

Body Image, Social Media and Gender Biases Associated with Kids Quitting Sports

Survey of youth athletes pinpoints causes of sports attrition

ORLANDO, Fla. (October 20, 2023) – Body image issues, social media, gender biases and coaching styles may be causing young athletes to quit sports, according to research presented by Nemours Children’s Health at the 2023 American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) National Conference & Exhibition.

Previous studies have found that 70% of children quit sports by age 13, and by age 14 girls quit at twice the rate of boys.

“Youth sports participation sets up children for a lifetime of healthy habits. Kids who participate in youth sports have improved cardiovascular fitness, muscular strength and endurance, and a healthy weight,” said lead study author Cassidy M. Foley Davelaar, DO, FAAP, CAQSM, of the Nemours Children’s Health Department of Orthopedics and Sports Medicine, an associate professor at the University of Central Florida College of Medicine, and physician for the U.S. Tennis Association. “Parents need to know what drives kids to quit sports so they can support their children’s physical and mental health.”

The study surveyed 70 current or past athletes, ages 8-18, through local athletic organizations and sports medicine clinics. Its goal was to determine the various factors that motivate youth sports attrition. The reasons participants gave for abandoning sports were coaching issues, poor body image comparison from social media and the competitive pressure of the sport.

Based on these findings, the researchers note, parents need to understand coaches’ impact on youth sports participation and ensure that coaches have proper training to foster a positive environment for participation.

Results also indicated significant correlation between screen time, physical activity and body image. Many respondents say they left sports because they feel they don’t match performance or appearance expectations of athletes that they see in media and social media. Those who were less confident in their athletic abilities ranked themselves as “less fit” on the body image silhouette scale than they perceived an athlete would be. Girls were particularly prone to quitting due to competitive pressure.

“Coaches and parents need to know that their words and actions can influence kids’ participation in sports. By being mindful to not place any importance on looking a certain way, adults can encourage a more supportive, inclusive and welcome sports environment among children of all abilities.” Dr. Foley Davelaar said. “We hope these findings will reveal the drivers of sports attrition so that adults can create a sports environment that brings joy and participation back to the game.”

About Nemours Children’s Health

Nemours Children’s Health is one of the nation’s largest multistate pediatric health systems, which includes two free-standing children’s hospitals and a network of more than 70 primary and specialty care practices. Nemours Children’s seeks to transform the health of children by adopting a holistic health model that utilizes innovative, safe, and high-quality care, while also caring for the health of the whole child beyond medicine. Nemours Children’s also powers the world’s most-visited website for information on the health of children and teens, Nemours KidsHealth.org.

The Nemours Foundation, established through the legacy and philanthropy of Alfred I. duPont, provides pediatric clinical care, research, education, advocacy, and prevention programs to the children, families and communities it serves. For more information, visit [Nemours.org](https://nemours.org).

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