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BOYS IN SPORTS

Challenges, Opportunities, and Recommendations
for Delivering on the Promise of Sports for Boys

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Research from the [American Institute for Boys and Men \(AIBM\)](#) reveals how too many boys and men are struggling at school, at work, and in their families and communities. Sport has a long history in the U.S. as a site of social and personal development, particularly for boys. Upon seeing declines in boys' participation rates, the [Aspen Institute Sports & Society Program](#) partnered with AIBM to better understand boys' experiences in sports today and offer ideas on how to deliver on the promise of sports for their development.

Investigating the Experiences of Boys in Sports

This work aims to understand the sports experience for adolescent boys, in order to identify areas of potential action for increasing access, improving retention, and delivering a quality experience. We conducted focus groups across a spectrum of teenage boys that included those that play sports, quit playing sports, and never played sports. We also conducted interviews with experts, analyzed boys' responses (ages 10-17) to our national youth survey, and cross-checked themes with industry reports and academic research.



Challenges and Opportunities for Boys in Sports

1. Boys Value Sports for Connection, Fun, and Personal Growth

“I was with my friends. So it wasn’t really boring... it’s always fun.” – Simon, H.S. Senior

Our research highlighted the benefits that boys reap from sports participation, including playing with friends, having fun, learning skills, and feeling challenged. Peer relationships serve as the primary anchor driving engagement. The boys we spoke to also expressed strong desire for personal autonomy to explore activities on their own terms.

According to the 2025 Youth Athlete Survey, 50% of current male athletes selected “playing with friends” and 50% selected “having fun” as one of their three favorite things about playing organized sports, followed by skill development (29%) and personal challenge (29%).

2. Sports are Socially, Psychologically, and Physically High-Stakes

“A lot of people just think of [tryouts] as pointless, so they just don’t bother going out. If you do atrocious at tryouts, there’s going to be some rumors spread and all that.” – Mark, H.S. Junior

Youth sports have become intense environments where boys face intense performance pressures, self-doubt, and the fear of public failure. Boys described an ongoing negotiation when it came to trying out or playing on a sports team, which had consequences for status, belonging and their reputation. Smartphone cameras and social media amplify these social risks. Furthermore, physical injury acts as a significant deterrent, both for active athletes dealing with setbacks and for non-athletes who cited injury as a reason to avoid sports altogether.

Survey data reveals that “I’m not good enough” is the number one least favorite aspect of sports cited by boys who quit (28%) and boys who have never played (31%), while 49.5% of those who never played report that fear of injury kept them from participating, with tackle football cited most frequently (13.5%).

3. There are Too Few Ways to Enter, Participate, and Remain in Sports

“I want to do basketball, but starting it at this age would kind of be difficult, especially because the tryouts for my school are competitive. I definitely wouldn’t be able to have the opportunity.”

– Jonah, H.S. Junior

We observed unmet demand for low-cost, low-stakes, and entry-level opportunities for high school boys, especially for those on the margins of selection who want to play but may have started, specialized, or grown later. None of the boys in our focus groups reported participating in “intramurals” in middle or high school — organized but low-stakes leagues and tournaments played within the same school, open to anyone interested.

4. Boys Often Do Not Receive the Support They Need From Coaches

“The coaches, they’ve always just cared about the program more than the kids. They’ve always put their team in front of any individual player, you know, and that’s fine. We’re a ‘family,’ I guess, but it just always felt like they didn’t really care about us as individuals.” – Adrian, H.S. Senior

Boys expressed a desire for caring, empathetic coaches who see them as individuals, but felt that traditional command-and-control styles often prioritize team performance over personal well-being.

Responses to the Youth Athlete Survey revealed that “bad coaching” was the top drawback by current male athletes (22%), while 23% of boys who never played stated that “having a coach who cares about me” would be a primary draw.

Additionally, National Coach Survey data shows that coaches — such as in baseball — report feeling least confident in identifying off-field stressors, guiding social media use, or connecting struggling athletes to mental health resources. In school settings, teacher-coaches were championed as valuable supports for personal and academic outcomes.

5. Boys Weigh Sports Against Other Demands and Alternatives

“I don’t think [video games are] entirely just a wasteful thing that people waste their time doing. I think a lot of them can definitely be pretty beneficial to a lot of different skills.” – Tyler, H.S. Junior

Faced with high “pay-to-play” financial costs, heavy academic workloads, and part-time job commitments, boys described how they needed to continually assess whether sports was worth the time, energy and costs. Digital activities like video games compete for their time, and some of the boys we spoke to described them as outlets for social connection and skill development.

While 27% of former athletes said video games made them less interested in sports, 55% of boys who have never played organized sports report that playing video games actually made them more interested in sports.



Recommendations

Delivering on the promise of sports for boys requires a strategic shift in how youth and school sports are structured, coached, and integrated into broader society. The report outlines strategies designed to build an inclusive and supportive sports ecosystem.

Diversify Boys' Experiences in Sport

- Invest in School Clubs, Intramurals, and Non-Traditional Sports
- Support School-Community Partnerships for Boys Not on School Teams
- Adopt Strategies that Account for Boys' Age-and-Stage Differences
- Make Comprehensive School Physical Activity Plans a Pillar of Every School
- Connect Sports to Academic and Career Pathways

Create Government Incentives to Expand Sports Participation

- Make Student Demand Visible with Student Interest Surveys
- Expand What Counts as a Meaningful Sports Opportunity

Provide Boys with the Coaches They Need

- Make Training in Holistic Development Foundational for Coaches
- Explicit, Boys-Focused Education for Adults Working With Boys in Sports
- Boys in School Sports Benefit From Teacher-Coaches. Bring Them Back.
- Address Hazing Through More Research, Guidance, and Education for Coaches
- Build Coaching Pathways Through Workforce Development

Foster Healthy Connections Between Sports and Boys' Digital Lives

- Coaches: Talk With Boys About Their Online Lives
- Enact Organizational Policies That Set Healthy Boundaries Around Phone Usage
- Reduce Constant Digital Surveillance to Support Boys' Healthy Risk-Taking

Bring Sports into the Public Dialogue on the State of Boys and Men

- Elevate Positive Male Role Models in Sports Culture



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INTRODUCTION

Increasingly, public attention has turned to the [challenges](#) facing boys and men across education, work, and social life. Academically, boys trail girls in school readiness by 14 percentage points at age 5. The gap widens at the end of the educational pipeline – women outpace men by 17 percentage points in receiving bachelor’s degrees.

Educational challenges extend into adulthood: the share of young men disconnected from work and school is up, and wages for men without a college degree have stagnated. Socially, men are experiencing increasing loneliness, declining civic participation, and elevated risks of “deaths of despair.” American men are four times more likely to die by suicide, and ten percentage points less likely to access mental health care. Together, these trends have prompted renewed attention to how families, schools, and communities can better support boys.

Sports are an important part of that conversation. Youth sports deliver multiple benefits: better health, stronger academics, development of life skills, and a deeper social connection. The good news is that the participation of girls in sports has increased in recent decades. However, there is reason to question the experience for boys. Evidence of declining participation suggests a broader concern for how sport may be meeting boys’ needs.

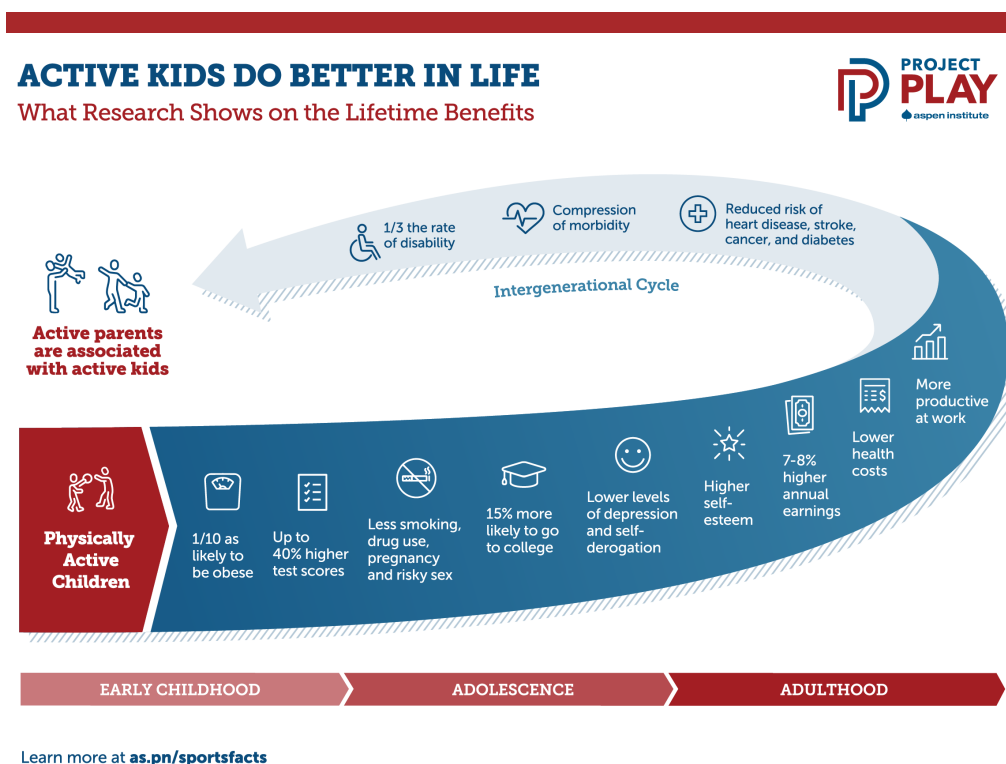


The Promise of Sports for Boys

Sport has a long history in the U.S. as a site of social and personal development, particularly for boys and young men.¹ Improving the quality and availability of youth sports and preparing its practitioners to meet the needs of boys today represents a practical strategy to advance educational, economic, and social outcomes for boys and our broader society.²

The benefits of sport for boys can include:

- **Physical Health.** Regular physical activity strengthens bones, improves cardiovascular health, and reduces risk of chronic disease. [Active children](#) are less obese and youth sports participation predicts young adult physical activity.
- **Education.** High school athletes have been [found](#) to perform better in school, and persist more in graduation from college. An [analysis](#) of Texas public high school students found that male athletes, compared to male non-athletes, had fewer disciplinary actions, scored better on standardized tests, and were at lower risk of dropout. High school sport participation has been associated with higher GPAs for [boys](#).
- **Mental Health & Well-being.** Physically active youth [report](#) more excitement, happiness and motivation, whereas inactive youth report greater nervousness, anxiety, worry and depression. Sport participation has been [associated](#) with lower rates of suicidal ideation and suicide attempts.



¹ American football was developed and played by male college students in the 1870s and 1880s. Similarly, basketball emerged in 1891 to occupy boys during cold New England winters, and baseball, America's "pastime," was honed into the game we know today by men's ball clubs around New York City in the mid-19th century.

² Participation may contribute to these outcomes, although much of the evidence is observational and may partly reflect selection into sport.

- **Positive Youth Development.** Intentionally-designed [organized sport](#) experiences can meet boys' [developmental needs](#), including physical and psychological safety, boundaries, prosocial norms, opportunities for skill building, senses of belonging, efficacy and mattering, supportive adult relationships, and integration with school, family and community.
- **Work and Career Readiness.** Employers and industry experts [highlight](#) the ways in which athletic experiences can drive workplace advancement, including transferring competencies in skill [learning](#), teamwork, leadership, time management, and receiving feedback to career success.

While sport is not a cure-all for today's challenges, it remains a formative experience for millions of boys in childhood and adolescence, two pivotal developmental periods. However, to deliver on this promise, sports programs must be widely available, designed with their experiences in mind, and led by prepared adults.

Concerns About Boys' Experiences in Sports

Evidence of declining national participation rates for boys in organized sports provided impetus for this report. While boys still continue to play sports more often than girls – the legacy of more than a century of American culture and institutions centering sports in the lives of boys – their overall participation rate, unlike that of girls, is headed down, not up:

- [Sports & Fitness Industry Association \(SFIA\)](#) data shows that the percentage of boys, ages 6-17, regularly engaging in sports has dropped over the past decade, from 50% in 2013 to 42% in 2024.³
- The [Youth Risk Behavior Survey](#) shows a decline in high school boys who played on at least one sports team, having peaked in 2011 at 64%, before decreasing to 60% in 2019, and further to 56% by 2023.
- [Monitoring the Future \(MTF\)](#),⁴ a University of Michigan, survey shows declines among high school seniors. The share of 12th-grade boys participating on their school's athletic teams peaked at 65% in 2013, fell to 57% by 2019, and has hovered around 53–55% in the post-pandemic years — a roughly ten-point decline.
- A [New York Times](#)' analysis of data from the American Time Use Survey found a slow but steady 10-year decline (2014-2024) in hours per week playing sports among boys and men, ages 15 to 24.

These trends prompted a broader question: Does the sports experience currently available to boys match what they need and want? This investigation centers on a concern that many boys still struggle to find sports experiences that meet their needs, such as reflecting their interests, providing meaningful opportunities to play, protecting their health and wellbeing, or nurturing their personal growth through supportive relationships. Boys tend to specialize earlier, experience [more pressure](#) from parents to specialize, and [mature physically](#) at later ages. These and other aspects of boys' experiences warrant attention. The report therefore focuses less on how to resolve the problem of specific participation rates, and more on how sports can be positioned in relation to the challenges boys and men face today.

³ Baseball and tackle football are two large, traditional boys-serving sports that have seen declines in participation across the board, according to SFIA. In the last five years, participation in baseball dropped 19% among 6-12 year olds and 16% among 13-17 year olds. In tackle football, participation is down 7% and 9% for the same populations and time period.

⁴ Calculated from AIBM analysis of MTF question, "To what extent have you participated in the following school activities during this school year? – Athletic teams." Response options include: Not at all / Slight / Moderate / Considerable / Great. Responses that include 'slight' and above were counted as participating.

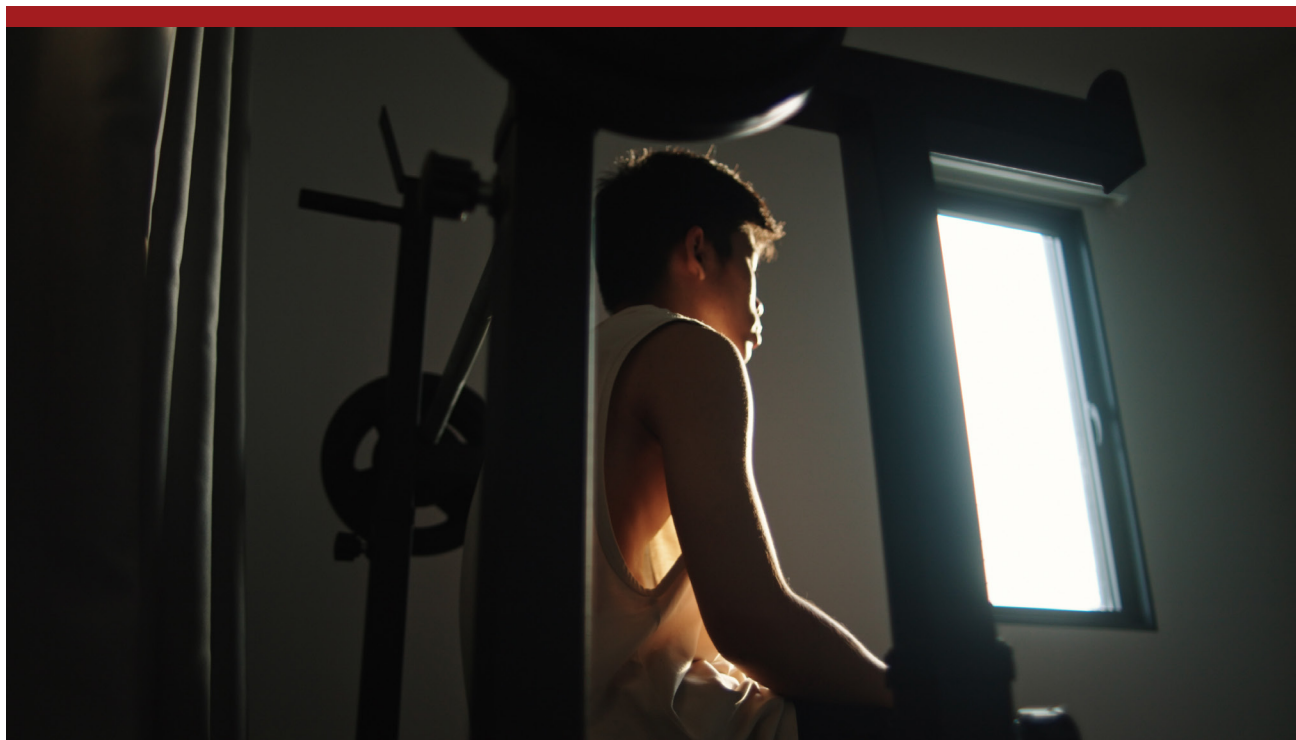
Given the formative role that sport can and should play for boys, we aim to understand barriers and opportunities for making sport accessible, safe, and oriented towards their unique development needs.

Importantly, nothing we write in this report should negate the critically important, ongoing work to encourage participation for girls in sports, including addressing the systemic barriers they face to participation opportunities, physical and psychological safety, and quality coaching. This is not a zero-sum game; it's a matter of creating a supply of quality sport experiences that meets the demands and needs of both boys and girls.

What's Going on With Boys in Sports?

This report sheds light on the state of boys in sports today by exploring diverse structural and cultural dynamics relevant to their experiences in and out of organized sports participation. The report focuses primarily on adolescent boys' (10 to 18 years old) experiences in sport, with an understanding that many of the insights and recommendations also apply across and beyond age and gender. Key questions included:

- What do boys enjoy about sports, and what do they want from their experience?
- What factors might explain recent declines in organized sports participation (defined as on a team or taking lessons), especially among adolescent boys?
- How has the context in which boys engage with institutions, including sports, changed in today's age, and what should be done accordingly?



WHAT WE DID

Review of Literature

We began our study by reviewing relevant academic literature, think tank and philanthropic reports, and popular media such as podcasts, news and opinion articles, and social media content to identify current evidence and perspectives on boys' experiences in youth sports. The review synthesized findings on participation, motivation, development, coaching, mental health, and related topics, helping to situate our primary research within the broader evidence base. To support analysis and contextual understanding, secondary research continued throughout the research process.

We also drew upon the Aspen Institute Sport & Society Program's existing national surveys, including the [2022 National Coach Survey](#) (10,485 participants), which identified coach attitudes related to motivations, feelings of confidence and preparedness, levels of stress/satisfaction, and areas of interest for additional training.

New Survey Research

The [2025 Youth Athlete Survey](#) (3,827 youth participants ages 10 to 17) is a first-of-its-kind national survey of youth across all 50 states and the District of Columbia. In partnership with researchers at Utah State University and Louisiana Tech University, the Aspen Institute survey captures attitudes of youth towards organized sports, including likes and dislikes, motivations, participation patterns, perceived coach and parent behavior, and injury risk. Unique questions were included that target boys' engagement, including regarding video games. To identify findings relevant to boys' experiences in organized sports, we conducted a targeted analysis of responses from three segments of male respondents: boys currently participating in organized sports, boys that had discontinued participation, and boys that had never participated.



Focus Groups of Boys

To get more nuanced perspectives, we hosted four focus groups to hear directly from boys themselves, organized into age-based cohorts and totaling 20 boys (ages 14 to 18). Discussion centered on their personal experiences and observations of youth, private club, and interscholastic sports. The 20 participants were recruited via a convenience sample. They were informed that the study sought to understand their experiences playing organized sports, including their introduction to sports, motivations to play or not, experiences with parents and coaches, and observations of access and opportunity, among other things. Focus groups surfaced illustrative experiences, but cannot establish how common a problem is or why most boys leave sports. In this report, pseudonyms are used to preserve anonymity.

- As high school and early college students, participants represented a range of athletic backgrounds, including those who play or played multiple sports, those who formerly played sports but no longer do, and those who had never played organized sports.
- Guided by open-ended questionnaires curated and moderated by the Aspen Institute team, emphasis was placed on understanding what draws boys to sports, what keeps them engaged, and what causes some boys to never try organized sports, lose interest, or leave sports altogether. We asked participants to reflect on their own experiences and those they've witnessed secondhand.
- Discussions explored the boys' earliest introductions to sports, their experiences in sports (or in the case of non-players, their perceptions of barriers to play), and their reflections on how sports participation functions in their respective local contexts. Moreover, prompts aimed to understand sports against the backdrop of their other commitments, responsibilities, opportunities, and goals.
- Consideration was given to different sporting contexts including particular kinds of sports (e.g., basketball vs. football, or individual vs. team sports) and competition levels (e.g., intramurals and recreational sports vs. varsity or travel-based private club sports). Additionally, participants were probed for their perceptions of boyhood and manhood, as they relate to varying sports contexts.

Interviews with Experts

We conducted six semi-structured interviews with coaches, athletic directors, sports program leaders, and scholars with expertise in youth sports and boys' development. These conversations were used to test, challenge, and contextualize emerging findings through our other research methods, and some of their insights will appear throughout the findings below.

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR BOYS IN SPORTS

The following section examines themes from our research into boys' experiences in sport, beginning with the features of sport that boys like most. Discussion then transitions to the complex array of pressures that emerged from survey analysis and focus group discussion ranging from internal self-doubt and fear of injury to the heightened public scrutiny imposed by digital surveillance and social media.

It further explores how coaching styles, hazing risks, and rigid, highly competitive organizational models can gate-keep participation, inadvertently sidelining late-blooming, academically vulnerable, or recreationally-minded boys. Additionally, this section analyzes how competing interests — namely financial burdens, academic demands, and video games — can shape boys' time-use decisions and choices to pursue sports, or not.



FINDING 1: Boys Value Sports for Connection, Fun and Personal Growth

Boys’ responses to the 2025 Youth Athlete Survey suggest that drivers of sports participation are deeply rooted in social connection, intrinsic enjoyment, and personal growth. Table 1 provides a summary of boys’ favorite things about playing on an organized team. Qualitative data from focus group sessions, as well as interviews with athletic directors and community leaders, reinforces boys’ desire for peer camaraderie and healthy environments.

**Table 1. Boys Youth Survey Responses:
Most Favorite Things About Playing On An Organized Team**

Currently in Sports	Formerly in Sports
Playing with friends 50%	Having fun 52%
Having fun 50%	Playing with friends 47%
Learning new skills or improving skills 29%	Exercising 31%
Challenging myself 29%	Winning 20%

Source: 2025 Youth Athlete Survey

Focus groups discussion made clear that for many boys, peer relationships were not just a pleasant byproduct of sports; they were the primary anchor keeping them engaged. Dominic, a high school sophomore, noted that his initial hesitation to try fencing was overcome entirely by people close to him: “It was sort of a mix of my mom and also my friends... my friends are definitely keeping me in here, and I plan on doing it next year as well.” Simon, a high school senior who used to participate in track and cross country, explained that the presence of peers was the dividing line between drudgery and joy: “I was with my friends. So it wasn’t really boring... it’s always fun.” Similarly, Rohan, a high school freshman, described how playing tennis helped him build community and get to know more people in other grades, including older students that he would not have talked to otherwise.

“I was with my friends.
So it wasn’t really
boring... it’s always fun.”

The boys we spoke to also shared candid, direct feedback for parents on their desire for autonomy, including the room to explore interests organically. Jordan urged parents to give children the freedom to self-select their activities: “Just give your child the room to explore... Had [my parents] just let me explore sports

more on my own, kind of what I wanted to do. I think I could have been more interested in the long run.” Others urged parents to manage their own emotions during competitions, prioritizing encouragement over intense criticism, pressure, or public hostility. “I also feel like parents just need to realize that it’s just a game,” said Lucas, a high school freshman who played football, baseball and basketball.

Finding 2: Sports Are Socially, Psychologically, and Physically High-Stakes

Boys perceive a pressure to perform: to make the team, to belong, to be worthy of playing sports. This pressure — from coaches, parents, and peers — was cited in our interviews and conversations as increasingly intensified by the omnipresence of surveillance through the recording, posting, and consumption of digital content from sports competitions and practices. As a uniquely visible activity, sports do not offer much anonymity to participants; the setting is ripe for online and offline virality.

Fear of Not Being Good Enough

Feelings of insufficient ability may lead some male youth to opt out or simply not try. When asked to identify their *least favorite thing about sports*, ‘I’m not good enough’ received the most votes among male survey respondents who had never played (31%) as well as those who had stopped playing (28%). Dr. Benjamin Houltberg, a developmental scientist, refers to finding that athletes with high levels of perfectionism, fear of failure, and contingent self-worth — adding up to what he calls [performance-based narrative identity](#) — demonstrate higher levels of depression, anxiety, and shame, and lower levels of life satisfaction.

Table 2. Boys Youth Survey Responses:
Least Favorite Things About Playing On An Organized Team

Currently in Sports	Formerly in Sports	Never in Sports
Bad Coaching 22%	I’m not good enough 28%	I’m not good enough 31%
Too expensive 17%	Bad coaching 20%	My friends don’t play 30%
I don’t want to get hurt 15%	I don’t want to get hurt 17%	No time / schoolwork 22%
No time / schoolwork 15%	No time / other activities 15%	Don’t enjoy playing organized 18%

Source: 2025 Youth Athlete Survey

Focus group discussion reinforced a connection between perceived ability, especially physical stature, and the challenge of playing sports in high school. Most of the boys we heard from had been introduced to sport by a parent, liked playing sports, and had been encouraged to try out or keep playing. However, many highlighted the uncertainty they could feel about themselves, their bodies, and fitting into a sport. For instance, Dominic wanted to get into football, but felt held back by his weight, “It was pretty difficult for me to actually get to a reasonable weight to play football, so I ended up just sort of dropping that idea.” Similarly, Simon stopped doing track and field, despite identifying as having “above average” ability, because he felt the coaches had favored other athletes perceived to have bodies and natural ability that were better suited to top performance in the sport: “Their physique was more geared up for track... the guy had a broader build and [the coach] just wanted to put him first.”

Status, Belonging, and Reputational Risk

The boys we spoke to described how playing a sport shaped how they were perceived socially in school; playing generated both rewards and consequences that impacted boys’ reputations and subsequent time use decisions.

Making a team, especially varsity, in a popular sport and showcasing awards or recognition produced a perceived social ‘credit’ that elevated them in the eyes of friends and others. Simon described how it worked in his school:

If you’re on the team that has been really up there, you get credit and some form of popularity because when people see your results, like on social media, they praise you for it. And when you get first division, second division, or honorable mention at the end of the season, you get praised for it. You get credit.

Focus groups made clear that boys were assessing the status implications of sport. For Rohan, popularity was directly related to perceptions of your ability: “If you’re good at something, you’re gonna get recognition for it. And that’s gonna get you more well known and stuff. Regardless of whether it’s a sports team or not, like if you do well, if you bring results, then you’re going to get more popular.” For Simon, status depended upon how impressive your sport and performances were. Because cross country was not viewed as a cool sport, it did not garner much attention. However, making the basketball team “was an instant reputation boost” and “if you go on morning announcements a couple of times, saying, oh, you did this, you did this, and you did it really well, then you’ll get a lot of credit.”

In contrast, embarrassing moments, like not making a team, noticeably failing during a tryout, or being outplayed by someone in a class below you, produced ‘slander,’ a form of ridicule and judgment that led to perceived reputational harm. Mark is a high school junior who stopped playing competitive tennis to focus on his academics. He saw tryouts as something to avoid if selection was not likely, or one might perform poorly, “a lot of people just think of [tryouts] as pointless, so they just don’t bother going out. If you do atrocious at tryouts, there’s going to be some rumors spread and all that.” Similarly, Simon described how making a team but not playing could be harmful: “Basketball was super competitive and people who are on the team were some of my friends... they weren’t the best, but they just get slandered while being on the team for not being the best.”

Digital Surveillance, Spotlight Culture and Fear of Public Failure

Today, the dynamics of boys' social status, belonging, and sport play out in an always-on digital surveillance culture that intensifies the experience. For some, this digital culture can have a positive, self-promoting side. Lamar described how photographers and instant social media posts can turn high school games into a performance stage:

We have a bunch of photographers just taking pictures throughout the entirety of the game. And five, ten minutes later, the players just get in the locker room, you see them post on their stories and posting their pictures and stuff. I feel like that really helps with them publicizing and getting their game out.

For others, smartphones and social media are removing any notions of private moments for learning. Jordan, a college student, highlighted how much sport performance is publicized: "Where I went to high school, if your team was bad or the player was bad or somebody just messed up a little too much, it would get posted and everybody would see it and hear about it." As a consequence, the constant filming and commentary may exacerbate anxiety and pressure connected to concern about reputational harm. Cory Stevens, Athletic Director at Sandwich High School (IL), described a heightened fear of failure in recent years, especially in athletes:⁵

I think kids are afraid to walk down the hallways of school, because somebody might have a camera and, you know, they don't like the backpack that they're carrying, or the way that they're walking, or something. That's a very real fear in kids, especially student-athletes.

Boys' Attitudes Towards Sports Injury Risk

Injury also emerged as a factor that undermined boys' experiences. First, many boys may not play at all for fear of injury. According to findings from the 2025 Youth Athlete Survey, roughly half of boys (49.5%) that had never played agreed that 'fear of injury'⁶ had kept them from choosing to play a sport at all. Football was cited most often (13.5% of boys) as a sport they did not play because of such fears, followed by Ice Hockey (5%).

Second, injuries defined some boys' experiences in sport. 'I don't want to get hurt' (Table 2) ranked third on the list of current and former athletes' least favorite things about sports. Echoing this sentiment, some boys described how injuries contributed to them quitting. Dominic left track after a physical setback ruined an already mediocre experience, "I tried out for track and field... and I was just not great at it. And not only was I pretty bad, I also hurt my hip halfway through the season, and I just did not like the experience at all, so I just stopped." Kiran, sophomore, had to put his tennis career on hold while he was actively recovering from an ACL Injury and Adrian, a senior football lineman and powerlifter, de-

Roughly half of boys (49.5%) that had never played agreed that 'fear of injury' had kept them from choosing to play a sport at all.

⁵ Jamyle Cannon, a former teacher who founded and runs a nonprofit boxing gym in Chicago called The Bloc, concurred: "A lot of trepidation comes from the hyperselectivity of youth and interscholastic sports. When there's a public list of who's in and who's out, kids have more fear. Social pressure isn't new, but the way it exists through social media is different."

⁶ When asked about injury and sport choice, the boys and experts we spoke to named parent risk tolerance as a key factor. "A lot of parents are...fearful of concussions," said Cory Stevens, Athletic Director at Sandwich HS (IL). Focus groups reinforced how some boys had interest in high profile contact sports, like football, but parents intervened. Kiran tried repeatedly to push past his barrier, but failed: "I've tried very hard to convince my parents to let me play football, and it's not worked at all."

scribed how he had gone home with “quite a lot of injuries,” including having “blown out my knees a few times.” [Research](#) from the National ACL Injury Coalition shows that ACL Injuries have risen 26% in high school sports since 2007, and Tackle Football holds the second highest annual ACL Injury incidence rate among all sports.

Finding 3: There Are Too Few Ways to Enter, Participate, and Remain In Sports

If the default organized sports environment is a selective team with a coach, requiring intense, early, and consistent participation, what void does that leave? We identified play settings that boys will or would like to engage, when and/or if offered.

Lack of School Sport Options That Meet Boys’ Interests

We observed unmet demand for low-cost, low-stakes, and entry-level opportunities for older kids (high-school aged) or later starters to sport, including for those who are later-pubescent developers. None of the boys in our focus groups reported participating in intramurals (organized but low-stakes and recreational sports leagues and tournaments played within the same school, open to anyone interested) in middle school or high school.

The menu of interscholastic sports options has changed little since the 1960s, when sport was elevated as a key feature in the life of high school students. Dominating that menu are tackle football (played by 33% of boys), soccer (22%), track and field (20%), baseball (19%), and basketball (18%). Less commonly offered are emerging sports such as lacrosse, badminton, ultimate frisbee, volleyball, flag football, and bowling, all of which a 2022 [Aspen Institute survey](#) of 6,000 students expressed interest in, as well as activities such as strength training, biking, archery, skateboarding and climbing.

Charter schools are among the most innovative, an Aspen Institute [analysis](#) of the national landscape of school-based sports found. The most enterprising have found success introducing sports like rugby, sailing, surfing and snowboarding. But many charters also are tightly focused on academic success and lack the facility space to offer much in the way of sports at all, with just [4 in 10 charters](#) nationally offering interscholastic sports – half the rate of traditional public schools. And many of them have too few students to field teams in football, the most popular sport for boys in high school. In Colorado, roughly 30 charter schools are members of the state federation that governs interscholastic sports, but fewer than 10 offer tackle football.

Many Boys Want Lower-Stakes Opportunities With Real Playing Time

For the boys we spoke to, school-based club and intramural sports were not options in their schools. Some took it upon themselves to find sport options in their community that gave them a chance to play, worked better with their personal schedules, would allow them to be with their friends, and provided autonomy to do it on their terms.

Amir, a sophomore, recently switched from soccer to golf because it was more “laid back” and allowed him to talk, hang out with his friends, play without a coach, and go when they want to. Caleb, a high school junior, quit soccer for track & field, commonly a “no-cut” sport, which he found more fun than being a reserve:

I stopped playing soccer because I felt like I wasn't enjoying it as much. I had joined the soccer team and it was my first time playing soccer, so obviously I would be on the bench, but I joined track the next season and I had so much more fun, even though it was my first time doing track. I feel like doing sports that are more like one-on-one instead of done as a team was much easier for me because I could actually see my improvement.

Simon said his coaches discouraged talking and wanted players to be serious and focused: "The only times you really get to talk to new people is after and at the start of practice when everybody's changing and stuff... Coaches always want you to be on point and focused. No talking, you know? So yeah, it's sort of hard to make friends."

Later Starters and Later Developers Struggle to Find On-Ramps

Focus groups reinforced how differences in boys' age-and-stage of development can shape the sports experience in high school. Later-starting boys were those that had found interest in a sport as an older teen. Similarly, later-developing boys grew physically at relatively later time periods than their peers. Both met obstacles to accessing sport, primarily when competing with boys who had already specialized, grown earlier, or simply been playing longer. The culture of a sport played an important role in how welcoming or doable a sport seemed to them. Jacob, a high school freshman, felt traditional sports were not as welcoming: "(With) bigger sports like football and basketball or baseball, you kind of have to be a little bit harder on people." Jonah, a high school junior, reasoned that his interest in playing basketball was unrealistic: "I want to do basketball, but starting it at this age would kind of be difficult, especially because the tryouts for my school are competitive. I definitely wouldn't be able to have the opportunity."

Disadvantages can accumulate for youth not already on a track to competitive sports, creating larger and more obvious barriers to entry as they get older. At the high school level, year-round training for school teams creates cumulative advantages that non-participants may simply be unable to overcome. Lucas described the challenge that his late-starting peers faced when they expressed interest in football, a sport he had played for most of his life:

We'll just talk at lunch, and some of my friends who've never even played football before are really thinking about playing, and I feel like for them, it's really hard to get involved with the football team because the team's doing lifts and stuff right now in the off-season. I've played football basically all my life. but for someone who hasn't really played football at all, it's almost like getting rejected.



Finding 4: Boys Often Do Not Receive The Support They Need From Coaches

Boys Want Coaches Who Care About Them Personally

When asked about the coaches they've had or observed, many of the boys we heard from shared frustrations with what they felt was excessive focus on team performance and little concern for their individual needs. For instance, Adrian recalled how a coach's message for the team to be a 'family' rang hollow without feeling a level of genuine care from the coach for who he was as a person:

The coaches, they've always just cared about the program more than the kids. They've always put their team in front of any individual player, you know, and that's fine. We're a 'family,' I guess, but it just always felt like they didn't really care about us as individuals.

Youth Athlete Survey data reveals that 'bad coaching' was the first least favorite thing about sports among current male athletes, and the second least favorite among former athletes. At the same time, data suggests many boys desire personal concern from their coach. When asked what boys value most about sports, 'Having a coach who cares about me' ranked third (22.9%) among boys who had never participated. The boys we spoke to echoed that sentiment. Simon cited a "ruthless" track and field coach that "didn't care about the mental health of the kids" unless it was linked to performance on the track. Such conflict appears to reflect a style of coaching that athletic directors say fewer boys respond well to today. Cory Stevens, athletic director at Sandwich HS (IL), acknowledged a growing desire for boys to have a coach that's going to "understand them as individuals." Noting a recent decline in football participation, Stevens attributes it to a growing gap in expectations between older coaches and today's players:

I think expectations from the coaches are greater than what the kids are willing to give at this point. They're looking for more empathetic coaches, and the coaches, having gone through a different experience with their upbringing and athletics, expect more from the kids.

What might empathic coaching look like? Researchers of athlete motivation have found that offering choice within limits, providing rationales for tasks, acknowledging athletes' feelings and perspectives, and providing opportunities for initiative taking and independent work foster more intrinsic motivation, positive well-being, low feelings of [distress](#), and [prosocial](#) behaviors. In contrast, excessive criticism, conditional regard, disinterest in athlete opinions, and imperviousness to questioning are associated with [unhealthy motivation](#), [burnout](#), and learning [antisocial](#) behaviors.

Coaches Feel Least Prepared For Boys’ Off-Field Needs

Findings from the National Coach Survey reveal major gaps in the confidence and preparedness of coaches for addressing and supporting youth needs beyond the court and playing field. For instance, consider baseball, a youth sport played and coached primarily by boys. Table 3 provides a list of baseball coaches’ most and least confident behaviors.

Table 3. Baseball Coaches’ Confidence in Coaching Behaviors (National Coach Survey, 2022)

Five Most Confident Behaviors	Five Least Confident Behaviors
1. Promote good sportsmanship	1. Link athletes to mental health resources
2. Teach basic techniques/skills	2. Help athletes navigate social media
3. Give constructive feedback to athletes	3. Set expectations related to social media
4. Make any athlete feel welcome	4. Refer athletes to support for unmet basic needs
5. Create an inclusive environment	5. Identify off-the-field stressors

Source: 2022 National Coach Survey

Table 3 findings reveal a lack of confidence among baseball coaches in behaviors that directly address boys’ health and well-being. Baseball coaches rate themselves low on their own ability to support boys’ mental health, such as by identifying off-the-field stressors, referring boys to support, and linking boys to mental health resources. Additionally, coaches struggle to support boys in their digital lives, including by helping them navigate social media and setting expectations related to social media.

Stevens attributes low feelings of preparedness among coaches to minimal training requirements in travel club settings, particularly among newly formed teams. “On the travel side, coaches may not be equipped, because teams are popping up all the time, and they’re taking anybody they can to be a coach,” says Stevens. In contrast, paid coaches in larger and more respected organizations were perceived to have more experience, and high school coaches more training: “On the high school side, I do think you’ve got more training, and they’re equipped because many times that was their goal when they got into education. They want to be a teacher, they want to coach and give kids the experience they had.” Regarding in-school teacher-coaches, Stevens described them as the best case scenario, given their readiness and availability for supporting boys socially, emotionally, and academically:

Ideally, you would love to have teacher coaches, because they're in the building, they can monitor the kids, and in theory, they can monitor the kids academically much better, they can check in on them for their social well-being, emotional well-being. They just have much more access to the kids to check in on them.

Academic Rules Can Exclude Boys Who Might Benefit Most From Engaged Coaches

Our discussions also highlighted the intersections between sports participation, coaching, and academics. At Rogers High School in Spokane (WA), athletes' academic success, such as graduation and GPA, was credited in part to engaged coaches. According to Aaron Brecek, athletic director, "the sports where it is an out-of-building coach, or where the coach just doesn't really emphasize it, those are the ones where I see multiple F's." Study of national coach data has found that [teacher-coaches](#) express greater confidence in their ability to support the academics of their student-athletes. Brecek also notes that coach-athlete relationships were stronger among teachers who coached, due to the ability to pop into classrooms and cross paths in hallways.

Coaches and team staff have been found to play critical roles in the academic success of underserved [athletes](#), including by creating support systems that might not otherwise exist. Academically ineligible youth can lose access to these critical supports and, based on some districts' policies, opportunities to even practice with the team.⁷ According to Brecek, current policy in his district prevents academically ineligible players from participating in games but still allows them to continue practicing with the team. Brecek disagreed with policies that take kids away from the team entirely, "If the policy is you're not even allowed to practice, then I can see [the kids] just throwing up their hands and giving up, but we work really hard with our coaching staffs to make sure that they're keeping that relationship and using sports as leverage to get them to pass their classes."



⁷ Relatedly, Cannon described a less formal sorting mechanism that he called, 'invisible filtering.' Here, coaches subjectively, though not always intentionally, filter interested players out based on perceived behavior problems, wherein coaches will not bring students onto teams if they are perceived to bring conflict, disrupt team culture, or otherwise require additional behavior management.

Adults Do Not Always Recognize or Prevent Hazing and Bullying

Hazing is often dismissed as a rite of passage in boys' sports. Although current national data are limited, [severe cases](#) continue to occur, and hazing is frequently [underreported](#). Our conversations also showed how easily boys can minimize behavior that makes them uncomfortable. One student described freshmen being put in lockers as “not really that bad,” before adding, “I know I wouldn’t want that to happen to me.”

Coaches play a critical role in determining where team traditions end and hazing begins, but that boundary was not always clear. Stevens noted that practices such as requiring younger players to carry heavy bags might be understood either as hazing or as a “team standard for your program.” Other boys described coaches dismissing mistreatment as “just kids being kids” or maintaining a “handle it in-house” culture. One boy said that when he sought outside help for bullying, “they benched me for months.”

Recent Canadian [research](#) similarly suggests a gap between coaches’ concern and action: while most consider hazing a serious problem, far fewer consistently establish standards or intervene. Hazing, then, is not only a peer problem. Coaches need clearer definitions, reporting procedures, and expectations for stopping harmful behavior before it escalates.

Finding 5: Boys Weigh Sports Against Other Demands and Alternatives

Boys can find themselves asking, “What’s the point?” of playing the default organized sports. When considering the pressure to perform, the intensity of commitment typically required, and the common experience of bad coaching, boys reasonably wonder if it’s “worth it.” The decision to play can be made more uncertain by the presence of compelling alternatives such as video games.

Awareness and Anxiety Around the Financial Burden of Sports for Parents

When considering how to spend scarce resources — time, money, and effort — the boys we heard from were thinking of maximizing their inputs into outputs in the form of future achievement, well-being, and enjoyment. For boys who do not perceive a pathway to success through athletics, some described turning toward educational or career pursuits. Several focus group participants explicitly stated that they reduced their involvement in sports or quit entirely to focus on working part-time jobs or preparing for college applications. Regardless of actual affordability, the [awareness](#) of costs triggers anxiety about “repaying” the investment through performance, leading to burnout, lower enjoyment, and reduced motivation. Jordan, a first-year college student now studying architecture, reflected on the feeling of “wasting” money on his sport:

I just don’t want to have the feeling of wasting money on things. I already knew, even before I would try out [for my school team], if I did do this, it was a lot of money to have to spend. So I would already have set aside just in case I did make it. Since my parents did both play sports, they never would have had a problem paying for it in the first place, but this would linger in my mind. I never want to drop a whole bunch of money on something that I don’t want to do that bad. It just had to be something that I really wanted to do for the money.

Gaming Competes with Sports, but Also Satisfies Some of the Same Needs

The national conversation on boys today often turns to the draw of [video games](#), an activity that easily sparks debate. A 2024 Pew Research Center [Report](#) found that boys are more likely than girls to play video games, identify as gamers, play everyday, and experience positive things from it, such as making friends. At the same time, a 2025 Common Sense Media [Report](#) found that while boys can find friendship and belonging through video games, adolescent boys are also frequently exposed to problematic behaviors during play, such as bullying or harassment (70%), racist or homophobic comments, and disrespectful language about women.

Table 4. Boys Youth Survey Responses: Digital Habits

Currently in Sports	Formerly in Sports	Never in Sports
Play Video Games 85%	Play Video Games 89%	Play Video Games 93%
Say it leads to more interest in sports 19.7%	Say it leads to more interest in sports 10%	Say it leads to more interest in sports 55%
Say it leads to less interest in sports 6%	Say it leads to less interest in sports 26.8%	Say it leads to less interest in sports 9%
Gaming 53 mins/weekday	Gaming 73 mins/weekday	Gaming 57 mins/weekday
Social Media 43 mins/weekday	Social Media 56 mins/weekday	Social Media 61 mins/weekday

Source: 2025 Youth Athlete Survey

In our research and conversations, video games emerged as a nuanced activity that played different roles for boys in sports, depending on their situation. Table 4 outlines key findings. First, gaming is pervasive among boys across all three segments of sports participation status, including 85% of current participants. Additionally, responses affirmed that boys play more often than girls, regardless of sports participation status. Notably, just 48% of girls currently in sports play video games, a difference of 37 percentage points. Third, participation in sports translates to slightly less gaming; fewer boys currently in sports play video

games, compared to boys that used to play (89%) or had never played (93%). Fourth, former participants spend the most time weekly playing video games and being in front of screens. Across all genders and sport status, boys that no longer play sports spent the most time per weekday on screens not related to schoolwork (232 min/day), including the most time gaming (73 mins/day).⁸

Notably, gaming may serve as an alternative to organized sports or on-ramp to participation. On the one hand, 27% of boys no longer in sports agreed that gaming made them less interested in sports, suggesting that gaming may accelerate dropout or provide a substitute for some boys that had already left. At the same time, 55% of boys that had never played sports agree that video games made them more interested in sports, suggesting that gaming might act as a gateway for boys who never started. On this point, some of the boys we spoke described how video games can be beneficial to their lives. For example, Tyler, a high school junior who wrestled in middle school but now plays football, described video games as a fun activity that developed skills:

I don't think [video games are] entirely just a wasteful thing that people waste their time doing. I think a lot of them can definitely be pretty beneficial to a lot of different skills. I mean, hand-eye coordination, critical thinking, problem solving, a lot of different things. I like playing video games.

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Summary

Adolescent boys in sports are navigating a high-stakes environment where performance pressures are amplified by constant digital exposure, fear of public failure, and hyper-competitive team structures. Data and youth reflections reveal that bad coaching, rigid selection processes, and a scarcity of low-stakes or intramural options create significant barriers to entry, particularly for late starters and others on the margins. While sports remain a desired outlet for friendship, fitness, and identity formation, many boys weigh these opportunities against financial costs, risk of injury, and compelling digital alternatives like video games, which often provide more accessible avenues for social connection and autonomy.

⁸ Behind YouTube, video games are the second most popular online social platform for adolescent boys, according to Common Sense Media. In particular, 'heavy gamers' (those playing daily or more) are more likely than 'occasional gamers' to say they feel like part of a group that likes them, have interesting conversations, get help from other players and make new friends. However, heavy gamers are more likely to engage in negative behaviors while gaming, including saying mean things about others, bullying or harassing others, and saying 'Kill Yourself' (KYS) or something similar. In this sense, gaming, especially those that involve active chats with friends, offers boys an online social experience that can have important consequences for moral and psychological development.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Delivering on the promise of sports for boys requires a strategic shift in how youth and school sports are structured, coached, and integrated into broader society. The following section outlines strategies designed to build an inclusive and supportive sports ecosystem. Recommendations span five core areas: diversifying opportunities to meet demand and interest; evolving public policy; improving coach readiness to meet boys' needs; establishing healthy digital boundaries; and bringing sport into the public conversation around boys and men.

Diversify Boys' Experiences in Sport

Traditional structures and offerings push many boys out of sport, particularly those who start later, experience bias in selection, or face other systemic disadvantages. Schools, districts, and other sport providers should consider programs, roster designs, selection policies, and sport offerings that meet the demand for sport from all boys. Our recommendations:

- **Invest in School Clubs, Intramurals, and Non-Traditional Sports**

Many of the boys we spoke to struggled to find their way in traditional sports like baseball, football, and basketball. Many want less intense options in those sports but also in sports such as golf, volleyball, and pickleball. Creative leadership in school athletic departments can produce innovative models to retain these boys. At John Rogers High School in Spokane (WA), Aaron Brecek has added extra school teams for in-demand sports (e.g., boys basketball and volleyball) that then compete in an intramural league at school. Notably, weekly intramural winners are rewarded with the chance to represent the school, wearing the official uniforms, in a local interscholastic league. While facility space is a challenge, Brecek believes in the intramurals model because it meets the needs of youth that simply want to play. Resources are kept low because teams do not require a dedicated coach, uniforms, or practice time. Is it working? Brecek says two peer schools in Spokane recently adopted a similar model.

- **Support School-Community Partnerships for Boys Not on School Teams**

Schools and communities should continue to find creative ways to open pathways for young people that traditional sports programs fail to serve. For example, to accommodate the hundreds of students cut during competitive tryouts, [Alexandria City High School](#) in Virginia partnered with the Alexandria Soccer Association (ASA) to provide students with free recreational play in exchange for access to school fields. This partnership creates an accessible, low-stakes

playing option and feeder pathway that keeps unselected students active and engaged in the sport rather than stopping altogether. Similarly, San Francisco Youth Soccer created a '[Varsity Division](#)' for local high school teens that “stop playing because options are limited to expensive travel teams or competitive school squads.” No experience is required.

- **Adopt Strategies that Account for Boys' Age-and-Stage Differences**

Boys' bodies develop at different rates, leading to clearly observable differences in early sports performance when competing against peers that have specialized early, physically matured earlier, and/or were born earlier in the year. Sport science research has long documented the negative impact of such “relative age effects,” which can [disproportionately affect boys](#) by biasing team selection decisions and coaches' perceptions of current and future ability.

One alternative model worth considering: [bio-banding](#), an emerging form of athlete grouping based on markers of physical maturation or ability such as size, speed, or strength. Kaig Lightner, founder of Portland Community Football Club (PCFC), developed a model that does not use strict age parameters, instead grouping kids by skill, size, or developmental stage. At PCFC, formal try-outs were highly stressful events that he found largely ineffective. Lightner replaced them with an organic “assessment-on-the-fly” model where new kids simply join a practice and are placed at the appropriate level, prioritizing their experience, abilities, and motivation, rather than solely their gender or age.



- **Make Comprehensive School Physical Activity Plans a Pillar of Every School**

Schools can also use [Comprehensive School Physical Activity Programs](#) to expand activity beyond interscholastic teams. The CDC-recognized framework combines physical education with activity during the school day, before- and after-school programs, and community partnerships. It offers another way to ensure the benefits of physical activity for boys who do not make school teams, prefer less competitive options, or cannot afford outside programs.

- **Connect Sports to Academic and Career Pathways**

Schools can make more of the interest many boys already have in sports. Sports offer a ready-made, practical context for learning in fields such as [math](#), health science, media, and business, while sparking interest in fields such as coaching, sports medicine, management, data analysis, and youth development. Schools can also create non-playing roles — including student coaching, team management, video production, and athletic-training assistance — and connect them to academic credit, career and technical education, or work-based learning. The opportunity is to meet boys where their interests already lie and use sports to widen, rather than narrow, their academic and career horizons.

Create Government Incentives to Expand Sports Participation

Policy helped transform sports opportunities for girls. In 1972, with a stroke of President Nixon's pen, Title IX was introduced, prohibiting colleges and schools receiving federal funds from discriminating by gender in the provision of education-based activities. That simple act helped unlock tens of millions of sports opportunities for girls, reshaping the health habits and lives of generations of women, many of whom became civic and C-suite leaders.

But today's challenge is broader: too many young people who want to play sports still cannot find an opportunity that fits their interests, abilities, schedules, or level of experience. In this report, we focus on boys, but it is not only a boys' problem. Girls still face gaps in access, while all students increasingly encounter a system built around early specialization, competitive tryouts, and a narrow menu of traditional interscholastic sports.

Demand remains strong among both girls and boys to play sports. Policy should help schools understand what students actually want, then create more ways for them to participate.

Policymakers can do this in two ways:

- **Make Student Demand Visible with Student Interest Surveys**

Simply knowing what students want to do can unlock innovation and investment, but we have no shared infrastructure for understanding this demand.

The Aspen Institute's Project Play has surveyed students in communities around the country to capture what students – athletes and non-athletes – play, what they want to play, and what's keeping them from playing. That data can reveal demand that schools often overlook. In several communities, survey results have helped schools and partners identify unmet demand and

expand programs. In Oakland, Stephen and Ayesha Curry's [foundation](#) partnered with Oakland middle schools to add more sports, lifting the participation rate from 17% in 2021 to 62% in 2026.

Schools themselves, in every town and city across the nation, should use a standard survey instrument approved by the U.S. Department of Education (DoE). If the federal government doesn't want to step up, state boards of education can and should.

Title IX recognizes the value of student interest surveys. Providing sport teams that meet student interest as demonstrated through a survey is one way that a school can show compliance with Title IX. But that assessment has only been applied to the interests of the "under-represented sex" in that school's athletic programs, which historically has meant girls. That protection remains important. But a school should also know if boys want volleyball, girls want wrestling, or students broadly want climbing or flag football.

Schools receiving federal support should distribute an online survey annually, with results published on the websites of the school and DoE. The school should then make efforts to create teams or activities that align with student interests, or identify non-school options in the community to consider.

We recognize the challenges that many schools will face in meeting student demand, especially those in districts with low resources and crumbling infrastructure. But measuring demand gives schools and policymakers better information for directing scarce resources and can unlock opportunities for advocates to argue for more.

- **Expand What Counts as a Meaningful Sports Opportunity**

Schools' narrow focus on interscholastic opportunities also limits participation. The findings of this report reinforce that boys want alternatives to traditional options: more casual, lower-cost, low-pressure sport environments that meet personal needs and can be enjoyed with friends,

activities like biking, weightlifting, golf, pickleball, rugby and ultimate frisbee. Late starters and late developers need entry points. So do students who enjoy sports but have less interest in highly competitive teams.

Policymakers should develop a broader sports participation framework that recognizes differences among varsity, student-led club, intramural, and recreational opportunities while encouraging schools to expand all of them where there is demand. Federal guidance should recognize a wider range of athletic opportunities under Title IX. Although the law applies to all school athletic pro-

grams, the framework for evaluating whether schools are meeting students' interests focuses on interscholastic teams. Other meaningful, school-sponsored programs should also count, provided they are adequately supported and offered equitably to boys and girls.

Title IX should remain an essential protection against sex discrimination. But the broader public-policy objective should be more ambitious: maximize the number of young people who can experience the physical, social, educational, and developmental benefits of sports.

Measuring student demand and expanding sports opportunities will require public investment. Several potential funding streams are already available or under consideration. First, the recent [Meta settlement](#) with states will provide at least \$12.1 billion over ten years; the [agreement](#) expressly identifies after-school and summer programs “such as sports” and outdoor activities as permissible uses. States could use a portion of those funds for youth sports and connection programs that reduce cost and transportation barriers, strengthen coaching and mentoring, and track participation, belonging, and well-being.

Second, some communities have begun to include youth recreation in data-center negotiations. In Botetourt County, Virginia, Google [committed](#) \$4 million over five years for community projects, including \$320,000 for tennis and pickleball courts, \$430,000 for soccer-field lighting and restrooms, \$3.6 million for a community center, and \$500,000 for ongoing parks and recreation support. In Frederick County, Maryland, a developer [proposed](#) \$40 million for a community center and recreational space, including \$10 million for youth recreation facilities.

Finally, sports betting revenue offers another model. New York already directs \$5 million annually from mobile sports betting to programs for underserved youth, while [pending legislation](#) sponsored by Sen. Jamaal Bailey would dedicate up to 2 percent of that revenue, capped at \$23 million, to youth sports and sports-based youth development. Massachusetts similarly directs 1 percent of its Sports Wagering Fund to a [Youth Development and Achievement Fund](#) that supports after-school activities, including youth athletics. In a TED Talk, NCAA President [Charlie Baker](#) last year called for sports betting proceeds to fund K-12 sports. Another option is building youth and school sports into emerging proposals to tax AI usage to support investments in young people.

The above two reforms reinforce each other: first, ask students what they want. Then build a sports system capable of responding.

The goal is not to redistribute a fixed number of opportunities between boys and girls. It is to protect equal opportunity while growing the number and variety of good opportunities available to both. For girls, that means preserving the gains of the past half-century while continuing to address unmet demand. For boys, it means recognizing that an abundance of male varsity roster spots does not necessarily mean the system is serving boys.

Provide Boys With the Coaches They Need

Boys pay attention to their coaching and want more than the traditional performance-focused, command-and-control approach. Boys told us they want opportunity and belonging, as well as safety and personalized attention. Research shows that such an [approach](#) does not have to be mutually exclusive from competitive success. Boys will benefit from more coaches that understand boys’ physical, social, and emotional development, and have the appropriate [training](#) and support to consistently meet their needs.

Our recommendations:

- **Make Training in Holistic Development Foundational for Coaches**

Coaching strategies rooted in a holistic, positive, long-term development approaches lead to more retention, healthier development, and life skills. Boys stand to benefit from coaches with a sound, general understanding of age-and-stage appropriate methods, underpinned by



knowledge of physical development, mental health, and motivation. While numerous research-backed frameworks and courses exist, a key issue remains the inclusion and standardization of such learning for coaches by sports organizations. Partners of the [Million Coaches Challenge](#) have taken important steps here, pushing the field to adopt more coach training in youth development. In particular, mental health has become a point of emphasis as more [states require training](#) for school-based coaches.

- **Explicit, Boys-Focused Education for Adults Working With Boys in Sports**

The field can do more to support coaches' understanding of the unique issues facing [boys and men today](#), including how sport is uniquely suited to prepare boys for successful futures, and how coaches can specifically work with boys to deliver on that promise. Coach education bodies can design programs to help coaches understand gender differences in educational attainment, mental health and suicide risk, as well as patterns in how boys develop physically, express emotion, respond to coaching tactics, and are shaped by cultural norms. Boys-specific mental health training warrants particular attention, especially as more states adopt training requirements for sports coaches. Acknowledging differences in how many boys express emotion, The Jed Foundation's recent report on the [Emotional Lives of Boys and Men](#) recognizes coaches in discussion of intervention strategies for caring adults, and Movember's [Ahead of the Game](#) supports community sports programs to engage with mental health [challenges](#).

- **Boys in School Sports Benefit From Teacher-Coaches. Bring Them Back.**

In schools, a key step is to bring more teachers back into coaching. Our interviews reinforced how influential the coach can be in boys' academic lives when they are in the school everyday. Unfortunately, a recurring sentiment is that teacher-coaches are less common today, contributing to a problematic cycle of [coach turnover](#). Reasons include increased academic or instructional responsibility, more demands at home, the challenge of sports parents, [teacher-coach role conflict](#), and, importantly, [pay](#). Researchers and [sport leaders](#) can recognize the importance of teacher-coaches to education-based athletics and search for ways to recruit, hire, and retain them. [Strategies](#) include structured mentorship, targeted professional development, active support with athletes and parents, proactive burnout prevention, and more attractive pay or stipends.

- **Address Hazing Through More Research, Guidance, and Education for Coaches**

Hazing deserves more attention, particularly around coaches' responsibilities for prevention, supervision and intervention. Despite emerging evidence that sports hazing undermines boys' development, including numerous scandals involving boys' teams, the issue remains notoriously underresearched, with the best current youth sports data coming from Canada. In the U.S., the [2024 Stop Campus Hazing Act](#) requires universities to collect and report data on hazing, but we need data at the high school level, perhaps through existing surveys like the [Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System \(YRBS\)](#). At the same time, the field may benefit from more specific policy, guidance, and education, such as what activities should be allowable for team bonding (e.g., team dinner, or captains workouts) and grey area activities that should be banned (e.g., coerced haircuts, or forced servitude to older teammates). Additional efforts can be made to [educate high school students](#), address unsupervised time, encourage bystander intervention and reporting, and hold administrators and coaches reasonably accountable.

- **Build Coaching Pathways Through Workforce Development**

If we believe that sport can serve as an effective intervention for boys today, efforts should be made to [professionalize](#) the coaching role through workforce development. This includes structural approaches to recruitment, retention, and ongoing development that can link opportunity, support, pay and/or benefits to increased volunteerism, education and accountability. Effective coaching is both art and science, and demands a deep repertoire of knowledge and skills. While completion of individual courses does support [gains](#) in knowledge and confidence, [researchers](#) and [youth sports coalitions](#) continue to call for deeper reforms that can address systemic barriers to quality coaching. For instance, the [Commission on the State of the Olympics and Paralympics](#) called on Congress, the USOPC, and other stakeholders to improve coaching at all levels, including by making coach education fees tax deductible and encouraging public colleges and universities to offer degree or certificate programs in coaching and coaching-related fields. Given the unique potential that sports has for providing formative experiences for boys, a targeted effort to create attractive pathways for coaches, particularly in sports dominated by boys, would have a transformative effect on their experiences.

Foster Healthy Connections Between Sports and Boys' Digital Lives

Clearly, digital technology plays a complicated role in the lives of boys today. Video games, YouTube, and the phone-based childhood are pillars of the public dialogue around boys. How do sports fit into that conversation? Is playing sports a viable alternative to helping boys reject the urge of technology, or social media fodder that leaves boys worried about going viral in the wrong ways? We call on the field to contribute to the conversation about boys, youth sport, healthy childhoods, and digital technology.

Our recommendations:

- **Coaches: Talk With Boys About Their Online Lives**

Nationally, coaches express low confidence in their ability to [help youth navigate social media](#). That needs to change. As mentors with regular access to boys, coaches can play an influential

role in shaping boys' online behavior. Positively, real relationships still matter to boys, especially coaches. According to Common Sense Media, 36% of boys draw on their coach as a source for what it means to be a 'good man,' including proactive discussions of [online content](#). Coach education bodies like the [Positive Coaching Alliance](#) have started moving in this direction by teaching strategies for helping youth navigate social media. In the United Kingdom, EE, a major telecommunications network and internet service provider, recently created the [Mentor Badge](#), a resource to help coaches of boys recognize and tackle negative online influences in their teams.

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- **Enact Organizational Policies That Set Healthy Boundaries Around Phone Usage**

Should sports programs ban phones in the same way that many schools now do? Some already have. After a team captain [started bagging phones](#) before bed on road trips, players cited fewer distractions and an improved ability to "live in the moment." Similarly, former Los Angeles Angels Manager Ron Washington banned cell phones [in the clubhouse](#) to foster more focus, interaction, and bonding — all things we want sports to do for boys. As more states enact school [phone ban policies](#) and [Americans support](#) their implementation, the discussion has centered almost entirely on what happens during the school day. Afterschool extra-curricular activities, especially sport, remain largely absent from the national discussion on teens. If they are not already doing so, sports programs can implement whistle-to-whistle practice and game bans, technology curfews on road trips, restricted bus/van recording, and lead-by-example rules for coaches and officials.

- **Reduce Constant Digital Surveillance to Support Boys' Healthy Risk-Taking**

At minimum, sports clubs and programs should already have [photography and filming consent policies](#) to guide official use of footage and protect youth from inappropriate taking or use of images. That said, consent forms tend not to stop bystander phone capture, such as sideline phone recording, which may shape on-court behavior and can undermine the healthy risk-taking that sport has historically afforded. Schools, clubs, event organizers, and facilities should explore common sense ways to keep phone and camera usage out of sensitive areas (e.g., locker rooms), keep sharing of recordings to private, password protected team apps, set guidelines for livestreaming, and establishing spectator codes of conduct that grant authority to leagues to ask non-compliant spectators to stop prohibited forms of recording (e.g., team huddles).

Bring Sports Into the Public Dialogue on the State of Boys and Men

Youth turn to sports stars for inspiration, guidance, and behavior modeling. Whether one is a fan, recreational participant, or emerging athlete, that influence can be better leveraged to more directly help boys make sense of a world that challenges them to define success, belonging, friendship, and competence. Acknowledging the reach of social media, influencers and content creators, particularly professional athletes with large followings, can connect boys' interest in sports content to meaningful discussions of boys' issues. At the same time, sports media, including PR companies, broadcasters and others can engage in strategic conversations around how the issues facing boys and men show up on their platforms.

Our recommendation:

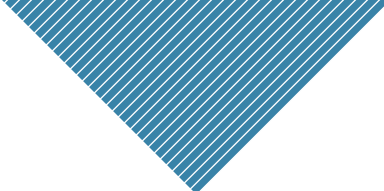
- **Elevate Positive Male Role Models in Sports Culture**

Coaches are often boys' most immediate role models, but professional athletes, content creators, broadcasters, and sponsors also shape how boys think about the world and define success. According to [Common Sense Media](#), 60% of boys find online creators inspirational and 56% use their advice for practical help. Athletes and creators can use that influence to model qualities such as discipline, friendship, emotional openness, responsible parenting, care for teammates, and willingness to seek help. NBA player DeMar DeRozan offers one example, using sports content to open conversations about [mental health](#), [fatherhood](#), and [therapy](#).

Broadcasters, advertisers, sponsors, and public relations firms can help amplify these examples. Sports coverage commonly presents athletes as competitors, but it can also show them as teammates, friends, fathers, and people navigating setbacks. Highlighting a wider range of positive male role models would connect boys' interest in sports to constructive conversations about the challenges they face beyond the field.

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CONCLUSION

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The challenges confronting young men today — spanning academic disengagement, economic uncertainty, and rising social isolation — demand practical, accessible interventions. Youth sports have historically offered a foundational space where boys build resilience, form supportive relationships with adults, and cultivate a sense of belonging and purpose.

The research identifies early specialization, digital recording, coaching quality and limited recreational options as reported concerns and plausible obstacles to boys sports participation, though their prevalence and causal importance remain uncertain.

Ultimately, ensuring quality experiences for boys in sports requires an intentional shift away from narrow, performance-focused models and towards accessible platforms for personal growth, community connection and future preparation. By strengthening coaching pathways, expanding low-barrier-to-entry programs, diversifying selection processes, and intentionally connecting sports to academic and career exploration, leaders can help boys get the full benefits of sports. Furthermore, establishing clear digital boundaries around sports practices and leveraging positive male influencers present vital opportunities to safeguard mental health and promote modern, empathetic expressions of sportsmanship and character.

Rebuilding a sport ecosystem that serves all boys requires moving away from rigid, hyper-competitive defaults and toward flexible, athlete-centered environments. When schools, sports organizations, and communities invest in caring coaching, help youth navigate challenging digital worlds, expand low-stakes and intramural opportunities, and link athletic participation to academic and career success, sport reclaims its transformative potential. These structural and cultural changes are not merely about reversing declining sports participation statistics; they are about fostering healthy, connected, and resilient young men.

Ultimately, the future of boys in sports is tied to our collective willingness to listen to youth, adapt to their evolving needs, and prioritize their holistic well-being over performance alone. By aligning policy, coaching, and community resources around these solutions, we can ensure that sports remain a predictable, developmental bedrock for every boy — advancing positive social, educational, and emotional outcomes across our broader society.