

**A Descriptive Study of The Impact Youth Athletic Participation has on Childhood
Development.**

By Joseph Pille

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to describe the effects of youth athletic participation on student development. Development was broken down into three categories: Childhood development, health, and confidence, and over-all wellbeing. Childhood development consists of academic, athletic, emotional, social, and personal development. Health and confidence include mental and physical health and self-confidence. Over-all being is split into competency and wellbeing. Twenty-five youth lacrosse coaches from New Jersey were asked to fill out a questionnaire asking for their coaching experience, a Likert scale to describe effects on development, and then a short response to describe their personal perspective. All coaches responded that athletic participation had a range of neutral to positive impact on student development. No coaches responded that athletics had a negative effect on any area of student development. Research should continue due to the small sample size of coaches limited to New Jersey and lacrosse. Coaches from different areas and sports could see more negative or more positive effects on student development.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Overview

Children and teens all struggle with issues in and around their life. Some of these include social issues like acceptance or bullying, others include physical issues like eating disorders or being overweight, and finally children deal with mental issues like depression and anxiety. These common issues along with others such as struggling in school or personal character development have a major impact on the lifetime achievements of individuals, and these issues are influenced by a multitude of different areas of daily life.

The one area of impact that this paper will focus on is athletic participation specifically in children under the age of 18. Athletics encompasses more than just physically practicing and playing games. Athletics touches on different areas of youth development beginning in the physical realm of exercise and activity, but in sports you need to learn how to communicate in social scenarios where emotions may run high, and you need to learn to interact with everyone, even those who you do not like or have had poor interactions within the past.

Participation in sports indirectly influences academics because time management skills are learned quickly. Time management skills paired with the concern of coaches for your well-being in all facets of life can influence a lot of players' academic standing. Starting at young ages, people look for ways to socialize, find acceptance, and succeed in something that they love; sports is that for many young children and teens, and it helps them develop lifelong skills, form bonds that last forever, and build up their mental health and self-esteem.

Youth athletics has a lot of issues, mainly cost, that limit the ability for many to participate, but even with that massive hindrance most studies agree that between 50-60% of all children under the age of 18 in the United States participate in some form of sport or activity. A report by the Aspen institute in 2016 claimed three of every four American households have at least one school-aged child participating in youth sports. This number roughly translates to 57% of all American children.

Mental health issues are rampant in young children as well. According to the CDC, almost 6.5 million children under 18 suffer from some form of depression or anxiety. (CDC.GOV, 2020) From a report published by the National Center for Education Statistics and Bureau of Justice, twenty percent of all students aged 12-18 reported suffering from some form of bullying. The most common forms include being physically assaulted, being the subject of lies, or being excluded.

As far as physical fitness goes, it is well documented that American children struggle tremendously with eating disorders and or being overweight or obese. Other issues like academic success affect children from all walks of life. Nearly 5.3% of students in the United States drop out of high school, and those numbers get even higher in areas without expensive school resources like athletics. Every one of these issues can be impacted directly by athletics or directly by those in youth athletics like coaches and support staff, and this impact is almost always positive for those children who do participate in youth sports.

Research has seen the impact that sports have played a role in the advancement of people's lives. Coaches, working with students as young as third grade until those students graduate from high school, begin to see players personalities and social abilities form; you see

how they learn to manage their activities to get good grades and keep developing at sports, and finally you see the players who take care of themselves physically. Many students communicate that athletic participation has had a profound impact on the person that they have become.

Statement of Problem

The purpose of this study is to examine the effects that participation in youth athletics has on student development. This study touches on multiple areas of childhood development including academic, athletic, mental, social, and personal. Participation in youth athletics, both team and individual sports, can have lasting impacts on all areas of growth. This study will specifically target youth participation in boys and girls lacrosse.

Operational Definition

Athletic Development- The growth of a lacrosse player's technical skills including but not limited to catching, and throwing, cradling, and ground balls.

Overall Competence- The understanding of both technical lacrosse skills and lacrosse game intelligence.

Overall Well-being- The wellness of all areas of life including academic, athletic, social, and mental.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Overview

This review of the literature examines the effect of athletic participation in youth sports on academic performance and success. The first section will explore the impact of athletic participation on student success. The second section looks at the effect that academics play on both athletic participation and athletic success including playing time and statistical athletic success such as goals or points scored. The final section explores the unforeseen effect of youth athletic participation. These three sections include benefits that sports participation have on personality development, and the health benefits that come from regular fitness and exercise activity.

Impact of Athletic Participation on Student Success

Teachers and coaches spend hours every day with young students. In many cases, especially in single parent and low-income households, students will spend more time with their teachers or coaches than their own parents. In many of these cases, parents are working multiple jobs to make ends meet, and are not able to spend time during the day with their own children. Outside of school, athletics become an easy way for parents to keep their children off the streets and enrolled in a productive and safe environment. In 2017, 58 percent of youth, ages 6 to 17 years, participated in team sports or took sports lessons after school or on weekends in the previous 12 months (Health.Gov, 2019). These numbers vary depending on many personal circumstances including parent's educational attainment, household income, age, sex, and race

and ethnicity. Age and sex have the smallest influence on athletic participation with male participation slightly higher than their female counterparts.

The same goes for age where students from 12-17 participate at a higher rate than those in the 6-12 age range. Race and ethnicity had varying degrees of separation the largest being participation levels between white and black athletes. The next largest gap was between white and Hispanic youth. White, Asian, and other students all participate within a similar percentile. The largest deciding factor in participation in sports was household income. Students whose family income was below the poverty threshold participated in athletics at 40% while children whose family made 400% more than the poverty threshold had almost an 80% participation rate.

From the collegiate level on down to elementary school, athletics and academics go hand in hand. Many times, athletics can be the reward that students receive for their effort and hard work in the classroom. For many other students, athletics are the saving grace from the effort that it takes just to get through a day in the classroom.

Standardized tests have long been the baseline for student's academic success. While it has recently become a less important standard to judge student success on, tests like the SAT and ACT are still widely required for college admittance. For younger students, the Department of Education has their own educational achievement tests in four different specific areas of study. Student achievement is measured by performance in the four areas of reading, writing, mathematics, and science (Nations Report Card, 2019). In grade 4 to grade 8, the national average raises anywhere from 1 to 40 points based on participation in athletics. The largest average growth can be seen in mathematics and reading. Middle school is the start of organized sports sponsored by schools which all require academic standards to compete.

As well as academic standards that must be met, athletic participation sees a jump at age 12 which also is the jump to middle school from elementary school. School sponsored athletic teams also require mandatory attendance to practice and play for school teams. A report on college level athletes has shown that athletes had higher class scores than their counterparts. “Across all coursework at our university, the academic performance of athletes in this study exceeded that of non-athletes” (Mourgela, & Pacurar, 2017, p.202). Athletic participation translates directly to academic success because of many outside influences including time management and ability to deal with stress in healthy ways.

Absenteeism is used as an early indicator of student success. Students who miss more than 10% or almost 20 days of school per year have demonstrated challenges in both maintaining good health and good grades. “The study makes an importantly positive linkage between school attendance and academic performance.” (Sekiwu, 2020, p. 152) Studies done in countries all over the world have found the same results as this study done in Uganda. School attendance is directly linked to academic success. Sports require students to be present in class on all days when sports participation occurs, so athletes who want to practice and play in games must attend school. Athletics becomes so important for so many students because it is the best way to deal with stress while competing and growing academically and athletically.

The impact of Academic Performance on Athletic Performance

Academic performance and success can have a positive effect on athletic performance in multiple different categories. Athletic participation is directly tied to academic success. “Furthermore, it can be claimed that the difficulty of managing both sports and academic life is overcome thanks to a planned and regular life, which brings success to athletes in both areas” (Sezen, 2018, p. 600). Structured academic and athletic schedules have shown to increase the performance in both aspects of everyday life. Time management practices can be taught and will have a direct effect on success. Academic standards can be shown to increase athletic participation and on-field performance. Playing time as well as statistical increases can be shown to have ties to academic performance. The same attitudes and traits that lead to high academic success can be seen in high athletic performers. Traits that include work ethic, attention to detail, and positive outlook can all be shown to increase performance in the classroom and on the field. Along with personal traits, support from teachers and coaches, especially those who perform both roles for a student, has an impact on academic and athletic success. “In a study about student re-enrollment or continued participation, researchers found that of the five main reasons for retention, one of the main reasons was the availability of learning support services had an effect on re-enrollment” (Sugilar, 2020, p.50). Quality coaching will keep athletes continuing to participate in formal sports the same way that a great teacher keeps their students paying attention in class.

Along with academic success come different techniques and attitudes that transfer onto the competitive field of play. Many studies have shown that different learning strategies can predict academic success. “This result agrees with previous findings suggesting that learning strategies, as well as academic future orientation, play an essential role in determining students’

academic success.” (Mazzetti, Paolucci, Guglielmi, & Vannini, 2020, p.134) These cognitive and behavioral strategies to help study can be used to train and prepare for games and practice.

The three phases of learning can be directly related to athletics. Preparation, performance, and appraisal are just different names for practice, game day, and post-game phases of athletics. Just like success in the classroom, the path of preparation and performance are the same academically and athletically. “Results from our study confirm the cyclic nature of self-regulated learning models, showing that learning strategies can impact positively on students’ expectations which, in turn, help them in achieving higher outcomes.” (Mazzetti et al., 2020, p. 134) This cyclical nature of positive preparation to positive performance leading to positive appraisal continue to push proper training and practice to succeed in the classroom and on the pitch. In this regard, achieving good grades is the result of the interaction between the future expectations of students and their opinions about their ability to achieve academic success. To summarize the results of these studies, students that have success tend to show high levels of self-esteem and expect good results on future tests.

Unforeseen Effects of Athletic Participation

Outside of the athletic and academic arenas, changes that can occur from organized youth sports include health and fitness. Studies have shown that children who participate in organized physical activity have increased mental health, happiness, and personal outlooks on top of the physical benefits to include healthy Body Mass Indexes (BMI). “Our findings, which are consistent with findings in previous research, indicate that being more involved in sports is associated with higher levels of fitness (i.e., cardiorespiratory, strength, and endurance) and of PA self-efficacy and aerobic endurance and strength self-concepts.” (Clevinger, 2020, p. 162)

Studies have shown time and time again that 60 minutes of moderate to intense levels of physical activity show higher levels of physical fitness. Physical education is the only time many students are active outside of formal athletic participation. Due to budgeting concerns, this has become an easy class to cut to save money in the budget. Other studies have shown a much deeper level of physical health. "Regular physical activity supports people's development with physical and physiological effects such as increasing bone mineral density, strengthening muscles and joints, maintaining musculoskeletal system, controlling body weight, reducing fat mass and improving heart and liver functions." (Orhan, 2015, p. 70) Athletic participation is guaranteed physical activity that is so important for physical health and now it is shown to effect mental health as well.

Most recently, people have begun to understand the benefits of good mental health. "Self-concept has been cited by some researchers as the variable with the most potential to reflect positive psychological gains." (Sonstroem & Morgan, 1988 p. 330) Psychological outlook has a direct correlation to physical health and fitness. The mind and body feed off each other and healthy lifestyles can help produce higher levels of mental health. Physical fitness and organized athletics can also have positive benefits for mood and behavioral patterns.

"It is clear that sports have a positive effect on subjective happiness levels of individuals." (Huang & Humphreys, 2012, p. 786) Children have been shown to self-report higher levels of happiness from participation in athletics. Research by the World Health Organization found similar results. Research done by Bingol and Bingol stated that sports positively affect the subjective happiness levels of individuals in terms of psychology. While happiness is inherently subjective, athletics has been shown as a catalyst to enhance one's own feelings. Many young athletes are more sociable and generally have a happier disposition.

Lifelong habits begin to form at a young age and many of these habits are directly influenced from coaches in youth athletics.

Athletics can also play a major role in achieving personal goals. “It was found in our study that there was a significant difference in the goal commitment levels of the participants, and the scores of the individuals engaged in active sports were higher.” (Bingol & Bingol, 2020, p. 495) This study presented the difference in goal attainment by students who actively participate in sports and students who do not. Students did not need to specifically compete in individual or team sports, but the sole act of participation in athletics helped increase their personal achievements. Athletics can have a major impact on both goal achievement and happiness. “A significant and positive relationship was found between goal commitment and subjective happiness. Accordingly, as the level of goal commitment of students increases, their subjective happiness level increases.” (Bingol & Bingol, p. 497) As students begin to set goals for themselves in both athletics and academics, the achievement and accomplishment of these progressively larger milestones has a direct correlation to personal happiness. Students’ who strive to and hit the mark on athletic goals such as playing in college or academic goals like hitting a 1400 on the SAT, tend to have high levels of personal happiness and outlook.

The final and most important unforeseen benefit of sport participation in schools was related to behavior. “The present study found that greater participation in sports was related to enhance emotional and behavioral well-being. The researchers found significantly lower levels of externalizing and social problems as compared to those who engaged in fewer formal sports.” (Donaldson & Ronan, 2006) Students who routinely participated in formal and informal athletics had less instances of external attitudes toward teachers and other students. The same study

indicated that students who felt athletically competent had fewer behavioral issues that has been a massive problem in schools from high school to elementary school.

Summary

Organized youth sports participation has shown a positive effect on multiple areas of childhood and human life. Academic success can be directly influenced by athletic participation and on-field performance can be shown to increase as academic success is achieved. Academic and athletic performance is affected by many of the same traits that top-level athletes and members of academia demonstrate. Traits such as work ethic, high self-esteem, and positivity can all be shown to increase overall performance across the board. Athletic participation, especially started at a young age, has been shown to have life-long benefits. Athletes tend to have lower BMI and less diseases related to weight like obesity and type two diabetes. Athletic participation has been shown to have important long-term influence on academic success along with a healthier life and better athletic performance.

CHAPTER III

METHODS

Design

This research is a descriptive study. The study specifically looked at the areas of athletic development, emotional development, social development, and academic development. Along with those 4 major categories, the study also touches on self-confidence, personal character, mental and physical health, and concludes with a look at overall-competence and well-being. Each of these areas of childhood development were assessed via a Likert scale questionnaire that was completed by lacrosse coaches.

Participants

For this study, twenty-five coaches were given a questionnaire and asked to complete it based on their personal history as youth lacrosse coach. All the coaches are highly qualified New Jersey youth club and school coaches. All have been coaching for more than one year with an average of 9 plus years of coaching experience. Fifteen of the 25 are direct competitors or co-workers in New Jersey youth club lacrosse with the researcher. The other ten are from the researcher's high school and college alma mater. Each coach had direct communication from the researcher about the questionnaire.

Instrument

The instrument used was a self-designed questionnaire that included both Likert scale questions and open-ended questions. The designed questionnaire had 12 questions. The first question was a multiple-choice question asking the participant to disclose how long they have

been a youth lacrosse coach. The next 10 questions were all based upon the same Likert scale of 1 to 5 with 1 being denoted a negative impact and 5 being a positive impact. The final question was an open-ended short answer question to allow the participants to describe from their perspective what the advantages and disadvantages of participation in youth athletics are specifically in the game of lacrosse. This instrument was not tested for validity and reliability.

Procedure

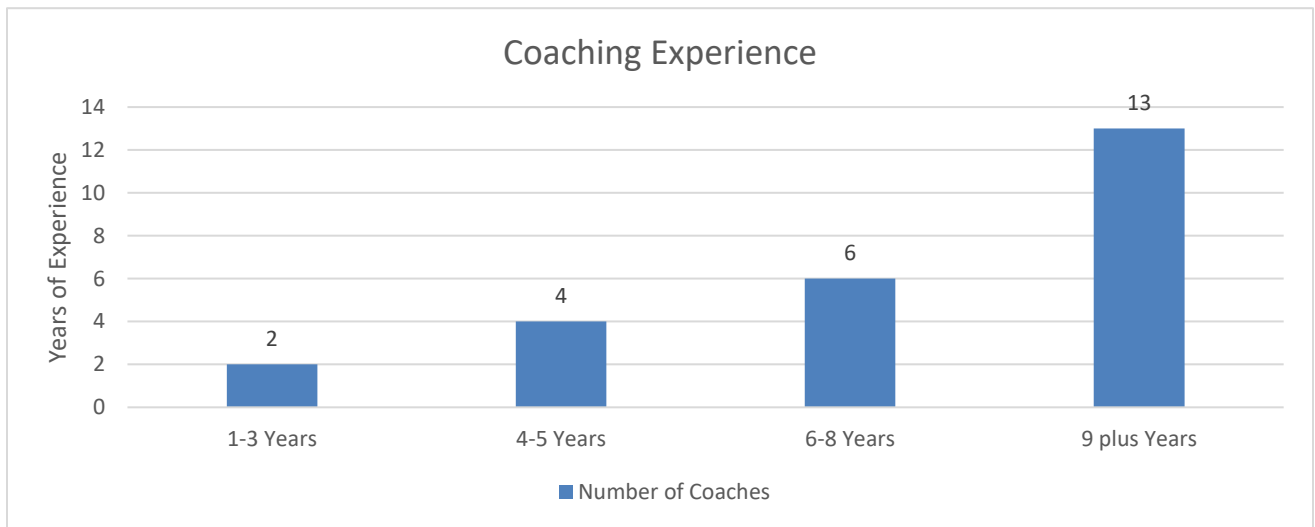
The questionnaire was created and distributed using the online platform, Google forms. After the list of participating coaches was selected and finalized, each participant was sent an individualized email asking for their participation in this study. Each coach was given ten days to read through and complete the questionnaire. Any coach who did not complete the questionnaire before the 5-day mark was sent a follow up email asking again that they participate in the study. The answers to each section of questions were collected via google docs.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

This study attempted to describe the impact that youth athletic participation has on multiple areas of childhood development. Data was gathered from New Jersey HS and Youth lacrosse coaches via an email questionnaire. This group of coaches were divided into four experience groups shown in Figure 1. Eight percent of these coaches had 1 to 3 years of experience. Sixteen percent of coaches had 4-5 years of coaching; 24% of coaches who responded had 6-8 years of experience, and 52% of coaches had 9 or more years of experience with the most being 25 years of coaching youth lacrosse.

Figure 1: Coaching Experience

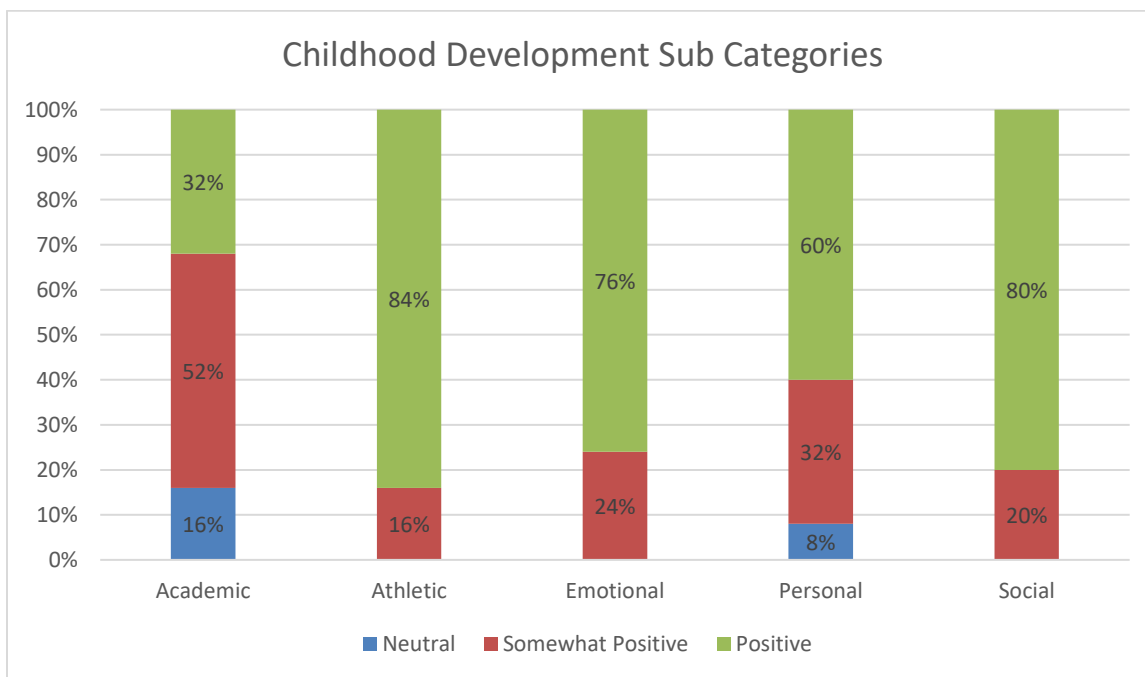


These 25 coaches answered questions that appeared in three different categories. These categories include childhood development, health, and confidence, and over-all development. Childhood development includes sub-categories of academic, emotional, athletic, social, and

personal development. Health and confidence include mental and physical health along with self-confidence. Overall development incorporates overall competency and overall wellbeing.

Five of the biggest categories of childhood development include areas of academic, athletic, emotional, personal, and social development. The answers can be seen in Figure 2. Across these 5 subcategories most coaches responded that athletic participation had a somewhat positive to positive impact. In the categories of academic development and personal development, a small group of coaches did note that athletic participation had a neutral impact.

Figure 2: Childhood Development Sub-Categories

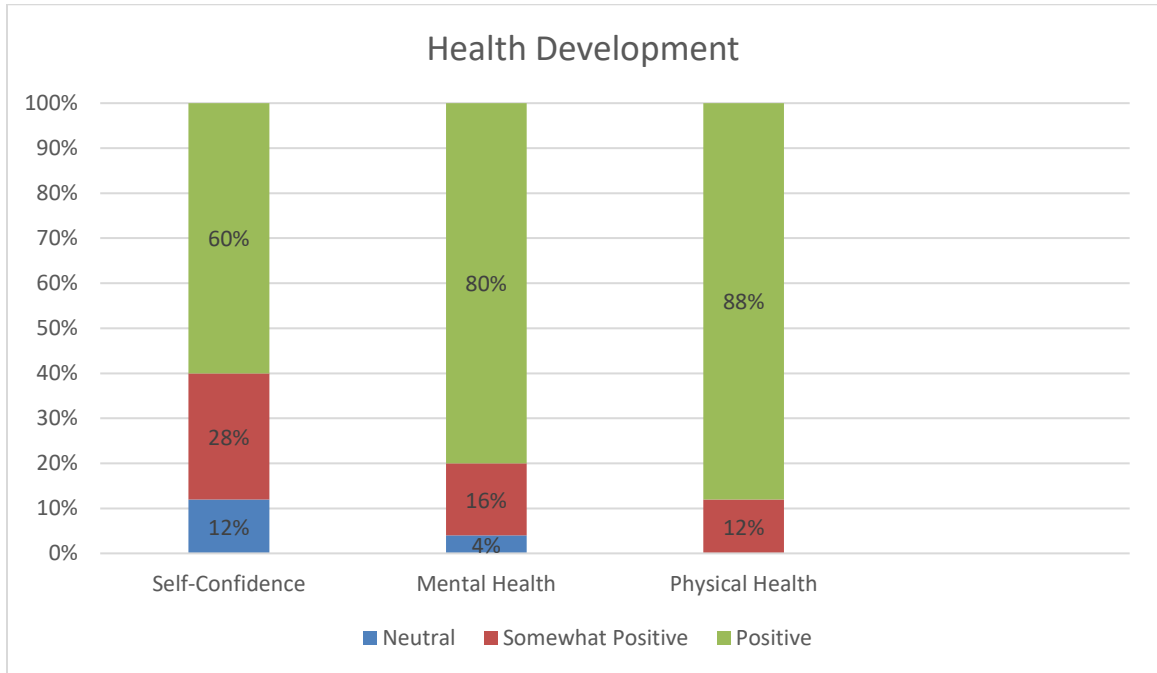


Academic development was the least positively impacted by athletic participation. Fifty-two percent of the coaches responded that athletic participation had a somewhat positive impact. Along with this 52%, 16% of coaches noted that athletic participation has a neutral impact. Only 32% of coaches stated that participation had a positive impact on academic development. Of all 5

sub-categories, academic had the largest response of neutral and somewhat positive impact. Personal Development was the second least positively impacted area of development. For this sub-category, 8% of coaches responded with a neutral impact and 16% of coaches noted a somewhat positive impact. Outside of academic development, personal development had 60% of coaches state a positive impact.

Athletic performance was the most positively developed by participation. Eighty-four percent of coaches stated a positive impact and the other 16% responded with a somewhat positive impact. The second most positively impacted area of childhood development was social. In social development, 80% of coaches responded that athletic participation had a positive impact along with the other 20% of coaches noting a somewhat positive impact. Emotional impact was just slightly less positive than athletic or social development. Seventy-six percent of coaches responded that athletic participation had a positive impact on emotional development. The other 24% of coaches responded with a somewhat positive impact for emotional development.

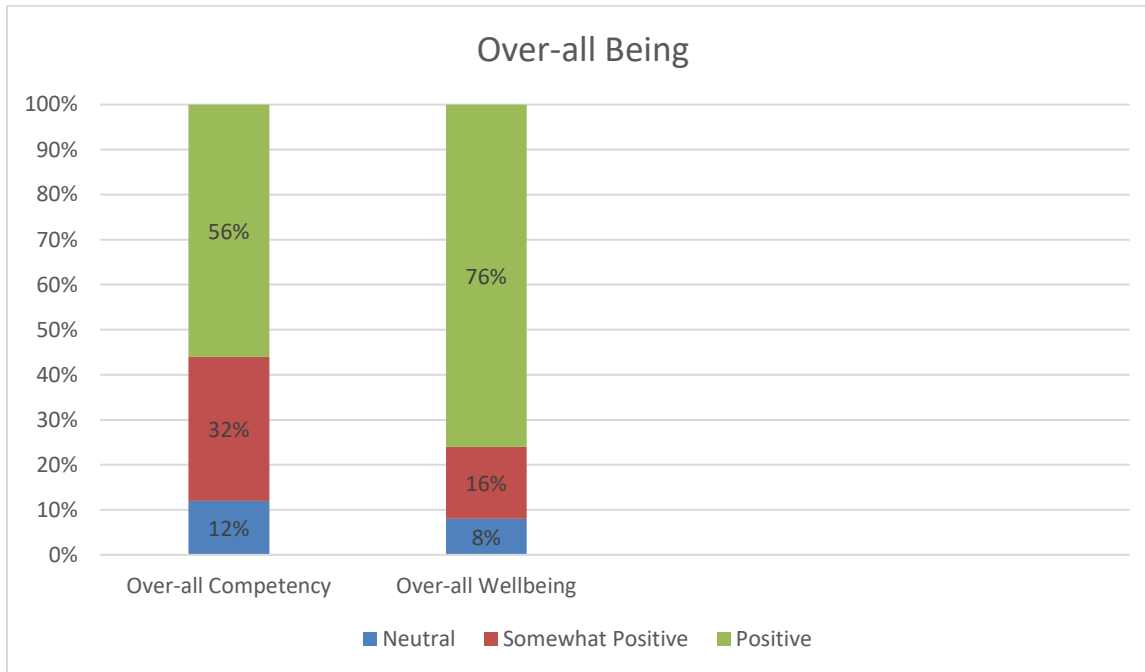
Figure 3: Self-Confidence, Mental Health, and Physical Health



Physical health was the most positively impacted of all areas of development. Eighty-eight percent of coaches responded with a positive impact on physical health from participation in youth athletics. Twelve percent of coaches responded that youth athletics had a somewhat positive impact on development. Mental health was also highly positively impacted with 80% of coaches stating that athletic participation had a positive impact on mental health while 20% of coaches responded differently. Four percent of coaches stated that athletic participation had a neutral impact and 16% of coaches said it was somewhat positive. Self-confidence was the least positively impacted by athletic participation. Twelve percent of coaches said that athletic participation had a neutral impact and 28% of coaches said it was only somewhat positive on the development of self-confidence. Sixty percent of coaches did say that athletics had a positive impact.

The final areas of development include over-all competency and overall wellbeing. Competency included both athletic ability and lacrosse IQ. Overall wellbeing is a combination of mental and physical health.

Figure 4: Over-all Competency, Over-all Wellbeing



Coaches had mixed reviews about over-all competency. Fifty-six percent of coaches stated a positive impact from athletic participation while 32% of coaches gave a somewhat positive impact. Twelve percent of coaches stated that there was a neutral impact from athletic participation. Over-all wellbeing had a slightly less neutral impact with only 8% of coaches responding so. There was a much higher positive impact with only 16% of coaches stating a somewhat positive impact and 76% of coaches stating that athletic participation had a positive impact on over-all wellbeing.

Every category was given a positive impact on development because of a child's participation in youth athletics. In about half of these categories, coaches responded with a neutral response with the most neutral impact was only seen by four coaches. Every category had a median amount of somewhat positive responses to athletic participation. Every player is affected differently because of several outside factors including parents, interest in athletics, and stress, but in most cases, athletic participation has been shown to be a positive force in childhood development.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

This descriptive study examined the effects of youth athletic participation on student development. The analysis of the coaches' responses would lead the research to indicate that athletic participation specifically, in youth lacrosse, has a positive impact on all areas of student development. Youth athletics give the kids a team environment where they learn to compete, share, and bond. Physical exercise alleviates stress/anxiety and gets them moving. As well, sports encourage positive mental and physical wellbeing where students learn how to handle success and non-success with proper emotional intelligence.

Implications of Results

The responses from these coaches are significant because of their description of the positivity on the development of students through youth athletic participation. Every sub-category of childhood development had, on average, a 66% positive impact from athletic participation with the highest being 84% positive impact in athletic development. Mental and physical health saw an average 76% positive impact from youth athletic participation. Over-all competency and wellbeing had an average 66% positive impact from youth sports. The description of the effects on youth sports should be shared with parents whose children are getting to the age of youth sports or who are pushing to participate in youth athletics. Most parents and children want to develop positively across their youth, and athletics can be a very impactful way to develop their athletic, social, and personal abilities.

Theoretical Consequences

The responses submitted by coaches demonstrate a strong relationship to the theories addressed in Chapter II. Huang and Humphreys (2012) spoke about the positive effects that sports have on subjective levels of happiness in players. As the coaches have stated, sports have a positive effect on more than just happiness. Athletic participation has positive influences on mental health and self-confidence as well as intrinsic happiness in social abilities and athletic achievement.

These positive outlooks from athletic participation show a direct correlation to the research done by Bingol and Bingol (2020) who spoke about subjective happiness from a psychological standpoint. These researchers indicated that athletic participation and goal achievement have a direct positive influence on happiness especially in the areas of academic and athletic achievement.

Along with Bingol and Bingol (2020), Sonstroem and Morgan (1988) spoke about mental health and self-confidence and the direct impact that athletic participation has on individuals. Athletic participation and healthy physical fitness have a positive impact on mental health, self-confidence, and happiness.

In this study, every coach who was interviewed spoke positively about the effects of athletic participation. This study and previous studies have shown that athletic participation has a positive effect on student development.

Threats to Validity

While all research has threats to the validity of the results, the main threats to validity in this study are internal. The main threat to validity is the sample size of the coaches who were contacted to fill out the questionnaire. Twenty-five lacrosse coaches from New Jersey are a small, limited sample size that may not give a true description of the effects on student development. Another threat to the validity is the questionnaire itself. The questionnaire was designed by the researcher and was not tested for validity and reliability. The writing and questions could be misleading to research subjects.

Connections to Previous Studies

This study can be linked to multiple studies about sports and areas of student development. In areas of happiness, self-esteem/confidence, and mental health, studies by Sonstroom and Morgan (1988) and Huang and Humphreys (2012) show the connections between physical activity and sports and higher levels of happiness and self-esteem. The results seen in this study back up the results seen in both studies that activity and participation positively impact the development of student's self-confidence and Mental Health.

Another study that has a direct connection to academic development was done by Sezen (2018). This research has shown higher academic performance in students who had participated in rhythmic gymnastics in secondary school. This research also demonstrated that there is a point of diminishing return where students can become too focused on their athletics and their academic performance can suffer because of it. The result seen in this research suggests that it is very possible as academic development had the highest neutral impact of any area of student

development. In a larger study, academics could be the highest area that is negatively impacted by youth athletic participation.

Implications to Future Research

The responses to the research questionnaire suggest that athletic participation has a positive impact on student development specifically in youth athletics. Every coach who responded to the questionnaire stated that youth athletic participation had a positive impact on all areas of student development. Because of the sample size and background of the coaches' contacted, future research should incorporate a larger number of youth coaches who come from different areas and coach different sports. A larger disparity in coaches from different sports and locations would solidify that youth sports have a positive impact on student development. The other possibilities that may arise from a larger sample size would be that certain sports or locations or coaches see either a positive or negative impact on student development from athletic participation.

Conclusions

It was the goal of this descriptive study to examine the possible effects of youth athletic participation on student development. The answers that this researcher received show a positive impact on student development because of athletic participation. It is very important to continue this research in different areas of the country and with coaches from different sports. This research is too limited to get a full perspective of the impact that youth athletics has on student development. The research can be very important for parents, coaches, and players to become the best possible people they can be.

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