

WHAT TO AIM FOR IN YOUTH PROGRAMS

FOR KIDS (AGES 6-12) WHO PLAY SPORTS

If you're a parent or caregiver, your favorite athlete is probably the one you're raising. Ten questions to ask of yourself, your child and local programs to make sports a great experience:

- 1. HAVE I ASKED MY CHILD *WHY* THEY WANT TO PLAY SPORTS?**

Is it to have fun with classmates? Be tested at the highest level competitively? What do they want to get from the activity? Finding the right program starts with understanding a child's social-emotional needs.
- 2. HAVE I ASKED MY CHILD WHICH SPORTS INTEREST THEM?**

Most kids get funneled into the same small handful of sports. But there are 120 of them offered across the U.S., with programs that might just be a few miles away. There's a sport for every kid. Explore the options with them.
- 3. DO I ENCOURAGE UNSTRUCTURED AND LOOSELY STRUCTURED PLAY?**

Michael Jordan had a "love of the game" clause in his NBA contract that allowed him to play pickup hoops. Build the same ethos into your kid's experience so it's not all organized competition. Give kids equipment, and get out of the way.
- 4. DOES MY CHILD'S PROGRAM PROMOTE MULTI-SPORT PARTICIPATION?**

As early as grade school, your child may get pressure to focus on playing one sport year-round. Research on child and athletic development rejects this approach. Ask program leaders how they'll make room for playing other sports.
- 5. ARE THE COACHES TRAINED IN KEY COMPETENCIES TO WORK WITH KIDS?**

The best programs mandate training in coaching philosophy/methods, sport skills & tactics, and safety protections including First Aid and CPR (and, in collision sports like football and hockey, concussion management).
- 6. DOES THE PROGRAM EMBRACE SMALL-SIDED, AGE-APPROPRIATE PLAY?**

Kids are not miniature adults. Six isn't even 16. Children learn better and have more fun when play spaces, equipment and the number of participants on the field/court/ice are modified to their level. Small rosters help, too.

7. DOES THE PROGRAM OFFER AN APPROPRIATE PRACTICE-TO-GAME RATIO?

Kids want access to the action. You want them to be physically active, while also minimizing the costs and time allocated to away-game transportation. The best programs understand that development mostly occurs in training. At least two practices for every game is best.

8. DOES THE PROGRAM ENCOURAGE EQUAL PLAYING TIME?

There's a time for programs to sort the weak from the strong in sports. It's not before kids grow into their bodies, minds, and interests. Through age 12, at least, programs should invest in every kid equally. That includes playing time.

9. DOES THE PROGRAM SYSTEMATICALLY SEEK FEEDBACK FROM KIDS AND PARENTS?

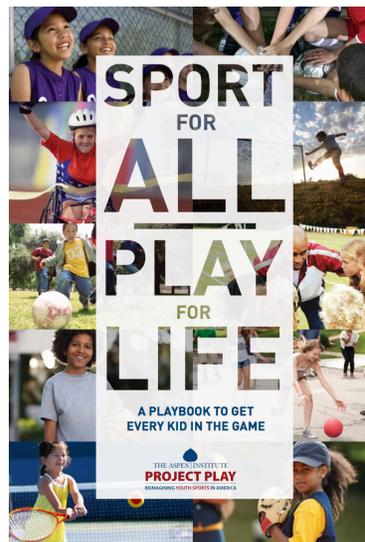
A simple online survey is easy enough to create and send at the end of the season, collecting insights that can be shared with program leadership to improve quality and foster retention. Honor the programs that honor input.

10. DOES THE PROGRAM MAKE EFFORTS TO FOSTER PHYSICAL LITERACY?

Physical Literacy is the ability, confidence and desire to be active for life, with an emphasis on fundamental movement skills – not just sport-specific skills. Learning to move well can open access to dozens of sports.

SCORE/BOXES CHECKED:

- 9-10 = Ideal scenario for kids
- 6-8 = Solid foundation
- 3-5 = Much more can be done
- 1-2 = Much more should be done



Questions distilled from *Sport for All, Play for Life: A Playbook to Get Every Kid in the Game*, by the Aspen Institute's Project Play, which developed its framework with input from 300+ thought leaders.

Additional experts and resources were consulted in the development of the checklists. Background on and resources supporting the checklists are at: www.projectplay.us