

## What Youth Sports can learn from Video Games



On a recent sunny Saturday, I took my kids out to the local park to play soccer with some friends. They ran, they jumped, and they competed hard. They laughed, they schemed, and they made the rules. Everyone played, no one was excluded from the game, and all the kids tried and failed over and over again without anyone telling them what to do, and without anyone critiquing their mistakes.

**They learned by doing, they played without fear, and they figured it out on their own terms, and at their own pace. They had fun!**

Next door to the park was a soccer field, and my attention was drawn to the organized practice taking place with kids of a similar age. What a different scene it was. While a bunch of kids stood in line and waited their turn, a few kids played. Every time they made a mistake, the play was stopped and they were told what they did wrong. Every movement took place under the watchful eye of a coach and the parents, who sat nearby shouting out a few instructions of their own. A mistake cost you your place on the field, and laughter elicited a scolding from the coach to “focus and pay attention.”

On one field there were kids smiling, having fun while learning, and simply playing a sport. It was all about the kids.

On the other there were kids training, scowling, and working while trying to learn a sport. It was about the needs of the adults.

**Isn't it a bit odd that the scenario we happily fork over our hard earned dollars for is the second one, which is the one least likely to keep our kids learning, engaged, and improving?**

We are losing 3 out of 4 young athletes from organized sports by the age of 13 and the reason is that sports far too often looks like the second scenario, and not the first. And where do they go? Many, especially boys, turn to video games.

Now I hate video games. I see no value in them for my kids, as aside from the violence and lack of respect for humanity portrayed in many of them, they take away from far more healthy pursuits, namely an active lifestyle. It scares me, as the father of a boy, that the average teenage boy plays 17 hours of video games a week.

Yet I am also intrigued, because there must be something here. Why do so many kids CHOOSE to play video games over all the other things they could be doing?

**Well, sadly there are many reasons a child would rather play video games than sports:**

- Video games put the kids in control, while in youth sports the adults take over.
- Video games are action packed 100% of the time and inclusive of all participants (especially their friends), while organized sports have huge numbers of kids sitting on the bench or standing in line and not participating. Throw in the push to form “select” teams and younger and younger ages and there go their friends too.
- Video games allow kids to create their own reality based upon their values and motivations, while youth sports today attempts to impose adult values and priorities upon them.

- Video games allow children to experiment and fail without fear of criticism and critiques, while youth sports rarely allow such space, especially in the “competitive” arena

In a nutshell, **in video games the needs, values and priorities of the child are at the center of the experience.** They want to have fun. They want to be with friends. They want to participate and they want to be active. The experience belongs to them.

In youth sports, the needs, values and priorities of the adults often take precedence. They want to win. They want to focus on long-term goals. They focus on trophies and medals, all-star teams and scholarships. That is not to say kids do not value these things. What I am saying is that for the vast majority of kids, they are not high on the list of what makes sports fun.

[In a 2014 study, researcher Amanda Visek asked children to define fun in youth sports](#), and they listed 81 characteristics of fun. Winning came in at No. 48! Playing in tournaments came in at No. 63. And getting trophies and medals came in at No. 67. Do they make it fun? Sure, but not as fun as the top reasons kids gave, namely:

1. Trying your best
2. When the coach treats players with respect
3. Getting playing time
4. Playing well together as a team
5. Getting along with teammates
6. Being active

You see, not only do video games promote [the three keys of continued participation in any achievement activity – autonomy, enjoyment, and intrinsic motivation](#) – but they have one additional current advantage over youth sports.

**The makers of video games actually ask kids for their feedback on how to make the experience better! Their motto: “What can we do to get you to play more?”**

How often do coaches ask kids “what can I do to make practice better, more fun, and more engaging?” Sadly kids are far more likely to hear “this is serious business, your parents have paid a lot of money for this, so suck it up and fight through the misery.”

How often do parents look at enjoyment, positive role models and a child-centered experience as reason to sign up their child? In my experience, parents are more likely to look at wins and losses, reputation of a coach as a winner, and the perceived best path to a scholarship.

Now, for all the naysayers who say I am the anti-competitive guy, I say that could not be further from the truth. I have coached national team players, I have coached pros, and I was an NCAA Division I college coach. I know what it means to compete. I believe there is a place for victories, defeats, hard work, disappointment, teaching, overcoming challenges, and things like that. What I am saying is those cannot be the primary components of the experience, nor should they always take precedence over enjoyment.

**Fun is not non-competitive; it is what makes kids competitive! Enjoyment and the willingness to compete hard go hand in hand. Fun and intrinsic motivation are intertwined. Play beats work every day of the week!**

Our choice is simple; [either start introducing organized coaching and parental participation in video games](#) – so we can get kids to do something else – or better yet make that something else, namely sports, more appealing to kids. How?

Parents please work hard to:

- [Make it fun](#)

- Make it about the needs and values of the kids
- Find ways for everyone to participate
- Lets kids [sample sports until they are ready to choose](#)
- Let their sports experience belong to them
- Pay more [attention to learning then winning](#)
- Give them [space to fail and be creative](#)
- Be a supporter, not a constant critic
- Reduce financial barriers to participation
- And start asking them “how can I make this a better experience for you?”

And coaches, when they ask kids the [five most important qualities in a coach](#), this is what they want from you:

- Respect and encouragement
- A positive role model
- Clear and consistent communication
- Knowledge of your sport
- Someone who listens and cares

The next time you cannot drag your child away from the computer screen, or the video console, take a moment and ask yourself “what is it about this experience that makes this far more important than everything else in my child’s life?”

Then ask yourself “do my child’s sports programs work as hard as these video game makers do to make the experience one worth participating in?” Sports can be just as exhilarating and addictive. We know this because whenever coaches talk about the best athletes in any sport, they always say the same thing:

“I have to drag them off the field.”

The day we start complaining that our kids are having too much fun in sports, and we cannot get them to do anything else, will be a happy day. Let’s take a cue from the tech world, and make it about the kids. They have already proven it works; we are just a bit slow on the download. Please share your thoughts below.

[Click here to join our movement to improve youth sports for our kids](#), and if you want to learn more about the Aspen Institutes Project Play movement, [click here to read their new report on improving youth sports](#).

**Sources for this article:**

Vissek, Amanda J. et al., “Fun Integration Theory: Towards Sustaining Children and Adolescents Sport Participation,” *Journal of Physical Activity & Health*, 2014.