

Oregon Outreach

Youth Soccer and Positive Youth Development

The primary goal of the Oregon Outreach initiative is to increase the participation of Latino youth and families in youth development activities offered or supported by the OSU Extension Service. Engaging a new audience often requires offering new programs and creating new approaches, although the ultimate goal is establishing a fully inclusive county and state 4-H program (Hobbs, 2004). Youth soccer is an example of a new project that is “a good fit” for Oregon Outreach efforts to reach Latino youth and families. Here are some reasons:

- To be successful, programs need to have participants. An effective way to generate participation is to offer programs that are of interest to the target audience. Soccer is the “number one” sport in Mexico and Central and South America, as well as in the Latino population of Oregon. Parents and children are enthusiastic about opportunities for youth to be involved in organized soccer activities.
- At the same time, many schools do not have soccer programs and participation in available out-of-school soccer leagues is expensive. The cost is especially prohibitive when families have several children interested in participating. Oregon Outreach can offer a safe, affordable, and positive youth development environment for soccer participation.
- A youth soccer program is culturally appropriate for the target audience. Program activities capitalize on interest that is culturally bound, attract the involvement of parents and other family members as spectators and volunteers, and provide positive same-culture adult role models in coaches, program staff, and other program supporters.
- Participation in sports, including soccer, offers benefits that are consistent with elements of positive youth development promoted by the Oregon 4-H program. Additionally, the physicality of the soccer experience supports the need for youth exercise and fitness as advocated in the emerging national agenda related to youth health and obesity.
- A 4-H soccer program provides visibility in the local Latino community and a way of introducing 4-H and the OSU Extension Service to the Latino population. Successful experiences with soccer can generate interest in other aspects of 4-H and provide access to other program possibilities for Latino families.

Factors relating to the outcome benefits of youth soccer are examined on the following pages. This is not a definitive study, but a brief overview of current and relevant research and evaluation (including secondary analyses when original studies are not readily available.) It is intended as an in-house document to provide a context for the implementation and evaluation of Outreach soccer activities.

Benefits of Participating in Youth Sports

An estimated 22 million children and youth, ages 6 to 18, are involved in organized sports outside of school (Poinsett, 1996). Results of research and evaluation studies relating to youth sports (both in- and out-of school) have been compiled and analyzed by the American Sport Education Program (1994). Highlights of these findings (also confirmed in more recent studies) indicate that sports participation helps youth to:

- Improve physical skills and build an appreciation of personal health and fitness. (As well as lay the foundation for adult health and health behaviors [Preventive Medicine, (2002)])
- Develop a sense of personal competence and a positive self image (believing oneself to be capable, significant, successful, and worthy).
- Develop social skills and competencies (including sportsmanship and other positive behaviors), such as getting along with others; developing friendships; cooperating with and supporting teammates; respecting coaches, officials, and other players; and learning to work as a team. (Includes concerns with “bad language”.)
- Learn how to handle winning and losing, success as well as disappointment (includes gracious winning as well as developing resiliency by accepting losses and moving on).

Most of the studies involved self-reported data relating to the development of social skills and positive self image. Exercise benefits were often considered as common sense “givens” for those who participated actively and often—mostly because of difficulties in monitoring and isolating physical changes that can be attributed to program participation rather than natural maturation or other possible factors. Physical benefits also tended to be examined in retrospective evidence of adult recollections of youth sports involvement correlated with assessments of current physical activity levels (Preventive, 2002). (These observations also seem to hold true for more recent research and evaluation.)

None of these studies examined the possible influence of cultural factors. Also, there appears to be little or no strong evidence linking sports activity to improved academic performance. (Again, observations confirmed in more recent research.) A couple of small health-related studies have shown that youth who play sports are less likely to become involved in risky behavior (sex and drugs) and have less depression and anxiety (Engle, 2005). [Editorial note: Or maybe youth prone to anxiety and depression are less likely to play soccer?]

The most reliable predictor of gains and benefits seems to be the degree of participation and experience—in other words, as one might expect, benefits are most pronounced for older youth and for youth who have accumulated the most hours (or years) of program participation. Another strong factor is socioeconomic status. In a related study (Marsh, 1992) found that the positive association between youth participation and benefit outcomes appears to be stronger for youth in low-income than those in middle income households, possibly because the alternatives for lower income families are more limited in terms of cost and availability.

Age-Appropriateness

Age and mental/physical development are key considerations in planning for success in youth sports programs. Sports scientists (Frank, Freigang; both undated) emphasize that sports participation for younger children (K-6) should be focused on fully engaged physical activity, trying progressively difficult challenges as performance improves, interacting with friends, and having fun rather than competition. They further advise that correction and criticisms should be held to a minimum.

Older youth, through maturation and experience, become capable of understanding sport tactics and strategies as well as other elements of challenge, competition, and teamwork. However, fun, enjoyment, and “doing your best” should still be emphasized over winning.

An extensive review of research relating to motivation and youth sports (Whitehead, 1993) includes several studies reporting that young athletes cite fun as their primary motive for participation. Further evidence indicated that this feeling for fun depends on experiencing the intrinsic satisfactions of skill improvement, personal accomplishment, and excitement, rather than being the result of extrinsic factors such as winning, receiving rewards, or trying to please others.

The Influence of Parents and Coaches

Children learn how to assess their *social competence* in sports through feedback received from parents and coaches. *Positive self image* (or *self esteem*) is developed through accumulated experiences and involves both the evaluation of one’s own abilities as well as the evaluation of responses received from others, including peers. Children actively observe parent and coach responses to their performances by looking for signs (often nonverbal) of approval or disapproval. A lack of feedback is often interpreted by youth to be a negative response. (Ewing, 1997).

Coaches and parents can sometimes lose sight of the program’s overall objectives and get caught up in a winning-is-everything orientation. While it would be naive and unrealistic to believe that winning is not an important part of sports participation (for older youth involved in competition), it is important to maintain a balance between an emphasis on youth development and an interest in winning. Many (if not most) youth sports programs advocate and reinforce this “child-centered” concept in training coaches, communicating with parents, and orienting participants. Examples of content, materials, and other relevant resources are readily available online and in various curriculum guides for youth sports programs (see the References section).

It’s important to note, however, that positive development and winning are not mutually exclusive. Research shows that coaches who are most liked and most successful in promoting self-esteem have win-loss records that are about the same as coaches who are less liked and less effective in fostering feelings of self-worth (Smoll & Smith, 2002).

Summary and Implications

Organized soccer activities offer opportunities for positive youth development that are consistent with the Oregon 4-H program. Soccer provides exercise, promotes fitness, and offers a context for developing social competencies and enhancing self esteem. Soccer is particularly appropriate as an Outreach project because of its high popularity with the Latino population and its appeal as a fun, family-friendly activity. The low cost of participating in Outreach soccer is also an attractive feature since many in this population have low incomes. Additionally, soccer can give visibility to 4-H in the Latino community and serve as a “hook” for further participation.

The roles and behaviors of parents and coaches are highly influential in helping young athletes interpret their sports performance within the context of program goals. It is strongly advisable that program staff advocate a child-centered philosophy that emphasizes personal development, positive behavior, and age-appropriateness. Elements of this philosophy can be incorporated into coaches’ training, parent communication, and participant orientation—numerous examples are available online. In all these efforts, cultural factors need to be considered.

The implications for evaluating the **outcome benefits** of Outreach soccer activities include:

- Since the primary predictor of benefits gained through sports is the extent of participation, it would be foolish to ignore the numbers. Relevant data would include the number of participants, the number of contact hours, and the number of youth continuing in the program. Data sources would be project staff and coaches.
- Benefit outcomes identified and/or reinforced through previous research and evaluation offer direction for Outreach evaluation efforts. These would include attention to specific aspects of positive behavior, personal competencies, and self esteem, with possible data sources including older youth, parents (particularly of younger youth), and coaches. These sources could also provide data relating to the improvement of physical skills and abilities and personal health and fitness. Another possible source might be trained observers who would note behavior occurring in teams over the course of the season (instances of good sportsmanship, bad language, etc.).

Implications for evaluating **program implementation** are also suggested by the research, as well as the context of the Outreach project:

- Programs that are considered most successful involve advocating a child-centered approach, age appropriate activities, and a healthy balance of youth development and interest in winning. How are these factors being addressed with coaches, parents, and participants (training, communications, orientation, etc.)? Sources would be project staff.
- Outreach strategy identifies soccer activities as a way of providing visibility for 4-H in the Latino community with the idea of building awareness and trust, as well as generating more participation of youth and families. How is this issue being addressed locally (“4-H” identified on printed materials, banners, uniforms; participants invited to other 4-H activities; volunteers recruited, etc.)? Sources would be project staff and enrollment data.

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Related Websites

www.soccer.org/. Site for the American Youth Soccer Organization. Lots of information, including a Player's Code relating to sportsmanship and a Code of Conduct for Parents.

www.kidsfirstsoccer.com and www.footy4kids.co.uk offer a variety of soccer resources and address numerous soccer-related topics.

Curriculum Guides

The following two curriculum guides address all youth sports (not just soccer) using a child-centered approach. Both are available for purchase.

You're the Athlete is a 4-H project produced by the Ohio State University Extension Service. It provides current, research-based information along with experiential learning activities to help participants develop knowledge, attitudes, skills, and aspirations in eight areas—goal setting, sportsmanship, time management, nutrition and sports, strength and conditioning, athletes as leaders, conflict resolution, and careers in athletics. Participants can explore all eight areas or focus on only one or two. Curriculum activities are designed for youth ages 11-14 and the adults who work with them. This 150-page guide is a for-sale publication. For more information about the project, or to order copies, check online at www.ohio4h.org/adult/athlete.htm.

Putting Youth Back into Sports is an extensive training curriculum created for Extension educators and sports organizations by the Cooperative Extension Services in South Dakota and Pennsylvania. The curriculum package consists of a large-ring “train the trainer” curriculum notebook with activities and handouts, sample copies of promotional materials, sample press releases, and a CD of PDF files to print your own graphics. Module I of the curriculum focuses on youth development and how developmental issues relate to youth sports experiences. Module II addresses how parents and coaches can help youth benefit from sports. Module III considers the role of communities in promoting a healthy environment for youth sports. Each module is divided into sections that provide an overview of current research issues, identify possible problem areas, and provide practical suggestions for promotion a fun and positive sports experience for youth. Each section also contains activities and handout that are designed for use in workshops with parents, coaches, or other adults involved in youth sports.

Also available is a smaller spiral-bound “community curriculum” version (100 pages) that is intended for use as a self-directed study guide for parents, coaches, sports organizations, volunteers, and others interested in youth sports. For more information, or to order materials, check online at <http://sdces.sdstate.edu/youthinsports/index.html>.