recognized guidelines for intramural programs and for finding the right sport and after-school physical activity (61). This approach also supports preliminary work on sport as positive youth development (27).

A DEVELOPMENTAL APPROACH FOR ADOLESCENTS

At the high school level, youth can begin to consider which sport most interests them. According to SHAPE America (62), youth can begin to specialize in one sport around the age of 15 for maximum positive physical and psychosocial development. Therefore, a two-tiered model is recommended: one program for those students with specific interest in more competitive sports and another program that is more intramural in nature to encourage lifelong participation in sports and

physical activity. To meet the nation's goals for all youth to participate in 60 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity on most, if not all, days of the week, a complete restructuring of how youth sports are offered, promoted, and instructed, is recommended (33,89).

INCORPORATING FREE PLAY INTO STRUCTURED PLAY

Côté et al. (15) found that youth sport structures that included both aspects of play tended to be the most favorable regarding children's motivation for continued participation. Institutions of structured play can promote physical literacy through youth sports by integrating free play into organized sport. The goal of structured and unstructured play is to develop athletic potential within each child's given level of endowment, and translate that athletic potential into lifelong physical activity. Therefore, it is essential that youth sports programming is cognitively, physically, and socially appropriate for the age of the child by integrating the benefits of free play into sport, including setting aside time during practices for free play and self-testing by youth without adult direction. Instead of focusing on sport competition for children, the focus should instead be on improving the child's ability to move with competence and confidence in a wide variety of physical activities in multiple environments, or physical literacy (50).

The U.S. Soccer Federation report, *Best Practices for Coaching in the United States*, urged soccer coaches to create less structured play, stating that organizing less, saying less, and allowing the players to do more, will be more helpful toward their development (81). Portland City United Soccer Club is currently taking this advice and offering pickup style games of soccer to children where the kids play street soccer, explore the game, and play on their terms (4). Once a week, kids are invited to come play free of charge. Parents are restricted from the area.

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS FOR INCORPORATING FREE PLAY INTO SPORTS PRACTICE

- Adjust the amount of time the child spends in structured play by their age – youth should not participate in structured play (sport) more hours per week than their age. For example, a 10-year-old should spend no more than 10 hours per week playing on a sports team (80).
- Do not exceed the recommended structured play to unstructured play ratio of 2:1 (37). In the example above, the same 10-year-old would play 5 hours per week in unstructured play. Especially during the neuroplastic formative years, this suggestion should give parents and coaches pause when overscheduling youth sports. To comply with the universally recommended 60 minutes per day of physical activity (89), a coordinated approach to physical activity, tracking minutes of the forms of play during physical education, recess, sports, and free play is recommended.
- Include free play events at the strength and conditioning training facilities. For instance, have nights where the youth get to decide what they play and how they play it. During these events, there should be minimal adult supervision (no parents, just staff for safety). For example, youth might choose to play variations of tag such as sharks and minnows. These games can be used as a positive reinforcement tool. Instead of punishing bad performance with exercise, use free play time to reward desired performance and effort. Although at face value this might seem to be just for fun, during these games, such as sharks and minnows, youth will also be training skills such as agility and acceleration.
- Focus all programming to be child-centered. Meaning, the development of physical literacy and fundamental motor skills should be emphasized more than winning.

Make sure children sample various sports becoming multisport athletes, and that time spent in these sports is age appropriate.

• Hit the TARGET (77)

Task—use a variety of tasks that are challenging, interesting, and meaningful; tasks need not be the same for all athletes

Authority—allow your athletes to get involved in making some of the decisions; give them a choice in which tasks or drills to work on

Recognition—use private recognition for individual accomplishments so that you are not inviting social comparison

Grouping—group athletes heterogeneously for drills

Evaluation—stress evaluation based on individual success and achievement of individual goals rather than using social comparison

Timing—not all athletes learn skills at the same pace; allow adequate practice and playing time for even the least skilled

• Teach Games for Understanding (78)

Instead of emphasizing specific movement technique, focus on the development of getting a tactical understanding of the sport.

Practice sport skills by playing modified versions of the sport and games that will enhance the understanding and awareness in full-game contexts.

Emphasize appreciation of the game itself as opposed to simply focusing on winning the game.

Encourage tactical awareness so that the children learn to solve problems posed in the game and to gain relevant knowledge for performance. This initial emphasis is followed by developing decision making, which leads to knowing what to do and how to do it in relation to specific tactical situations.

Assess skill execution and performance by observing the outcomes of decisions as they are executed by the children during actual game.

• Set aside time for youth to invent and explore. Allow them to create their own version of the sport. They can make changes to the rules of the existing game, play a different

position, or change the structure of the game entirely.

- Have a family night at the training facility where the youth can teach their parents and guardians the new versions of the games they created, and everyone can play it together.

CONCLUSION

In the United States, along with several other developed nations, children's free play has declined significantly, although for some of these children structured activities have been steadily increasing. This is a mistake. Free and unstructured play is healthy and essential for children. It is cognitively stimulating and helps children develop intrinsic interests, follow rules, learn to solve problems and make decisions, exert self-control, learn to regulate their emotions, and form friendships. This is not to suggest that structured play does not have a purpose. To the contrary, structured play offers several benefits of its own and should also be a part of a child's development. However, it is the authors' contention that structured play currently is valued more than free play, resulting in children not participating in it as often. If optimal childhood development is the goal, then there needs to be a better balance between the various forms of play on the spectrum (11).

Each structure of the play continuum offers unique benefits for youth development. Structured play, particularly through strength and conditioning preparation for sport, delivers learning of motor skills that serve as the foundation of movement, the development of sport-specific skills, discipline, and teamwork (36). On the other side, unstructured free play delivers ownership, empowerment, leadership skills, and planning skills (36). By incorporating more free play into sports practice sessions, youth will increase the likelihood of gaining quality learning experiences that are critical for long-term physical activity and sport participation (36).



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