

5 Psychological Benefits of Playing Youth Sports

1) Better grades!

Research shows that youth who participate in sport, on average, have higher grades in school and complete more years of education on average.

Through sport, young athletes learn valuable life skills that transfer to academics and eventually the work environment, such as emotional control and the ability to show initiative. Other studies have shown that children and youth participating in sport, when compared to peers who do not play sport, exhibit higher grades, expectations, and attainment.

2) Caring Connections

Numerous surveys and studies have found that establishing friendships is an important reason for beginning and staying in sport. Youth who participate in sport are also more likely to make friends, including those that more academically-focused and of different races.

Sport also provides opportunities for children and youth to engage in valuable and positive relationships with adults, which is especially important when such benefits are not available at home. Sport provides an opportunity for children to safely navigate and negotiate between right and wrong as they learn to interact with peers and adults.

3) Stronger self-esteem and values

We know that sport, at its best, can build character and promote the virtues of honesty, respect, selfless teamwork, dedication, and commitment to a greater cause. Playing sport instills “a sense of confidence, usefulness, belonging, and influence.” In-depth research has shown that sport can provide a rich and fertile field for social, psychological, and emotional growth.

Sport participation stands out over other activities as a confidence builder, showing a consistent advantage in building self-esteem and improved psychological functioning. Research found that youth who play sport reported higher rates of self-knowledge, managing emotions, and physical skills compared to non-involved peers in academic and leadership activities.

4) Better Behavior

As legendary basketball coach John Wooden once said, “sports don’t build character, they reveal it.” The playing field is a place where children can develop a life-long moral compass that transcends the sport experience itself.

Studies have found that girls and young women who engage in sport gain confidence and self-esteem and are less likely to be overweight, depressed, smoke, use illegal drugs, or have teen pregnancies. Sport lessons (good and bad) transcend the playing field, spilling over into the classroom, the business world, and the community, and they contribute to shaping the character and culture of America’s citizens. The lessons sports provide—taught properly—apply directly to life. Many of those lessons are usually taught first by a good mother and father, but sports can help make them stick and add a few more.

5) Life Lessons

Children's first encounter with fairness often comes from the behavior of coaches and referees. When children have opportunities to play and improve their skills, they will be more likely to find satisfaction from mastering skills, enjoying the game, and achieving their personal best. As a result, they also will be more likely to display ethical behavior both on and off the field.