



# STATE OF PLAY 2017

## TRENDS AND DEVELOPMENTS



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## THE VISION

An America in which  
all children have the  
opportunity to be  
active through sports

## THE FRAMEWORK

Sport for All, Play for Life:  
A Playbook to Get Every  
Kid in the Game

by the Aspen Institute  
Project Play

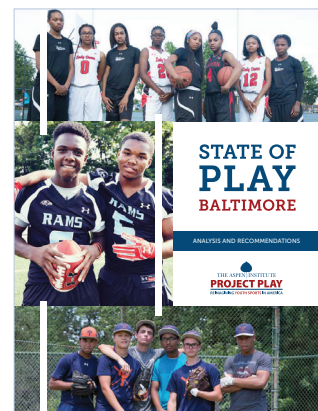
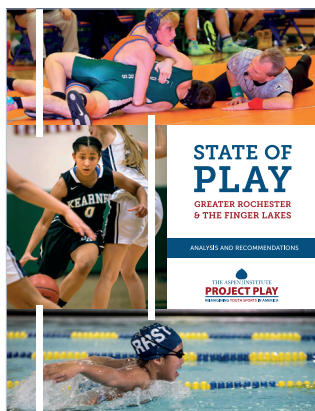
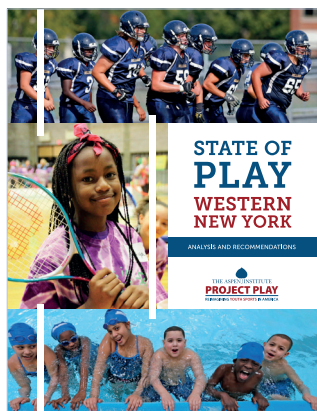
[youthreport.projectplay.us](http://youthreport.projectplay.us)

## SPORT as defined by Project Play

All forms of physical activity which, through organized or casual play, aim to express or improve physical fitness and mental well-being. Participants may be motivated by intrinsic or external rewards, and competition may be with others or themselves (personal challenge).

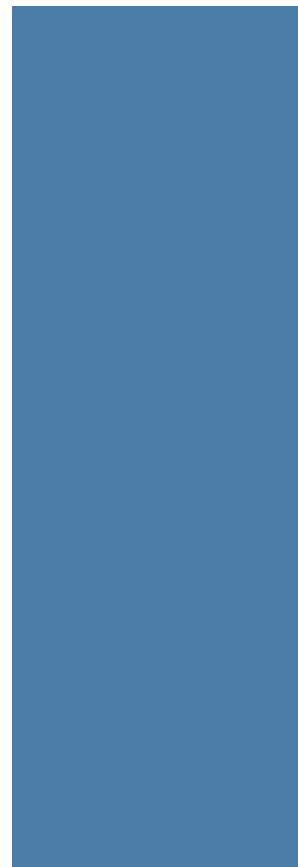
## ALSO WORTH READING

Our State of Play reports on cities and regions where we're working.  
Find them at [www.ProjectPlay.us](http://www.ProjectPlay.us)



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## INTRODUCTION

Nina Locklear is a never-bashful 11-year-old from Baltimore with common sense well beyond her years. She plays basketball, serves as a junior coach at her school to motivate other kids, and doesn't hesitate to tell adults why sports are so valuable.

"It's fun when you meet other people that you don't know," Nina told 400 sport, health, policy, industry and media leaders at the 2017 Project Play Summit. "I'm seeing all of you right now. I don't know any of you, none of you. But now that I see you I'm like, 'You're family.' It (doesn't) matter where you live, what you look like, y'all my family and I'm gonna remember that."

If you're reading this, you're probably as passionate as Nina about the power of sports to change lives. Consider this *State of Play: 2017* report by the Aspen Institute's Project Play our response to Nina and millions of kids. It's a resource to guide the efforts of stakeholders who appreciate the benefits, and embrace the challenge, of providing quality sports activity to all kids, regardless of zip code or ability.

Our second annual State of Play report offers a snapshot of how well we as adults are serving children and communities through sports. Focused on the base of our sport system in this country — youth through age 12 — the report presents the latest participation rates, curated for the Aspen Institute by the Sports & Fitness Industry Association through its annual household survey. We identify five key developments in the past year in each of Project Play's eight shared strategies identified in our seminal 2015 report: *Sport for All, Play for Life: A Playbook to Get Every Kid in the Game*, a framework for what good looks like in youth sports.

*State of Play: 2017* also offers grades, crowdsourced at the Summit, on how well stakeholders did in the past year in each of the eight strategies, or opportunity areas. As you can see, the assembled leaders found much room for improvement. This was the year when youth sports landed on the cover of *TIME* magazine, which explored how the games kids play became, according to one minimum estimate, a \$15 billion industry.<sup>1</sup> That's more revenue than is taken in by any professional sports league or media company.<sup>2</sup> Yet, the gap between sports haves and have notes only grew; kids from upper-income homes are now twice as likely to play as those from homes with less than \$25,000 a year in income.

The theme of this year's Summit was "A New Scoreboard for Sports," one based less on who won the game that weekend than the metrics that matter most — how many kids play, how many sports they play, how often coaches are trained, and more. It is a call for programs to capture better data and use it to drive decision-making that improves policies and practices.

Progress is being made. In each of the eight play sections, we highlight one innovative program as the 2017 winners of our "What's Your Play?" annual contest. The "Call for Leadership" section discusses a major collective step forward — the launch of the Project Play 2020 sub-initiative in which leading organizations are coming together for the first time to grow participation and related metrics among youth. The "Next" section covers key questions that we plan to ask in 2018 to push the movement forward.

We hope you find the report useful in your work. Sports can be an intense, competitive venue where winners and losers are declared. But when it comes to shaping policies, breaking new ground with partnerships, and building healthy kids and communities, Nina is right.

**Families work best when all are included.**



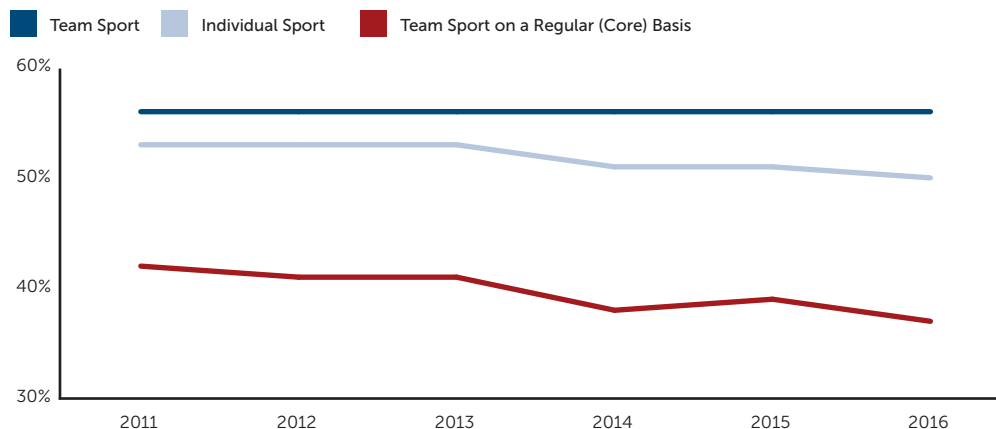
# THE STATE OF PLAY IN THE U.S.

# SCOREBOARD

Sport participation and other data below were provided to the Aspen Institute and Project Play by the Sports & Fitness Industry Association, which in 2016 commissioned an online survey of 24,134 individuals and households through Sports Marketing Surveys.

## TOTAL SPORT PARTICIPATION RATES

Percentage of children ages 6 to 12 who played at least one day during the year



	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
TEAM SPORT	55.5%	55.8%	55.5%	56.2%	56.1%	56.3%
TEAM SPORT ON REGULAR BASIS	41.5%	41.4%	41.0%	38.2%	38.6%	36.9%
INDIVIDUAL SPORT	53.2%	52.9%	52.7%	50.8%	50.8%	49.8%
TEAM OR INDIVIDUAL SPORT	73.0%	72.9%	72.8%	71.5%	71.7%	71.5%

Team sports include: baseball, basketball, cheerleading, field hockey, football (flag, touch, tackle), gymnastics, ice hockey, lacrosse, paintball, roller hockey, rugby, soccer (indoor, outdoor), softball (slow-pitch, fast-pitch), swimming on a team, track and field, ultimate frisbee, volleyball (court, grass, sand), and wrestling. Individual sports include: tennis, golf, martial arts, roller skating, skateboarding, running, cycling road, cycling bmx, and cycling mountain bike.

A participant is anyone who played a sport at least one day during the year, in any form, organized or unstructured. A “core” participant is anyone who participated on a regular basis, a number of times per year that varies by sport, as defined by SFIA, and usually includes a level of organized play; whether playing on one team or multiple teams, they are only counted once.

**Bottom Line:** While the percentage of core participants who play team sports on a regular basis declined again, total participation slightly increased. In 2016, 56.3 percent of kids ages 6 to 12 played a sport (organized or unorganized) at least one day a year. This figure has been holding steady for several years as many other participation numbers decline.

### The Good News:

Team sport participation increased for girls (52.8%) and held steady for boys (61.1%).

### The Bad:

Kids playing at least one team sport on a regular basis fell again (to 36.9%) and those playing an individual sport dropped below the halfway mark (49.8%).



**What grade do you give stakeholders in getting kids active through sports?**

As determined by thought leaders at the 2017 Project Play Summit.  
(Prior year's State of Play grade: C-)

C

THE STATE OF PLAY IN THE U.S.

# SCOREBOARD

## CORE PARTICIPATION IN SELECT SPORTS

Percentage and number (in 000s) of kids ages 6 to 12 who participated on a regular basis

	2008	2010	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2008-16 CHANGE	2015-16 CHANGE
BICYCLING (%)	35.6%	33%	31.4%	31.3%	29.2%	29.2%	29%	▼ 6.6	▼ 0.2
# of Children	9,690	9,101	9,114	9,082	8,523	8,608	8,630	▼ 1,060	▲ 22
BASKETBALL (%)	16.6%	15.3%	14.1%	16.0%	14.7%	14.7%	13.0%	▼ 3.6	▼ 1.7
# of Children	4,523	4,205	4,089	4,641	4,300	4,336	3,857	▼ 666	▼ 479
BASEBALL (%)	16.5%	14.1%	12.5%	14.2%	12.9%	12.8%	12.4%	▼ 4.1	▼ 0.4
# of Children	4,483	3,875	3,622	4,122	3,771	3,775	3,677	▼ 806	▼ 98
SOCCER (Outdoor) (%)	10.4%	10.9%	9.2%	9.3%	9.1%	8.8%	7.7%	▼ 2.7	▼ 1.1
# of Children	2,826	3,016	2,659	2,708	2,659	2,597	2,303	▼ 523	▼ 294
GOLF (%)	5.1%	4.4%	4.1%	4.8%	5.5%	5.1%	5.1%	0.0	0.0
# of Children	1,400	1,200	1,200	1,400	1,600	1,500	1,600	▲ 200	▲ 100
TENNIS (%)	n/a	4.0%	3.9%	4.0%	3.6%	3.9%	4.4%	n/a	▲ 0.5
# of Children	n/a	1,178	1,173	1,202	1,086	1,147	1,296	n/a	▲ 149
GYMNASTICS (%)	2.3%	2.8%	3.5%	2.9%	3.0%	2.9%	3.3%	▲ 1.0	▲ 0.4
# of Children	627	774	1,005	855	871	854	984	▲ 357	▲ 130
TACKLE FOOTBALL (%)	3.7%	3.8%	3.6%	3.5%	3.3%	3.4%	3.3%	▼ 0.4	▼ 0.1
# of Children	1,370	1,045	1,055	1,007	959	991	982	▼ 388	▼ 9
FLAG FOOTBALL (%)	4.5%	3.0%	2.8%	2.8%	2.4%	2.7%	3.0%	▼ 1.5	▲ 0.3
# of Children	1,225	839	804	800	688	788	893	▼ 332	▲ 105
VOLLEYBALL (Court) (%)	2.9%	2.6%	2.4%	2.7%	2.8%	2.6%	2.2%	▼ 0.7	▼ 0.4
# of Children	796	718	707	779	823	761	654	▼ 142	▼ 107
TEAM SWIMMING (%)	n/a	n/a	1.5%	1.6%	1.6%	1.4%	1.3%	n/a	▼ 0.1
# of Children	n/a	n/a	449	459	480	425	390	n/a	▼ 35
ICE HOCKEY (%)	0.5%	0.7%	0.8%	1.1%	1.1%	1.0%	1.1%	▲ 0.6	▲ 0.1
# of Children	132	193	236	331	331	304	328	▲ 196	▲ 24
SOFTBALL (Fast-Pitch) (%)	1.0%	0.8%	1.5%	1.1%	1.2%	1.3%	1.0%	▶ 0.0	▼ 0.3
# of Children	275	231	436	315	350	388	290	▲ 15	▼ 98
TRACK AND FIELD (%)	1.0%	1.2%	1.7%	1.1%	1.2%	1.0%	1.0%	▶ 0.0	▶ 0.0
# of Children	259	338	479	327	351	302	289	▲ 30	▼ 13
LACROSSE (%)	0.4%	0.6%	0.7%	0.8%	0.9%	0.8%	1.0%	▲ 0.6	▲ 0.2
# of Children	104	177	199	234	273	227	312	▲ 208	▲ 85
WRESTLING (%)	1.1%	1.1%	0.8%	0.7%	0.6%	0.6%	0.7%	▼ 0.4	▲ 0.1
# of Children	287	293	237	192	163	162	200	▼ 87	▲ 38

Source: Data for tennis and golf provided by the Tennis Industry Association and National Golf Foundation, respectively. All other data courtesy of Sports & Fitness Industry Association/Sports Marketing Surveys.

**Bottom Line:** In 2016, tennis, gymnastics, flag football, hockey, lacrosse and wrestling had slight participation increases. The largest decrease belonged to basketball, baseball and soccer — the three most popular youth sports.

**Note:** Some sports, like bicycling, saw a drop in percentage of kids participating but a rise in total number of kids participating. This is due to the effects of a baby boom that peaked in 2008; the population of children reaching the 6 to 12 age group has grown.

## TEAM SPORT PARTICIPATION BY DEMOGRAPHIC

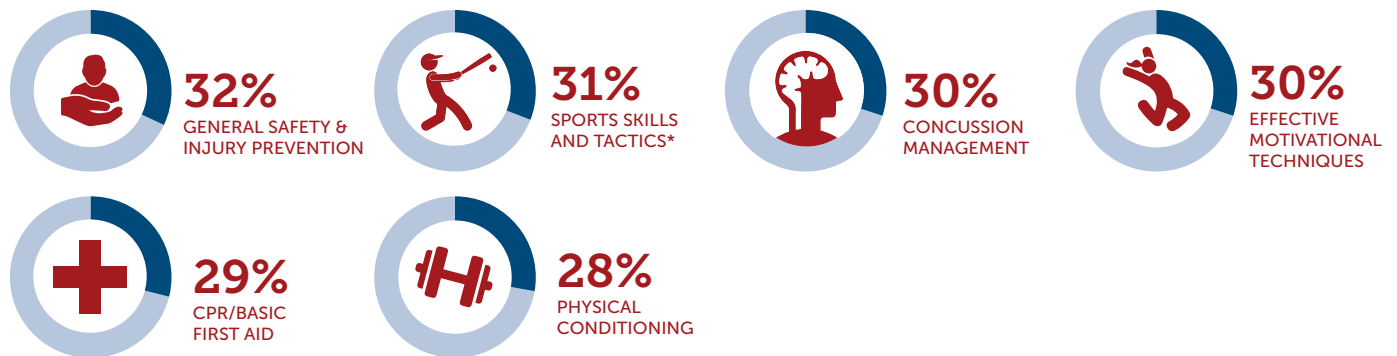
Children ages 6 to 12 who played a team sport at least one day during the year

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
MALE	61.3%	61.7%	60.2%	59.6%	61.0%	61.1%
FEMALE	49.4%	49.6%	48.7%	50.6%	51.3%	52.8%
UNDER \$25,000	41.9%	46.9%	41.3%	38.3%	35.7%	34.6%
\$25,000 TO \$49,999	47.8%	49.3%	46.6%	47.4%	48.6%	48.4%
\$50,000 TO \$74,999	59.6%	57.3%	55.7%	52.7%	53.9%	53.7%
\$75,000 TO \$99,999	61.5%	61.0%	61.5%	62.1%	60.5%	61.1%
\$100,000+	66.4%	63.9%	64.2%	64.8%	68.0%	68.4%

**Bottom Line:** Household income is a major factor for kids 6 to 12 who play a team sport at least one day per year. In 2013, the gap between kids in households that earn less than \$25,000 and those in \$100,000-plus households was about 23 percentage points. That gap increased to 32 percentage points in 2016. Some positive news: The overall percentage of girls playing a team sport continues to improve, and the overall percentage of boys has held steady.

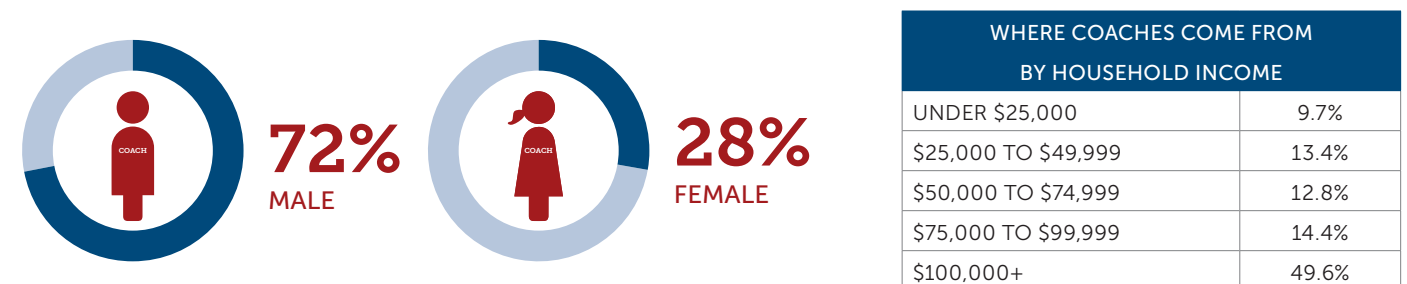
## YOUTH COACHES WITH TRAINING

Percentage of current coaches who say they received specified training



\*In primary sport they coach

## YOUTH COACHES BY GENDER & DEMOGRAPHICS



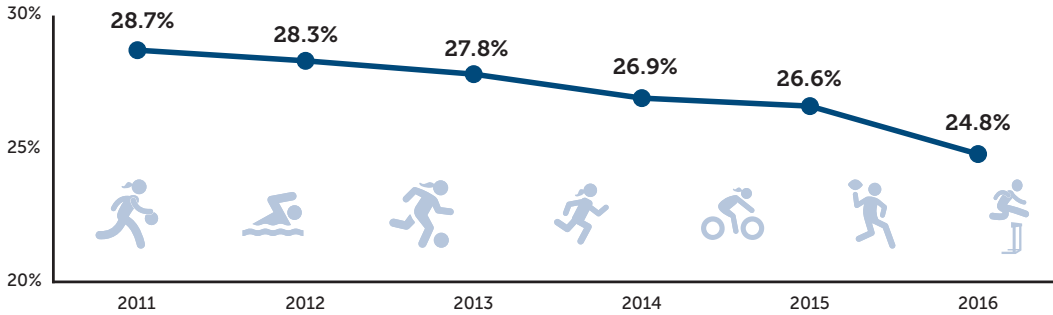
**Bottom Line:** Less than one-third of youth coaches were trained in key competencies: general safety and injury prevention, sport instruction, concussion management, motivational techniques, CPR/first aid, and physical conditioning. Also, the percentage of female coaches continued to be significantly lower than the percentage of girls who play sports.

THE STATE OF PLAY IN THE U.S.

# SCOREBOARD

## ACTIVE TO A HEALTHY LEVEL

Percentage of kids who regularly participated in high-calorie-burning sports

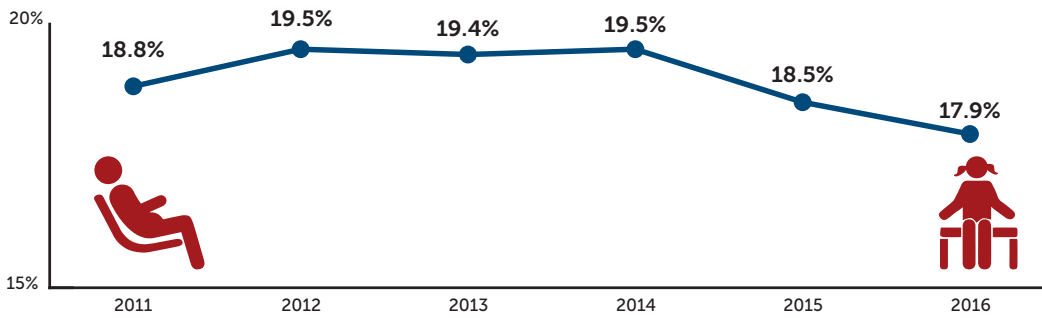


Sports considered by SFIA to be high-calorie-burning include: bicycling (BMX, mountain, road), running/jogging, basketball, field hockey, football (tackle, touch), ice hockey, roller hockey, lacrosse, rugby, soccer (indoor, outdoor), swimming (on a team or for fitness), track and field, badminton, racquetball, squash, tennis, cross-country skiing, martial arts, wrestling, stand-up paddling, climbing (sport, traditional), trail running, triathlon, snowshoeing, boxing, dance, step and other choreographed exercise to music. The list also includes several activities more associated with teens and adults, including high impact/intensity training, cardio kickboxing, stationary cycling, rowing machine, stair-climbing machine, treadmill, aquatic exercise, bodyweight exercise, cross-training-style workouts, Pilates training, adventure racing, cardio tennis, pickleball, MMA and other combat training.

**Bottom Line:** As you can see, only 24.8 percent of kids 6 to 12 were considered active to a healthy level in 2016, marking the steepest one-year decline on record dating to 2008. “Active to a Healthy Level” is defined as those engaging in high-calorie-burning activities a minimum of 151 times during the year.

## PHYSICALLY INACTIVE CHILDREN

Percentage of kids ages 6 to 12 who engaged in no sport activity during the year



### The Good News:

Progress was made in lowering the percentage of kids who were completely inactive.

### The Bad:

Those breaking a sweat on a regular basis also fell, again.

	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
AVERAGE	18.8%	19.5%	19.4%	19.5%	18.5%	17.9%
BY HOUSEHOLD INCOME						
UNDER \$25,000	29.5%	27.9%	26.4%	28.0%	28.1%	29.9%
\$25,000 TO \$49,999	23.8%	23.1%	23.5%	23.1%	24.3%	24.9%
\$50,000 TO \$74,999	16.4%	16.7%	17.4%	20.2%	19.1%	20.0%
\$75,000 TO \$99,999	13.5%	14.7%	16.1%	16.2%	16.0%	16.1%
\$100,000+	10.1%	11.4%	12.5%	13.3%	12.2%	11.5%

High-income households (\$100k+) now take up a larger share of households with children than in 2011, according to Sports Marketing Surveys. The amount of children from that population segment — which is nearly three times less likely to be physically inactive as kids from low-income homes — has pushed down the overall percentage of children who are inactive, even as the rate grew within each income category.

**Bottom Line:** Money continues to be a major driver of sports participation. In 2016, 29.9 percent of kids from homes in the lowest income bracket (\$25,000 or less) were physically inactive. Only 11.5 percent of children in the wealthiest households (\$100,000 or more) were physically inactive.



# THE 8 PLAYS

Key developments in the past year within the eight strategies for the eight sectors that touch the lives of children

1. ASK KIDS WHAT THEY WANT
2. REINTRODUCE FREE PLAY
3. ENCOURAGE SPORT SAMPLING
4. REVITALIZE IN-TOWN LEAGUES
5. THINK SMALL
6. DESIGN FOR DEVELOPMENT
7. TRAIN ALL COACHES
8. EMPHASIZE PREVENTION



## Challenge: Youth sport is organized by adults

### 1 | THE PLAY: ASK KIDS WHAT THEY WANT

#### From the *Sport for All, Play for Life* report:

*It's Rule No. 1 in business: know your customer. Video games (and the technology industry more broadly) often get blamed for our kids' sedentary habits, yet they provide much of what children want out of a sport experience, including: lots of action, freedom to experiment, competition without exclusion, social connection with friends as co-players, customization, and a measure of control over the activity — plus, no parents critiquing their every move. Simply put, the child is at the center of the video game experience, all made possible by research and feedback loops that seek input from its young customers. Now imagine if youth sport providers worked half as hard to understand the needs of kids, especially those who are left out or who opt out of sports.*

#### Five developments:

**The U.S. Soccer Federation made it harder for children to play with classmates.** In an effort to develop better players for its national teams, the sport's governing body began implementing a rule that all youth teams be comprised of players born in the same calendar year. Prior to 2016-17, teams were formed with players born between Aug. 1 and July 31, roughly following school-year groupings. Reaction was swift and largely harsh, as the new rule broke up most youth teams, affecting millions of youth nationally. Research shows that playing with friends is a high priority for most children.<sup>3</sup>

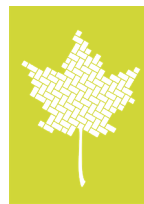
**Online media increasingly gave kids what they want.** The number of kids ages 8 to 15 who report using the internet “many times a day” now stands at 64 percent, a 32 percent increase since 2012, according to KidSay Research. The estimate is considered conservative because kids don't always consider their time on apps as using the internet. “Kids traverse the entertainment landscape constantly on the lookout for the latest ‘just for me’ content,” wrote researchers Bob Reynolds and Terence Burke. For kids ages 5 to 7, YouTube's popularity has tripled in the past year.<sup>4</sup>

**Sports industry investment poured into esports, betting this is what kids want.** Over the past year, large investments in video game competitions have been made by major media companies, owners of traditional sports teams, and former athletes.<sup>5</sup> Tournaments for teens on club teams are becoming more common, and momentum is building for state high school associations to officially sanction esports. “For kids who maybe weren't into athletics, this gives them another avenue to be active in their schools,” said one Chicago-area school administrator.<sup>6</sup> Increasingly, esports offer youth and their parents the chase for a college scholarship, not unlike physical sports. The National Association of Collegiate eSports has climbed to more than 30 member colleges, whose average scholarship payout is about \$7,600, according to *Inside Higher Ed*.

**A study showed kids are most physically active at age 6.** After that, they begin slowing down, and by age 19 they are as sedentary as 60-year-olds, according to the National Health and Nutrition Examination survey. The fact that physical activity rates begin tapering off so early surprised researchers, given that the adolescent years are when bodies are growing fastest and hormones are raging. Theories advanced included the early start to school days, when kids' bodies want to be active but are sitting in classes, and the abundance of screen time that kids have today.<sup>7</sup> Other research shows that 82 percent of 8- to 11-year-olds now have tablets and 59 percent have smartphones; among 5- to 7-year-olds, 77 percent have tablets and 10 percent have smartphones.<sup>8</sup>

**Given a voice, kids spoke up in support of mixed-gender competition.** In a story that received national attention, a Clark, New Jersey basketball team of fifth graders decided it would rather give up the rest of its season than play without its two female teammates. The team's coach let the players vote on whether to continue after a Catholic Youth Organization ruled it had erred in allowing boys and girls to play together. The girls had joined the team four years earlier because there weren't enough interested girls in their age group to form their own team. “Pride. Just pure pride,” one parent said when asked her thought on the vote. “These kids are doing the right thing. We don't have to tell them what to do.”<sup>9</sup>

#### 2017 WINNER: WHAT'S YOUR PLAY?



**PARKS & PEOPLE**  
FOUNDATION

Parks and People Foundation committed to launching six new sports leagues in Baltimore as determined by youth sport surveys. The focus includes physical literacy, character development and environmental education.

Challenge: Overstructured experiences  
2 | THE PLAY: REINTRODUCE FREE PLAY

From the *Sport for All, Play for Life* report:

*Today, many parents are reluctant to let children ride bikes across town to play games with friends. Fear of child abductions, while extremely rare, is a psychological barrier, and crime and traffic concerns are real issues in some neighborhoods. Families are smaller, so there are often fewer siblings to play with at home. But experts recognize the need to reintroduce free play where possible, given the science. “To promote lifelong, intrinsically motivated sport participation, it is imperative to build a foundation during childhood,” sports psychologist Jean Coté writes. “Inclusion of high amounts of deliberate play activities early in development provides that motivational foundation.”*

Five developments:

**New evidence confirmed neighborhood games are all but a thing of the past.** We now have numbers highlighting the extent that playing with kids down the block has shifted, at least in Western New York (Greater Buffalo, Rochester and the Finger Lakes) and Southeast Michigan (Detroit and surrounding areas). According to a household survey of 22 counties in those regions that was commissioned by the Aspen Institute on behalf of the Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation, fewer than one in five youth play football near their home. It’s one in 10 for basketball and less than one in 20 for baseball and soccer. Today, in those regions, the only activity that most kids engage in near their homes is bicycling, enjoyed by about two-thirds of kids.

**Clarity was gained about the barriers to unstructured play.** A Gallup poll found children ages 2 to 10 spend significantly less time engaged in free play than they do in front of screens (18 to 21 hours a week). Nearly all of the kids had more screen time than the number of hours per day recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics. More than half of parents reported wanting their kids to play outside more. Why parents said it’s not happening: It’s too hot, cold, or rainy (36 percent). Another third said they didn’t feel their kids were safe outside, or that they had no other kids to play with. More than one in five parents said their kids’ schedules were too busy for outdoor play.<sup>10</sup>

**Pokémon Go! brought a new game to town.** It’s called location-based augmented reality, and the potential of the technology to get kids out and about was made clear in 2016 when the app was released by Niantic. Young people across the globe immediately took to the game, which uses a player’s mobile device and GPS coordinates to find, capture, battle and train virtual creatures, called Pokémon, that were placed at parks and other locations around cities. The app was downloaded more than 750 million times. The game suffered from technical glitches early on, and the initial excitement around it tapered off. But the Global Obesity Prevention Center at Johns Hopkins University noted the potential of tech games like these to engage kids, especially sedentary ones, to increase health promotion.<sup>11</sup>

**Five-dollar golf programs went to scale.** The challenge for many kids to play the sport is the cost of greens fees. But golf is finding success at exporting a model addressing that barrier. Youth on Course, a program for kids ages 7 to 18, offers \$5 golf at participating courses. The organization ended 2017 at more than 600 courses in 17 states: Arizona, California, Georgia, Idaho, Illinois, Kansas, Kentucky, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nevada, New Mexico, Ohio, Oregon, Utah, Washington and Wisconsin. The gap between the \$5 fee and the regular youth greens fee gets covered through fundraising by local nonprofits.

**National news media got hip to the benefits of free play.** Among the stories was an NBC News report on an Oklahoma town where adults are now supporting “unorganized baseball,” in which kids are brought to a field once a week to make up games on their own.<sup>12</sup> Media attention also was given to the pregame routine of Stephen Curry, the Golden State Warriors star who shortly before tip-off might treat the basketball as a volleyball, bumping and setting with teammates. Or he might pitch it, like he’s standing on a mound. Or he’ll act like a bowling pin to a teammate’s spun ball. Curry explained that acting like a kid is what gets him ready to compete. It’s a reminder to the basketball community, increasingly focused on training for the NBA dream at an early age, that free play and performance are related.<sup>13</sup>

2017 WINNER: WHAT'S YOUR PLAY?



Joy of the People committed to reaching 1,200 underserved kids with free soccer events across Minneapolis and St. Paul during the 2018 World Cup. Fields of different sizes will be available for kids.

## Challenge: Sameness and specialization

### 3 | THE PLAY: ENCOURAGE SPORT SAMPLING

#### From the *Sport for All, Play for Life* report:

*Most children flow into only a handful of the more than 120 sports played in the United States. And, as early as the grade school years, those identified as having the most promise get the message from coaches and others that they must specialize in one sport at the exclusion of others in order to fully develop their talents and play at a college, pro, or other elite level. It's a myth. ... Grow the menu of sport options, create better connections to vulnerable populations, and more athletes-for-life will emerge.*

#### Five developments:

**The 2016 Summer Olympics sparked interest in playing related sports.** The U.S. Olympic Committee reported strong levels of engagement with a tool designed to connect viewers with local programs affiliated with official national governing bodies. In Baltimore in 2017, students told the Aspen Institute in surveys that among the sports they most want to try is swimming, a sport that the United States dominated in Rio. Another desired sport to try among Baltimore girls was gymnastics, a sport in which the U.S. team shined. To help youth find local programs, NBC Sports launched a consumer portal, SportsEngine, that allows users to search by zip code for leagues, camps and other opportunities both paid and free.

**Major League Baseball Commissioner Rob Manfred endorsed multisport play.** Manfred shared his point of view at the 2017 Project Play Summit, where he said he has spoken with commissioners of the NBA, NFL and NHL and all agree that the best athlete is a child who plays multiple sports. Among youth ages 6 to 17, the average number of team sports that a child played in 2016 fell for the third straight year, and to its lowest level (1.86) since SFIA began tracking the measure. All of the drop was at ages 13 to 17. The average number of team sports for kids 6 to 12 held steady at 1.81, roughly the same level it's been at since 2012, when it fell below the two-sport mark. Meanwhile, the American Academy of Pediatrics issued new guidance to doctors suggesting the delay of sport specialization for the majority of sports until after puberty.<sup>14</sup>

**The NCAA banned early recruiting in lacrosse.** College lacrosse coaches are now prohibited from communicating with prospects until Sept. 1 of their junior year of high school. The move was pushed for and largely celebrated within the lacrosse community, which had grown tired of the early-recruiting trend that saw players committing to college programs as early as eighth grade. Early recruiting can make youth feel like they need to specialize in one sport even before then just to position themselves for a scholarship. In a column that recognized the impact that college recruiting is having on specialization in youth sports, NCAA senior executives Oliver Luck and Brian Hainline lauded the move by lacrosse and questioned the value of early recruitment in all sports.<sup>15</sup>

**Arizona moved to year-round high school practices, a move that could promote early specialization.** The Arizona Interscholastic Association passed legislation allowing high school coaches in all sports to practice all year with their teams. There are no limitations on out-of-season practices except that helmets and shoulder pads aren't allowed during football workouts. One football coach called the year-round measure a "frustration rule," because most high school sports have no answer to keep their athletes from club teams year-round. Some athletic directors are concerned this will cause youth to play fewer sports and impact smaller schools that rely on sharing multisport athletes.

**Rural areas were identified as having the fewest sport options.** Many rural areas in Western New York and Southeast Michigan possess the lowest percentage of adequate access to physical activity locations, according to research highlighted in the Aspen Institute's regional State of Play reports. For example, 49 percent of residents in Allegany County, a rural part of Western New York, have adequate access to physical activity locations, compared to 95 percent in Erie County, which is home to Buffalo. However, youth who play the widest variety of sports in the region can be found in rural Cattaraugus County, where the average child plays 5.1 sports (compared to 1.8 sports in Buffalo). In smaller population centers, kids are often asked to play multiple sports to fill out team rosters.

#### 2017 WINNER: WHAT'S YOUR PLAY?



Seacoast Public Health Network committed to providing sports scholarships in Exeter, NH, to any child who receives free and reduced lunch. The goal is to make many sports available to low-income youth and reduce the stigma of getting financial help.

Challenge: Rising costs and commitment

4 | THE PLAY: REVITALIZE IN-TOWN LEAGUES

From the *Sport for All, Play for Life* report:

*It's been a setting where kids of all skill levels and backgrounds play at the same local field or gym, rarely roaming beyond the town borders. But today, house leagues can be stigmatized as inferior, a casualty of tryout-based, early-forming travel teams that cater to the "best" child athletes. ... Revitalizing recreational leagues depends on improving both the quality of the offering and the quantity of available kids. Parents with means must be given a reason not to flee early for travel teams, through programming that develops their child's skills and provides opportunities for advancement, with fewer impacts on family time. Sport providers need to develop business models that wring less money out of more participants. And organizers must look in new places to grow the pool of players.*

Five developments:

**The club and travel team industry grew in prominence.** In sports such as soccer and basketball, private clubs showed an increasing desire to compete with in-town rec leagues, offering programming down to age 4 at \$250 a season in some cases. Clubs now drive the youth sports economy, which one analyst estimates is a \$15 billion industry.<sup>16</sup> Largely left out of that economy are youth from homes with fewer resources. The website *The Undefeated* teased out the downstream impact in a piece, "The Gentrification of College Hoops," by Tom Farrey, Aspen Institute Sports & Society Program executive director.<sup>17</sup> At the 2017 Project Play Summit, Little League Baseball CEO Steve Keener said his organization wears its rec league baseball label as "a badge of honor."

**Olympic negotiators acquired support for Los Angeles youth sports.** Local organizers received \$160 million in funding commitments for youth sports from the International Olympic Committee as part of L.A. agreeing to host the 2028 Olympics. "My dream is not so much just to bring the Olympics here, but to bring youth sports for free to every zip code," L.A. Mayor Eric Garcetti said. The new commitment in L.A. provides an opportunity to build a legacy in advance of the Games. To be determined in the coming year is how much of the funding will be used to create systems-level changes that outlast the Games.

**The Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation emerged as a major investor.** Created from the estate of the late owner of the Buffalo Bills, the Wilson Foundation made "Children & Youth" one of its funding priorities. "Livable Communities" is another focus, which includes support of design and access to public space and the places where kids play. While the priorities were determined by the Foundation's trustees, they were both areas of interest to Wilson, who died in 2014 and whose legacy foundation intends to give away all of its \$1.2 billion in assets over the next 17 years. Grant making is focused on his hometown region of Southeast Michigan, where he lived just outside of Detroit, and his adopted region of Western New York. The entrance of the Wilson Foundation into the sector made it one of the largest foundations in the nation focused on youth sports, with an emphasis on underserved populations of kids.<sup>18</sup>

**More evidence of embezzlement was unearthed.** Pick any day to search Google and you're likely to find a new story of adults stealing money from a youth sports league. In 2016, *The New York Times* reported that in the previous five years there had been hundreds of arrests and convictions in 43 states involving 15 sports.<sup>19</sup> Law enforcement officials told the *Times* that they see only about half of the actual fraud in youth sports, because organizations cover up smaller amounts of theft to preserve their reputations. As one forensic auditor put it to *The Guardian*: "Every time you see (a story about financial fraud), multiply it by nine and that's how big the problem is."<sup>20</sup>

**A Latino soccer league found success in San Antonio.** An Aspen Institute report explored why many Latinos are getting left behind in their favorite sport, and how San Antonio is an exception. The Urban Soccer Leadership Academy, founded by former San Antonio Mayor Ed Garza, creates accessible, affordable soccer teams for underserved kids to compete with suburban clubs and uses soccer to chart academic pathways toward college. What began in 2010 in one neighborhood with 120 recreation players and a \$20,000 budget has grown to 500 players (300 rec, 200 academy/premier) and a \$284,000 budget.<sup>21</sup> Garza found scholarship support from sponsors by focusing on breaking the poverty cycle through educational attainment.

2017 WINNER: WHAT'S YOUR PLAY?



Volo City Kids Foundation committed to launching new and free rec programming in Washington, DC focused on development and skill. All players and families receive postgame meals.

## Challenge: Not enough places to play 5 | THE PLAY: THINK SMALL

### From the *Sport for All, Play for Life* report:

*Growing access to play spaces for most children starts with the small — simple, smart moves that hold great promise. In urban areas, this may mean finding small spaces to develop quarter-sized courts for small-sided play. ... When schools agree to share their playing fields and facilities, it gives families and kids, especially those in underserved communities, more places to play in the evenings, on weekends, and during summer. ... Transportation to parks and school sites is vital, especially in predominantly African American and Hispanic neighborhoods, which often have fewer nearby recreation facilities than other areas. That's significant, because people living within a mile of a park are four times more likely to use it than those who live farther away. Funding enables, but so do small gestures of other types of support. Which is another way of saying: be creative.*

### Five developments:

**NFL embraced small-sided football.** USA Football launched its “rookie tackle” pilot program, a new version of the game designed to transition kids from flag to tackle football. There are six to eight players per side on a 40-yard field, no kickoffs or punts, and no three-point stances by linemen. The Cleveland Browns became the first NFL team to embrace the pilot program, which was rolled out to 11 leagues in nine states. Football faces increasing pressure to play only flag before high school in order to limit the number of hits to the head. New Orleans Saints quarterback Drew Brees told reporters he doesn't feel comfortable having his kids play tackle until middle school.<sup>22</sup> In football-crazed Tuscaloosa, Alabama, one rec league has seen flag football participation exceed that of tackle football since 2015, according to *The Tuscaloosa News*.

**Dallas announced it will build the largest public park in the country.** Everything's bigger in Texas, including parks. The city announced in late 2016 that it's building a 10,000-acre nature district, nearly 12 times as large as Manhattan's Central Park. Sports fields, walkways and trees will be part of the largest urban park in America. The Harold Simmons Park is scheduled to be complete by 2021 at a cost of \$250 million. While the cost and land size are anything but small, the Dallas park is an example of how one idea — getting greener — can have a major impact on a city's recreation infrastructure.

**The White House proposed severe cuts to federal programs supporting recreation.** President Donald Trump's proposed 2018 budget would cut the Land and Water Conservation Fund by 84 percent. For more than 50 years, the LWCF has been responsible for protecting parks, wildlife refuges, and recreation areas at the federal, state and local levels. Trump's budget would also eliminate community development block grants, which are highly flexible funds for many needs, including recreational services for youth. The National Recreation and Park Association said those grants have provided over \$800 million to cities for park and recreation priorities since 2005. As of November, congressional leaders have rejected cuts to these programs.

### **Pro teams, industry and cities build more mini-pitches.**

The U.S. Soccer Foundation is teaming with Target to build 100 mini-pitches by 2020, starting with three in Chicago. The foundation is also building 50 new soccer fields in underserved areas in New York City, working with New York City FC (the city's MLS team), the mayor's office and Adidas. The U.S. Soccer Foundation said it will work with each community to ensure each pitch offers free programming to youth. The foundation was created with profits from the 1994 World Cup and is separate from the U.S. Soccer Federation, with its own board of directors.

### **The first assessment of walking and walkable communities in the United States was released.**

The National Physical Activity Plan Alliance gave an F for children's and youths' walking behavior, because less than 30 percent walk to and from school on a regular basis. Only 11.7 percent of students usually walk to school, and 15 percent usually walk home, according to the National Household Travel Survey from 2009. The United States also received an F for pedestrian infrastructure, because less than 30 percent of states meet the standard of \$5.26 per capita funding for biking and walking projects. Infrastructure for walking and biking facilitates easy access to nearby sports and recreation sites.

### 2017 WINNER: WHAT'S YOUR PLAY?



Street Soccer USA and LA84 Foundation are connecting at-risk and homeless youth to soccer and other services. Ten street soccer parks will be built over five years, and an annual tournament will be created with support from the Los Angeles Galaxy Foundation.

Challenge: Too much, too soon

## 6 | THE PLAY: DESIGN FOR DEVELOPMENT

From the *Sport for All, Play for Life* report:

*If a local facility is the hardware in a child's sport experience, then a developmentally appropriate program is the software. Leading sport governing bodies recognize it as the organizing framework to deliver what kids need to grow as both athletes and people. Adoption of it is seen as a tool to stem attrition, advance physical literacy, and debunk misperceptions that parents and coaches have about athletic development.*

### Five developments:

**The NBA and USA Basketball partnered to create their first-ever youth basketball guidelines.** The Wild West culture of grassroots basketball now has a playbook to reshape its activity — should it desire. The league and national governing body for the sport developed guidelines for game and practice lengths, how often kids should play organized hoops, and how much rest from the sport they need each week and over the course of a year. Organizations such as AAU, Boys & Girls Club of America, Adidas, Nike, Under Armour and the NCAA endorsed the guidelines. “Youth sports in general are fragmented and lack structure, so to say that grassroots basketball is at the top of the heap (with challenges) is really saying something,” said David Krichavsky, NBA vice president of youth basketball development.

**European soccer clubs entered the U.S. market.** International soccer clubs are investing in academies in the United States, planting a flag in a youth soccer market that is flush with resources but has produced few world-class players on the men's side. The failure of the U.S. national team to qualify for the 2018 World Cup — the first time it will sit out the tournament since 1986 — underscored the need for better training environments, opening the door further for clubs with track records of developing youth. Among those are Spanish league clubs FC Valencia and FC Barcelona, which in the past year introduced clubs and foundation programs in several states.

**Tennis had the biggest participation increase.** The percentage of kids ages 6 to 12 who played tennis on a regular basis increased from 3.9 percent in 2015 to 4.4 percent in 2016 — the biggest one-year jump in the data collected by the Sports & Fitness Industry Association. Tennis saw 149,000 more kids regularly playing — joining gymnastics, flag football, ice hockey, lacrosse and wrestling among the few sports that grew participation. Like most of those sports, tennis is seen as a leader in having embraced child-centric policies and practices in recent years, from smaller courts and equipment to greater emphasis on coach training.

**An argument for equal playing time emerged: Confidence fuels youth participation.** Kids who quit sports often do so due to lack of playing time, which can be a result of lack of confidence. And confidence is a by-product of proper preparation and adults who believe in them, IMG Academy Head of Leadership Development James Leath told the *Colorado Springs Gazette*. “From a small child to the world's greatest athlete, those who are confident are confident because they have taken thousands of shots, tried and failed many times, then tried again and got it right,” Leath said. For kids to stay physically active in sports, they need to know it's OK to fail and get the chance to keep playing.

**A study suggested that running creates new brain cells and that weight training doesn't.** For the first time, scientists compared the neurological impacts of different types of exercise — running, weight training and high-intensity interval training — through a study of rats in Finland. The results showed very different levels of neurogenesis — the creation of new brain cells in an already mature brain — depending on how the rats exercised. Rats that jogged on wheels showed high levels of neurogenesis based on the greater the distance they ran. Rats that sprinted on treadmills had fewer new neurons in their brains. And the rats that climbed a wall with tiny weights attached to their tails became much stronger but showed no augmentation of neurogenesis.<sup>23</sup>

### 2017 WINNER: WHAT'S YOUR PLAY?



USA Wrestling is revamping its training program to emphasize physical literacy, movement and position skills, health skills, and life skills.

## Challenge: Well-meaning but untrained volunteers 7 | TRAIN ALL COACHES

### From the *Sport for All, Play for Life* report:

*Coaches are the delivery mechanism for quality sport programming. They determine how much exercise occurs during practice. Research aggregated by the President's Council on Fitness, Sports & Nutrition shows that good coaches also lower kids' anxiety levels and lift their self-esteem. They help boys and girls enjoy the sport. They can make an athlete for life — or wreck enthusiasm for sport altogether. ... Trained coaches do best. One study found that only 5 percent of kids who played for trained coaches quit the sport the next year; the attrition rate was 26 percent otherwise.*

### Five developments:

**Data suggested that most youth coaches remained untrained in key competencies.** Rates of trained coaches remain low in spite of efforts by some sports organizations to promote safety. The latest data from SFIA, as shown on page 5 of this report, revealed that only 30 percent of youth coaches have been trained in concussion management over the past five years. Soccer had the fewest trained coaches in concussions (26 percent), and ice hockey had the highest (43 percent). Only 30 percent of all youth coaches had been trained in effective motivational techniques — within this category, baseball (25 percent) had the fewest trained coaches while volleyball did the best.

**The best-trained coaches resided in volleyball.** In 2016, volleyball surpassed lacrosse with the best-trained coaches among the nine team sports that Aspen asked SFIA to supply data on. Volleyball ranked first in training for general safety/injury (55 percent) and effective motivational techniques (41 percent), second in concussion management (44 percent), third in CPR/basic first aid (54 percent), fourth in sports skills tactics (43 percent), and sixth in physical conditioning (37 percent). The sport that needs the most help is soccer, which finished last in four of six training categories and no higher than seventh in any.

**A new coalition of organizations decided to focus on training coaches.** Project Play 2020, the Aspen Institute's new multiyear initiative, represents the first time that industry groups and nonprofits have come together to develop shared goals around making sport accessible to all children. One of the group's first goals is improving the number of youth coaches trained in key competencies. U.S. Lacrosse CEO Steve Stenersen said parents shouldn't assume coaches are qualified to interact with their kids. "The standard (in coaching) is so inconsistent now that I think the key is a standardized consistency of education that all sports get behind so there's a minimum proficiency," Stenersen said. "Right now, it's the complete opposite."

**Little League Baseball created a T-ball curriculum designed to help recruit entry-level coaches.** Each week during the season, LittleLeagueU.org includes detailed practice plans, activity diagrams, companion videos, and a tip of the week from the Positive Coaching Alliance. According to Little League, coaches that implemented the program reported a higher level of player, parent and coach satisfaction, resulting in an increased likelihood of players and coaches returning for future baseball and softball seasons.

**The "power of the permit" gained traction.** Across the country in recent years, some municipalities have worked with youth sports organizations to create coaching standards. Buffalo switched to this model in the past year. In order for football leagues in Buffalo to get a field permit, their coaches must have a background check and be trained in a number of areas, including CPR/first aid, concussion protocol, coaching techniques, and effective communication with youth and parents, according to Kenneth Simmons, the city's youth recreation director. Buffalo Police Athletic League Executive Director Nekia Kemp said volunteer coaches should be celebrated but also given the proper tools because they want to provide kids with the best experience possible.

### 2017 WINNER: WHAT'S YOUR PLAY?



The National Fitness Foundation committed \$50,000 toward physical education in East Baltimore. The funding is part of Project Play: Baltimore, the Aspen Institute's first model community initiative.



Challenge: Safety concerns among parents  
8 | EMPHASIZE PREVENTION

From the *Sport for All, Play for Life* report:

*Among the many issues facing youth sports, injury risks trouble parents the most. The espnW/Aspen Institute Project Play survey showed that nine out of ten parents have safety concerns – and half of those describe safety as a major concern. Both mothers and fathers said that concussions are the most worrisome and one-quarter of parents have considered keeping a child from playing because of that. Football, by far, gave parents the most cause for concern. ... Youth sport organizations should err on the side of caution – and ultimately participation – and embrace policies that eliminate or greatly reduce head contact at the 12-and-under level.*

Five developments:

**One report provided a concerning snapshot about injury policies and training coaches.** The report by the National Council on Youth Sports Safety, titled *Concussions in Youth Sports: Preventing and Healing the Invisible Wounds*, concluded that youth sports administrators believe that current injury prevention policies regarding a coach’s responsibility for safety have had “little or no effect on coaching behavior.” Administrators said they lack the tools and resources to properly train coaches in preventive methods. Most coaches said they do not feel qualified in injury prevention and characterized watching videos as an ineffective learning tool. Experienced coaches advocated for injury-prevention principles to be integrated into the teaching of performance skills. The report also said that parents, although more fearful of sports injuries, are reluctant to discuss their concerns with their child’s coach. Many parents don’t ask about background checks or training certification for coaches. Youth coaches claimed that pressure to win from parents is a factor in return-to-play decisions.<sup>24</sup>

**Tennessee became the first state to devise a safety rating system for youth leagues.** The new system, called Safe Stars, allows parents to see if youth sports leagues in Tennessee follow state-recommended safety protocols. It’s a collaboration between the Tennessee Department of Health and the Program for Injury Prevention in Youth Sports at Vanderbilt University. Participation by sports leagues is voluntary. Programs are awarded bronze, silver and gold star safety ratings based on various criteria.<sup>25</sup>

**The U.S. Center for SafeSport launched.** The center has the exclusive authority to investigate all reports of misconduct for the National Governing Bodies (NGBs) within the U.S. Olympic Committee. This includes bullying, hazing, harassment, and physical, sexual and emotional abuse. All 47 NGBs report to SafeSport any claims of abuse. Allegations can also come directly from athletes, survivors, coaches, third parties and anonymous reports. Upon investigating, SafeSport has the authority to issue sanctions, including bans. Any sanctions must be upheld across the NGBs. The Senate passed legislation that requires NGBs to report sex-abuse allegations immediately to law enforcement or child welfare agencies. The bill authorizes SafeSport to oversee child-abuse protections with NGBs.

**The president of USA Gymnastics resigned due to a sexual abuse scandal.** Steve Penny stepped down amid criticism that gymnastics’ governing body did not do enough to protect young gymnasts from sexual abuse or respond appropriately to allegations against coaches. *The Indianapolis Star* reported more than 360 cases in which gymnasts have accused coaches of sexual transgressions over 20 years. More than 100 gymnasts have alleged sexual abuse by Larry Nassar, who was the national team physician from 1996 to 2015. USA Gymnastics needs a “complete cultural change,” concluded a report by a former federal prosecutor hired by USA Gymnastics. The report said that USA Gymnastics’ position has been that it has no authority to require clubs to report suspected child abuse — a position the report disagrees with. The USA Gymnastics board accepted 70 recommendations made by the former prosecutor.

**If you tear a knee ligament, arthritis is likely to follow in 10 years.** Harvard Medical School orthopedics professor Dr. Mininder Kocher has determined that the chance of getting arthritis within a decade of tearing a tendon or ligament in the knee is greater than 50 percent, according to *The New York Times*. Kocher found that the number of anterior cruciate ligament surgeries at 26 children’s hospitals in 2004 was about 500; there were 2,500 such operations in 2014. A big reason for the increase: More kids play in sports that involve twisting the knee (such as soccer and basketball), and they often participate year-round.

2017 WINNER: WHAT’S YOUR PLAY?

HSS Sports Safety

The top-rated hospital in the country for orthopedics, the Hospital for Special Surgery committed to launching a free, virtual workshop that replicates its existing workshop focused on how programs can prevent knee injuries among young athletes. The initiative provides resources for coaches.

# CALL FOR LEADERSHIP

*From the Sport for All, Play for Life report:*

*Project Play offers a conceptual framework that helps stakeholders from across sectors understand how they can work together to serve the interests of children, communities, and public health. We hope the strategies and ideas contained in this playbook inspire organizations and individuals to take meaningful actions. At the same time, we recognize that so much more can get done with a commitment to Collective Impact. As the Stanford Social Innovation Review has observed, large-scale social movements — systems change — require broad cross-sector collaboration.*

Nike is the largest sports apparel manufacturer in the world. Major League Baseball and the National Basketball Association are the largest organizations in their sports. Dick's Sporting Goods is the nation's largest retailer of sports equipment, and Target the second-largest discounter. The Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation is the largest foundation invested in youth sports, and the American College of Sports Medicine has the largest network of safety and fitness experts. NBC Sports televises the largest event (the Olympics), and the U.S. Olympic Committee plays the largest role in guiding grassroots development across sports.

None of these organizations alone, however, are equipped to address a mutual threat: Drops in sport participation and related metrics among youth over the past decade.

That shared understanding — that progress depends on collective action — underpins the logic of Project Play 2020, a first-of-its-kind initiative announced at the 2017 Project Play Summit. A total of 17 organizations pledged to come together over the next three years to develop mutually reinforcing actions that make quality sport activity accessible to more kids, regardless of zip code or ability.

In China, the government announces that winter sports are a priority in advance of the 2022 Winter Olympics in Beijing and, just like that, orders up 200 new ski resorts (this happened one day in February). It doesn't work like that in the United States, with its decentralized approach to decision-making, especially in sports. For better or worse, the U.S. is one of the few nations in the world without a sports ministry or equivalent body to coordinate sport development and sync it with other national priorities.

So, over the next three years, the Aspen Institute will convene Project Play 2020 members to help them identify ways to work together, and alongside each other, in support of building healthy kids and communities. The focus is on moving key performance indicators for youth ages 12 and under. Annual priorities will be tied to the identified strategies or "plays" in the Project Play framework. Train All Coaches and Encourage Sport Sampling are first up, and work groups are making plans to introduce deliverables by the 2018 Project Play Summit.

At the 2017 Summit, **Tom Farrey, Sports & Society Program executive director**, talked with several representatives from Project Play 2020 member organizations about the initiative as part of the panel, "Collaboration Nation: What's Possible When Silos Connect for Kids?" Below are excerpts.

**Gary Zenkel, president of NBC Olympics and president of business at NBC Sports Group:** All of us, especially those of us with commercial interests, can clearly see the benefits in growing sports participation. It's almost measurable — it creates fans, fans watch more sports, fans play more. Nike and Dick's would say the same thing. But at times there are conflicts, as we're competitors, too. ... (So) how do we maintain our commercial interests and serve this common interest of increasing interest in sports and play, which we know at the end of the day will help all of our businesses?



**Farrey:** Well, how much faith do you have in the [initiative strategically focusing on] 12 and under, the idea that everyone should invest in every kid in America having access to a quality sport opportunity?

**Zenkel:** I think that's the appropriate group to focus on. I think parents have significant influence over 12 and unders, and to the extent that those of us who are fighting for this, or are commercially interested in it, you have a fighting chance at accomplishing that at 12 and under. And, kids have less access to technology so that also gives us a fighting chance. We're fighting a battle against technology.

**Beth Baran, co-executive director of Dick's Sporting Goods Foundation:** Project Play and Project Play 2020 are important for all of us who may be competitors because it provides a neutral forum, where we can share ideas and come with a level of openness that solving this problem is bigger than any one of us.

**David Egner, president and CEO of Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation:** These kids are assets. If we listen to them about what they want, and we look at the programs, we can make simple adjustments pretty quickly. [But] someone has to wake up every day thinking about this. You've really got to have that backbone organization ... somebody who gets up and says, 'What are we going to do about this gap or this hole?'

**Laura Robbins, senior vice president of Hospital for Special Surgery:** I think [data and research] are pivotal, especially if we're talking about changing policy. If you look at the osteoarthritis issue, kids who get ACL repair, 50 percent will go on to have osteoarthritis. And that's a huge burden on society. So collecting that data and being able to say to the public health people, 'Here's the data' [as a means of getting them involved and identifying programs that work] ... I think it's very valuable.

**Farrey:** Who else needs to be brought into this conversation?

**Caitlin Morris, general manager of global community impact at Nike:** There's a need to have a relentless focus on the end user, the kid. How do they have a positive experience with play? Most of the national organizations on the stage today don't get a chance to get out in the field and see directly for themselves what's happening with the kid and the coach locally. I think there are a lot of things we can do nationally, but there are some things that we have to do closer to home, at a city-based level.

**Egner:** I think you're spot on. We use the term ecosystem. This is not a garden system. Garden systems are, I know where the carrots are and where the tomatoes are. This is a rainforest, and there will be all kinds of plants growing in places that you never anticipated — whether it's large groups that are playing or little groups at the local level. Different plants are going to nourish different people in different ways. So it might be less about who else joins on the stage and how the stage (the deliverables flowing from the national effort) gets into the community.

**Watch the Call for Leadership panel at: <http://bit.ly/2A2Pqj8>**

*Other founding members of Project Play 2020 include the Global Obesity Prevention Center at Johns Hopkins University, Ketchum, National Fitness Foundation, New York Road Runners, PGA of America, SFIA and Sports Facilities Advisory.*

*Additional organizations are invited to join a broader coalition that offers benefits for aligning efforts. Learn how to become a Project Play Champion at [www.ProjectPlay.us](http://www.ProjectPlay.us).*





## NEXT

It's been a year of change in America, and that extends to the movement to get kids active through sports. The architect of Let's Move, former First Lady Michelle Obama, has moved on. So has Dr. Vivek Murthy, the first U.S. surgeon general to articulate the role that youth sports plays in building healthy communities. New challenges have emerged in making a quality sport experience accessible to all children, regardless of zip code or ability.

Project Play is here to stay. We'll continue to push the movement forward by developing, applying and sharing knowledge. That, and asking the big questions.

Here are five that Project Play plans to advance in the coming year.

### Q1: How can we best empower parents?

Parents and caregivers today are bombarded with conflicting messages about when and how to introduce children to sport activity. Programs sometimes offer “parent education,” but the messages aren't always well received, as they often ask for behavior change from parents but nothing from the programs themselves. To address this deficit, we recently released our first resource designed for parents that draw from the Project Play framework of evidence-based strategies and best practices. The Project Play Parent Checklists offer 10 questions that parents should ask themselves, their child and their sports provider, depending on the child's age and engagement level with sports. Accompanying videos and a web page with resources will help three types of parents: those with children ages 0 to 5 as they prepare to enter sports, those with children ages 6 to 12 who are enrolled in programs, and those with kids ages 6 to 12 who are not active.

The checklists can be found at: [www.ProjectPlay.us](http://www.ProjectPlay.us). In the coming year, we will distribute the checklists broadly with the help of partners.

Meanwhile, Project Play 2020 will aim to help parents by creating tools and opportunities to improve youth coaching and access to multisport sampling.

### Q2: How can we best empower communities?

In 2017, Aspen added a second day to the annual Project Play Summit. Workshop Day was attended by more than 125 leaders, most from grassroots organizations. The day was introduced in response to a question that we often get: How do I use the Project Play report and its eight strategies to mobilize people where I live to improve the quality and quantity of sport offerings for youth? Where do I start? So, we designed a toolkit, drawing from the principles of Collective Impact with its five conditions for addressing complex social problems.

Response in the post-event survey was enthusiastic, with 93 percent of respondents finding the toolkit valuable in providing learning tools to measure the state of play in their communities and 76 percent stating it will help them rally local leaders. So, we now plan to refine the toolkit and make it available more broadly to communities everywhere. It will benefit from our learnings from Project Play model communities (Baltimore, Harlem) and regional initiatives (Southeast Michigan, Western New York, Greater Rochester, South Alabama). For communities that lack the resources to support a project coordinator dedicated to driving results, we will provide ideas for backbone support options.



### Q3: Which models best promote healthy outcomes at scale?

The Aspen Institute Sports & Society Program recognizes that sport isn't inherently good or bad — it's a neutral institution like all others, and can promote both positive and negative outcomes. The same goes for sport participation. Different activities offer different risks and benefits, and the way the activity is delivered matters as well. In 2018, we plan to advance and share knowledge in this important area of research, so improvements can be made in the provision of and decision-making around sports activity.

### Q4: What's working in other countries?

The United States isn't the only nation facing these challenges. Just about every developed nation faces an epidemic of physical inactivity among youth, coupled with an obesity crisis that taxes its health care system. Leaders from across the world — in Mexico, Romania, Australia, China, France, the United Kingdom, and elsewhere — have reached out to us, asking to share learnings from Project Play that can be applied in their countries. In doing so, we've become more aware of some of the breakthrough programs in play in those and other countries. We're taking notes on programs, policies and initiatives in those countries that may inspire stakeholders in the U.S. to think outside the box. We'll look to share the best of them at the 2018 Project Play Summit.

### Q5: What role can the White House and policymakers play?

Officially, President Donald Trump has declared his support for getting young people active through sports. He released a statement in April in honor of National Physical Fitness and Sports Month, calling on Americans to “re-dedicate ourselves each day to childhood obesity prevention, and recognize the role that sports can play in our Nation's health and well-being.”<sup>26</sup> At the Project Play Summit in September, a senior official with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Acting Assistant Secretary of Health Don Wright, reiterated that those would be priorities of HHS, then led by Secretary Tom Price, a medical doctor.

These developments are promising. However, Price resigned shortly afterward due to an unrelated issue; Trump nominated Alex Azar, a pharmaceutical industry veteran, to replace him. As of late November, Trump had yet to announce an executive director or members for the President's Council for Fitness, Sports & Nutrition, which advises the president on matters related to sports..

The uncertainty, combined with severe cuts to key federal supports for recreation that Trump has proposed (see Play 5: Think Small), has policy wonks wondering if parents, nonprofits and private sector organizations will have to go it alone in growing access to sports.

Delivered well and made broadly available, sport has the potential to address larger national challenges. Our work with Johns Hopkins University shows it can reduce medical costs and boost the economic productivity of workers. Conversely, busted joints and avoidable injuries can lead to painkiller abuse — contributing to the opioid crisis. Will these insights make their way into the conversation about health care reform? What's the appropriate role of government in creating the conditions for progress? Are there any bold opportunities that align with the needs of public health and a Republican-led and/or Trump agenda? These are all questions we encourage dialogue on in the coming year.

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## FIGURES

All data represented in the charts and graphs in this report are based on data provided by the Sports & Fitness Industry Association at the request of the Aspen Institute.

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