

National Standards

For Youth Sports

Modifying the Sports Environment for a Healthier Youth

National
ALLIANCE
For Youth Sports

Compiled By:

National Alliance for Youth Sports



An Introduction to the National Standards for Youth Sports

The National Alliance for Youth Sports (NAYS) is pleased to release this revised edition of the National Standards for Youth Sports. The original version of the National Standards for Youth Sports were released in 1987 to provide direction for parents to follow when developing and administering youth sport for children. Since then, the Standards have served as the blueprint for how thousands of recreation professionals have conducted their youth sports programs through the years in an effort to meet the needs of all their participants.

In December 2007, a dedicated group of professional youth sports administrators convened during the International Youth Sports Congress in Orlando, Florida to re-examine the Standards in relation to the current youth sports environment. This new edition reflects the consensus of this group and addresses a variety of topics that currently affect the delivery of youth sports programs.

The purpose of these Standards is to provide a framework by which youth sports programs are designed and executed. While the previous edition was focused on parents and the role of parents within the youth sports landscape, this new version is directed to the league and program administrators. The National Standards for Youth Sports place in motion a nation policy for youth sports.

In addition to the nine standards, we have included three additional sections that provide information to parents, volunteer coaches and participants to explain what the National Standards for Youth Sports specifically mean to each group.

For more information about the National Standards for Youth Sports contact:



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Standard #1 Quality Sports Environment

Youth sports programs must be developed and organized to ensure, as well as to enhance, the emotional, physical, social and educational well-being of children.

Background:

A wide variety of youth sports experiences are available today. Historically, many programs have been modeled after adult-oriented programs using rules, skill expectations and competitive requirements replicated from high school, college and professional levels. Today, programs must be designed and administered so that every child, regardless of their abilities, has an opportunity to positively benefit from participation.

Rationale:

Youth sports programs should be based on meaningful participation. All children physically and emotionally mature at different rates. In order to have a quality youth sports environment consider the appropriate age range of the participants, the rules of the sport and the proper level of physical and emotional stress.

Implementation:

1. Leagues should be required to abide by written policies and procedures.
2. Leagues should be guided by a written mission statement that provides a foundation for the program's purpose and goals.
3. Leagues should maximize play time for all by establishing a minimum play rule/policy.
4. Leagues should organize programs using the following guidelines, although modifications can be made when total participation numbers are low:
 - a. Developmental Programs for children 6 years old and under:
 - Informal teams
 - Focus on motor skill development
 - Scores and/or standings not emphasized
 - Roster size, rules, equipment and fields modified
 - Limited uniforms
 - Post-season tournament or all-star competition highly discouraged
 - Encourage boys and girls to participate together whenever possible
 - No travel
 - Coaches permitted on playing surface
 - b. Instructional Sports Programs for 7 to 8 year olds:
 - Focus on skill development and rules of the game
 - Scores and standings not emphasized
 - Roster size, rules, equipment and fields modified
 - Limited uniforms
 - Encourage a variety of position and situational play
 - Post-season tournament or all-star competition discouraged
 - Encourage boys and girls to participate together whenever possible
 - Travel discouraged
 - Coaches permitted on playing surface
 - c. Organizational Programs for 9 to 10 year olds:
 - Scores kept but standings de-emphasized
 - Roster sizes, rules, equipment and fields modified when necessary
 - Encourage a variety of position and situational play
 - Out-of-community postseason play only when necessary
 - No national tournament participation
 - d. Skill Enhancement and Enrichment Programs for 11 year olds and above:
 - Scores and standings de-emphasized
 - Proper grouping and selection procedures to ensure fair and equitable teams
 - Encourage a variety of position and situational play
5. Leagues should develop skill level assessments to establish teams using methods to ensure teams are balanced by considering weight, skill and special needs when grouping children.
6. Leagues should establish a no-cut policy so all children can participate in recreational programs.
7. League standings should be discouraged below the age of nine and de-emphasized below the age of 13.
8. Leagues and coaches should not require sports specialization or year-around participation.



Standard #2 Sports participation should be fun and a portion of a child's life

Youth sports are only one portion of a child's life that must be balanced with other social and educational experiences and activities.

Background:

The foundation for human development occurs during the early years of life. Individuals that are exposed to many different learning situations increase their potential for successful development. Youth sports participation is a valuable component to a child's overall healthy development.

Rationale:

Parents, coaches and league administrators need to encourage children to be involved in a variety of programs and activities to experience positive growth and development, while taking great care to ensure that the child isn't overscheduled or that activities don't detract from their academic learning. Parents must respect a child's decision to play or not play, while keeping in mind that commitment is still important for their growth and development. Parents, coaches and league administrators must also realize that a child's involvement in youth sports affects the entire family.

Implementation:

1. Leagues, parents and coaches should encourage participation in a variety of youth activities in addition to sports while not over-scheduling.
2. Leagues should establish rules that limit organized practices and games to no more than one hour a day and three days a week up to age 8; not more than 1.5 hours and four days a week for ages 9 to 12; and not more than two hours and four days a week for ages 13 and above.
3. Leagues should adopt policies that make provisions for excused absences.
4. Everyone involved should understand that positive life skills are learned/gained from participation in youth sports programs.

Standard #3 Training and Accountability

Adults involved with youth sports must receive training and important information about the program and must be held accountable for their behavior.

Background:

Sports participation can lead to physical and emotional harm if those responsible have no training. In many cases, adults involved with youth sports organizations have not received formal training. Adults are an essential component of organized sports programs, whose own motives, morals and beliefs can influence how programs are conducted and their outcomes.

Rationale:

To ensure that everyone involved strives to make the youth sports program safe, positive and fun for all children, all administrators, coaches and parents must receive information about the program's philosophy, policies and procedures, as well as specific knowledge required for each position. By holding everyone accountable for their behaviors, high quality programming can be ensured.

Implementation:

1. Parents, coaches and volunteers should be provided written information that outlines the program's purpose, as well as policies and procedures.
2. Coaches and staff should be trained in the following areas: the emotional needs of children; safety, injury prevention and first aid; conditioning; hydration and nutrition; teaching proper sport techniques; including all children; child abuse prevention; and drug, alcohol and tobacco prevention.
3. Coaches should be encouraged to continually gain general and sport-specific coaching skills.
4. Leagues are encouraged to provide additional educational resources for coaches and parents to assist them in providing the best possible youth sports experience for each child.
5. Adults involved should be provided information about the types of child abuse, recognizing symptoms of child abuse and neglect and understand reporting procedures.
6. Leagues should adopt a positive coaching recruitment policy that encourages the recruitment and selection of qualified women and men regardless of race, creed, sex or economic status.
7. All volunteers should be required annually to sign a code of conduct pledging their commitment to provide enjoyable, healthful youth sports experiences.
8. Leagues should establish an accountability procedure and disciplinary process to remove anyone who does not abide by its policies and procedures.
9. Coaches and parents should encourage and apply proper principles of conditioning.

Standard #4 Screening Process

To ensure the safety and well being of children in youth sports, individuals with regular, repetitive access or contact with children must complete the screening process.

Background:

Volunteers are crucial to the delivery of youth sports programs. Leagues have a responsibility to protect participants against unsafe individuals by implementing a comprehensive screening system. Screening is a process with many elements that an organization uses to protect participants.

Rationale:

Leagues must be selective when choosing volunteers since parents are entrusting their children to the adults running the youth sports league. Consistent and comprehensive screening strengthens the organization's protective shield. T ct occurs in the organization.

Implementation:

1. Leagues must use appropriate and available screening techniques for selecting and assigning individuals to ensure that children are protected.
2. A written screening policy should be included in policies and procedures.
3. A written job description outlining the duties and responsibilities should be available for every position.
4. Job descriptions should be read, signed, dated and kept on file to ensure an understanding of the position and the league's expectations.
5. Volunteers should be required to complete and sign an application form.
6. Leagues should contact references provided by potential volunteers.
7. Leagues are encouraged to interview volunteers.
8. A criminal history background check should be conducted on all volunteers.
9. Leagues are encouraged to develop procedures and disqualifiers to determine what issues make a volunteer undesirable.

Standard #5 Parents' Commitment

Parents/guardians must take an active and positive role in their child's youth sports experiences.

Background:

Leagues should encourage parents to be caring and active in their child's youth sports experiences by providing positive support as a spectator, coach and league administrator. Many parents do not get involved at all in their child's youth sports experience, while others become overly involved. All parents should be required to demonstrate their positive commitment by signing a code which outlines the opportunities their child should have through participation, as well as the responsibility the parent has in supporting the youth sports experience.

Rationale:

Parents are one of the keys to their child's youth sports experiences. Parents who receive an orientation and who are required to sign a code of conduct are usually more positive and supportive of their children. They need to demonstrate the participation benefits by attending games, practices, or team social events; or by just expressing their positive support. Parents should discuss participation with their child and help in evaluating his/her experiences.

Implementation:

1. Parents should be required to complete a league orientation meeting annually. The orientation should cover the following areas: youth sports philosophy, program goals, expected behaviors and responsibilities, as well as sport specific information.
2. Teams should be required to have a minimum of one team/parents' meeting at the beginning of each sports season.
3. Parents must demonstrate their commitment to their child's youth sports experience by annually signing a parental code of conduct.
4. A child should not be allowed to participate if their parent refuses to sign the parental code of conduct.
5. Parents should familiarize themselves with the specific sport, including the rules of the game.
6. Leagues should encourage parent-child communication about their youth sports experiences.
7. Leagues should maintain open communication channels with parents through newsletters, league meetings and email.
8. Leagues should promote parental involvement in roles such as coach, team manager, fund-raiser, league manager, special assistant and fan.

Standard #6 Sportsmanship

Everyone involved in youth sports programs should exhibit positive sportsmanship behavior at all times.

Background:

Children will follow the example of adult role models, positively or negatively. Children will copy or imitate sports behaviors witnessed, including the development of values based on that behavior. Adults must be a positive role model exhibiting sportsmanlike behavior at games, practices, and at all times while giving positive reinforcement to the children and supporting their coaches, staff and other volunteers.

Rationale:

If the youth sports experience is to be a positive one for each child, adults must demonstrate sportsmanlike behavior as a fan, coach, and/or league administrator. They need to encourage fun, guide with positive reinforcement and give praise for successes along the way. When a child makes a mistake, separate the mistake from the child. Adults need to encourage peer support and give positive verbal support to team members, opponents and coaches of their child.

Implementation:

1. Leagues will develop a sportsmanship/conduct code that includes positive expectations and describes unacceptable behaviors (for example berating players, coaches, officials; use of vulgar language; and intoxication).
2. Leagues will promote fair play, respect for the game and graciousness in losing or winning.
3. Leagues will communicate conduct requirements to administrators, coaches, parents, players and spectators through policies and procedures, newsletters, email, website, telephone calls and announcements.
4. Leagues will develop an enforcement plan for implementing a sportsmanship/conduct code, including disciplinary procedures.



Standard #7 Safe Playing Environment

Youth sports programs must provide safe playing facilities and equipment, healthful playing situations and proper first aid applications, should the need arise.

Background:

Coaches and league administrators have the responsibility to inspect and ensure proper maintenance of facilities; to have knowledge of proper equipment selection and appropriate use; to understand the physical consequence of improper skill techniques; have the ability to modify rules for safe-playing situations; understand the physical need for a proper child-oriented conditioning program; and have knowledge of prevention and first aid for athletic injuries, including the ability to implement emergency procedures.

Rationale:

Children participating in youth sports are exposed to a variety of organized risk-taking opportunities. It is important for programs to take every precaution to protect participants from dangerous situations and in the event of an accident or emergency, everyone must be prepared to respond appropriately.

Implementation:

1. Leagues must implement procedures for inspecting playing facilities for safety hazards before every youth sports activity.
2. Leagues should develop procedures for continual safety inspections of all playing equipment.
3. Leagues must not allow participation during unsafe conditions, such as lightning storms, darkness, playing sites in disrepair, etc.
4. Leagues should develop emergency action plans and these should be communicated to everyone involved at the beginning of the season or program.
5. Leagues should establish procedures to ensure that all teams and events have an emergency first aid plan for administering to injuries, as well as policies in place for dealing with dangerous weather conditions and hazards that pose injury risks. .
6. Leagues should require basic medical and injury treatment forms to be properly completed and signed by parents.
7. Leagues should require that at least one adult trained in CPR (cardiopulmonary resuscitation) and basic first aid is always on site at any practice or game.
8. Leagues should require coaches to carry each player's emergency contact and health information at all practices and games.
9. Leagues should demand that teams have a fully equipped first aid kit at all youth sports activities.
10. An AED (automated external defibrillator) should be located in proximity to all fields, courts and rinks.
11. Leagues should remove coaches that knowingly allow a player to play while having a serious injury or knowingly create unsafe play situations.
12. Leagues should enforce a policy that requires written permission from a doctor prior to allowing a child to participate following an injury.
13. Leagues should provide information to everyone regarding proper hydration techniques.
14. Children below the age of 11 should participate in activities that contain limited collision potential and feature modified rules that will significantly reduce the chances of injury.
15. Leagues should mandate that at least two adults are always present during practices, games and any other related activity.
16. Leagues must adopt rules/policies banning rapid weight loss/gain procedures used solely for participation in youth sports.
17. Leagues must select equipment designed to ensure injury reduction for participants, (i.e. baseballs designed to reduce injuries, soccer shin guards, approved protective equipment in contact sports).

Standard #8 Equal Play Opportunity

Parents, coaches and league administrators must provide equal play opportunity for all youth regardless of race, creed, sex, economic status or ability.

Background:

The cost of participation in youth sports is financially out of reach for some kids. Sports opportunities for girls, minorities and children with disabilities have improved but are still not equal.

Rationale:

All children deserve the opportunity to play regardless of race, creed, sex, economic status or ability. Coaches, parents and league administrators should recognize stereotyping and demand that prejudice of any type be prohibited. Every effort should be made to provide financial assistance to those unable to afford participation, including the cost of safe equipment. Adult youth sports leaders must teach acceptance, tolerance and respect for people of all abilities, sizes, shapes, colors and cultural and economic backgrounds.

Implementation:

1. Leagues must adopt a non-discrimination policy that ensures participation for all children regardless of race, creed, sex, economic status or ability.
2. Leagues should make provisions whenever possible to allow all children to participate regardless of their financial ability to pay.
3. Leagues are encouraged to provide programs that allow boys and girls to participate together whenever possible.
4. Leagues must encourage equal play time for all participants.
5. Leagues must make reasonable accommodations to encourage children with disabilities to participate.

Standard #9 Drug, Tobacco, Alcohol and Performance Enhancer-Free Environment

Parents, coaches, officials, fans, players and administrators must be drug, tobacco, alcohol and performance enhancer free at youth sports activities.

Background:

Sports participation has long been characterized as a means of developing character and positive values. Information indicates that peer pressure, negative peer group associations and unhealthy adult role models may actually increase the use of drug, tobacco and alcohol use among youth participants as well as lead to the use of performance-enhancing drugs.

Rationale:

Adults involved in youth sports must be educated about all drugs, including performance enhancing drugs. Leagues should have policies to deal with the use of drugs, tobacco and alcohol, emphasizing prevention through education. Parents, league administrators and coaches should be trained to identify signs of usage and know how to access community resources. Healthful role modeling should lead the way for influencing youth participants to avoid drug, tobacco and alcohol use and to promote seeking safe and healthy improvements through proper training methods that don't involve the use of performance-enhancing drugs to gain an unfair advantage.

Implementation:

- Leagues should adopt rules prohibiting the use of performance enhancing drugs, alcohol, illegal substances and/or tobacco at all youth sports events.
- Leagues should provide coaches and parents educational information on identifying signs and symptoms of substance use.
- Leagues should establish written policies and implementation procedures for immediately dealing with substance use by coaches and players and communicate this information to coaches, players, and parents.
- Leagues should continually encourage dialogue between coaches, players and parents about the need for an alcohol, tobacco and drug-free environment for children.
- Leagues must ban all forms of tobacco use during any youth sports related activity.
- Leagues should discourage participants from using caffeine products (pills, gum and drinks).
- Leagues must not allow alcohol to be sold or allowed to be brought into youth sports games, practices or related events.
- Leagues should develop an enforcement plan for removing adults and players who appear to be under the influence of drugs, alcohol or any illegal substances.

What the Standards mean to parents and coaches

Parents - What the National Standards for Youth Sports Mean to YOU

Participation in youth sports provides children with an opportunity to gain many valuable life skills and develop an appreciation for physical fitness, all of which can lead to a lifetime of healthy activity. This can only occur, though, when organized sports programs are designed and administered to ensure a safe, positive and fun environment for everyone.

The National Standards for Youth Sports place in motion a national policy for children's sports. These Standards serve as a blueprint for all youth sports programs and must be incorporated into the delivery of every youth sports experience to best ensure that the needs of every child are met.

As a parent of a youngster involved in youth sports, you have a responsibility to make sure that your child is enrolled in a program that adheres to the Standards. Prior to signing your child up for a sport it's important that you review the Standards so when you're taking a look at how the program operates you can be sure that it is a good fit for your child.

Remember, you have the right to expect and demand that the recreation agency and/or youth sports program understands the Standards. You also have the right to ask that these Standards are incorporated into their programs so that all children are given the best opportunity for a memorable season that they'll look back on for years to come for all the right reasons.

Coaches - What the National Standards for Youth Sports Mean to YOU

As a volunteer coach you are commended for stepping forward to work with a group of children because there are few endeavors in life more worthwhile. You may be aware that as a coach you are in a special position to impact the lives of children in so many areas. Your influence extends far beyond simply helping them learn and progress in their respective sport, so it's of paramount importance that you take great care to approach your role with diligence.

One of the best ways you can prepare yourself for the season is to review the National Standards for Youth Sports. The Standards place in motion a national policy for children's sports. They serve as a blueprint for all youth sports programs and must be incorporated into the delivery of every youth sports experience to best ensure that the needs of every child are met.

When you volunteer to coach a youth sports team you take on the responsibility to meet the needs of every child under your care. As you review the Standards - which should be customary operating procedure before you gather the children for your first practice of the season - keep in mind that these represent what being involved in youth sports is all about.

By making a commitment to abide by these Standards you'll greatly increase your chances of making special connections with your players. This will translate into happy and productive children who will learn and develop skills and likely continue their involvement in the sport for years to come. Equally important, they'll reflect back on their experiences with you favorably and if they choose to coach someday they'll be more likely to pass along many of the same positive attributes to their players that they gained from their interactions with you.

What the Standards mean to youth sports participants

Kids - What the National Standards for Youth Sports Mean to YOU

Participating in organized sports programs is a truly special time in your young life. It's important that you - along with your parents or guardians - are aware that with your involvement in these programs you have rights. Among those are the right to a safe and fun experience and the opportunity to receive the same amount of playing time as your teammates, among many others.

The National Standards for Youth Sports are a great resource to help you gain a good understanding of what your youth sports experience is all about and how you should expect to be treated throughout the season. You should know that the Standards were created with your best interests in mind. They represent what respected professionals around the country believe is the best way to provide top-quality sports programs for children.

Along with your rights comes the responsibility for you to abide by team rules, follow your coach's instructions and, with the help of your parent or guardian, put forth every effort to get to practices and games on time. When coaches, parents and players work together - and do their best to follow the Standards - you'll enjoy participating in a positive environment that will increase the likelihood of you learning new skills, enhancing others and having a safe and fun-filled experience.

Acknowledgements

These National Standards for Youth Sports have been developed to be used by every youth sports league in the nation. The National Alliance for Youth Sports (NAYS), America's leading advocate for safe, positive and fun youth sports experiences, has continually taken a leadership role to assimilate and share the best practices. NAYS wishes to pay a special tribute to the following dedicated youth sports professionals who lent their time and provided input for the update of these Standards.

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