The Dropout From Youth Sport Crisis: Not as Simple as It Appears

Anthony Battaglia, Gretchen Kerr, and Katherine Tamminen
Faculty of Kinesiology & Physical Education, University of Toronto, Toronto, ON, Canada

Given the documented benefits associated with organized sport and thus the assumption that youth who leave sport are losing out on developmental benefits, dropout has been predominantly framed as a crisis to be solved. Throughout this paper, we aimed to challenge the overarching narrative of youth dropout from organized sport as a negative outcome only by highlighting the complexity of youth sport experiences and participation patterns. First, we highlight the lack of conceptual clarity regarding the term “dropout” and question its relevance for describing youth’s sport experiences. Next, we discuss how declines in organized sport participation may reflect developmentally appropriate transitions in sport and broader physical activity for youth and across the life span. Finally, we suggest that, at times, disengagement may be a positive and protective outcome for youth when the sport environment is harmful. Recommendations for future research and practice are provided to advance the understanding of youth sport experiences and participation patterns.

Keywords: developmental transitions, harms, withdrawal, participation patterns

Organized sport participation trends indicate that 50%–70% of youth in Westernized nations participate in sport programs, yet roughly 35% of participants organize youth sport programs annually, and by the age of 13, it is estimated that 70% of youth leave sport (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2016; Woods & Butler, 2021). Youth’s decisions to leave organized sport have been framed predominantly as a negative outcome and a crisis to be solved (Cobley & Moulds, 2023). As such, significant attention has been devoted to understanding the youth dropout phenomenon in sport. Researchers have examined intrapersonal (e.g., competence), interpersonal (e.g., coach-athlete relationship), and structural/organizational (e.g., cost) factors that contribute to dropout (Balish et al., 2014; Battaglia, Kerr, & Tamminen, 2022; Crane & Temple, 2015). Recommendations for youth sport programming and systems to keep youth in sport (Côté & Hancock, 2016; Westerbeek & Eime, 2021; Whitley et al., 2019) have also been proposed.

Underlying the narrative of youth dropout from organized sport as problematic is the assumption that youth who cease participation will miss out on the physical, psychological, and social developmental benefits organized sport has to offer (Cobley & Moulds, 2023; Fraser-Thomas et al., 2016). Youth physical inactivity is identified as a problem worldwide due to the short- and long-term consequences for health and well-being (e.g., diabetes, mental health concerns; Batista et al., 2019; Pfeiffer & Wierenga, 2019). Organized sport participation has been considered an effective avenue through which youth may achieve recommended activity levels and physical health benefits, such as improved cardiovascular fitness, motor skill acquisition, and musculoskeletal growth (Hebert et al., 2017; Logan et al., 2019; Vallence et al., 2019). Sport has also been advocated as a vehicle through which mental health may be promoted as youth who participate in sport report fewer mental health concerns, lower depressive and anxiety-related symptoms, and suicidal ideation (Swann et al., 2018; Vella, 2019). Long-term health benefits associated with youth sport involvement include lower sedentary levels and higher rates of physically active lifestyles in adulthood (Batista et al., 2019; Shull et al., 2020). Sport involvement during childhood was reportedly associated with reduced risk of mental health concerns over a decade later (Vella et al., 2019), whereas disengagement from sport between 8 and 10 years of age was linked to greater psychological difficulties (e.g., internalizing problems; Vella et al., 2015). Moreover, researchers have argued that youth sport participation may promote life skills, leadership qualities, and effective civic engagement (Anderson-Butcher, 2019; Camiré et al., 2022).

The potential benefits of organized sport involvement for youth cannot be ignored, yet focusing solely on the benefits inherently frames a binary view of sport participation as “good” and dropout as “bad.” To date, the youth dropout literature has been criticized for conceptual and methodological problems including concerns about dropout definitions and measurements, raising questions regarding the term “dropout” and its associated negative connotations. Furthermore, this binary perspective fails to capture the complexity of youth’s sport experiences and participation patterns (Baker et al., 2023) and the reality that for many youth, organized sport may stimulate negative outcomes (Gould, 2019). Challenging the prevailing narrative of dropout from organized sport as problematic, we advocate for a more critical, nuanced perspective to highlight the complexity of youth sport experiences and participation patterns. First, we highlight the messiness of the term “dropout” and question its relevance in sport. Second, we demonstrate how youth’s decisions to cease organized sport involvement may not be a final, rigid outcome, but instead may be reflective of developmentally appropriate transitions involving engagement, disengagement, and reengagement for youth’s sport experiences and/or the long-term physical activity patterns across the life span. Third, we draw on the growing body of literature highlighting negative experiences for youth in sport to argue that in situations where organized sport is harmful, disengagement may be
a positive and protective outcome. Informed by these perspectives, recommendations for future research and practice are provided.

**What Do We Mean by Dropout and Is It Relevant in Youth Sport?**

One of the main barriers to examining youth sport participation patterns is definitional; specifically, the term “dropout” is not clearly defined, and as a result, various operational definitions and terminologies exist across studies (Moulds et al., 2022). For example, Robinson and Carron (1982) categorized youth in the sport context as starter—an individual who consistently played; dropout—an individual who withdrew from sport; and survivor—an individual who was on the team but did not participate in games/competitions. Klint and Weiss (1986) labeled dropouts as the following: volunteer dropouts (i.e., left sport of their own volition to sample other sports and/or activities); resistant dropouts (i.e., valued sport but found their current sport situation as negative); and reluctant dropouts (i.e., forced to leave sport for reasons including injuries and cost). Researchers examining the dropout dilemma have also classified youth as participant—an individual who is currently participating in a specific sport program; dropout—an individual who is no longer involved in that specific program; and nonparticipant—an individual who was never involved in that specific sports program (Petlichkoff, 1996).

According to the model of youth sport withdrawal (Gould, 1987) and model of voluntary youth sport withdrawal (Lindner et al., 1989), while youth may terminate all sport, many athletes might leave a specific team, competitive level, or sport for another. For example, Gould’s (1987) model of youth sport withdrawal suggests sport dropout occurs on a continuum ranging from activity-specific dropout (e.g., baseball, hockey, or swimming) to domain-general dropout (i.e., all sports). Lindner et al.’s (1991) model of voluntary youth sport withdrawal theorized that dropouts can be classified as samplers, participants, and transfers. A sampler dropout tries multiple sports but fails to make a commitment and withdraws after 1 year or less. A participant dropout commits to one or more sports for several years and can be further categorized according to a low-, high-, and elite-level participant. This individual may return to the sport they left but at another level, pursue another sport, or drop out of all sport. A transfer dropout is no longer involved in a specific sport program but may be currently participating in another sport or may have reentered sport at another level. Other researchers (e.g., Allermann & Stambulova, 2007) consider dropout as the premature termination of sport before reaching one’s performance potential. Despite these various classifications, researchers rarely specify the type of dropout being explored, and of those who do specify, dropout is defined as athletes who have not reregistered for one or more successive season in the sport context (Balish et al., 2014; Crane & Temple, 2015; Moulds et al., 2022). As such, current definitions and interpretations of dropout provide an overly simplistic view, infer all or nothing meanings to youth’s sport participation patterns, and fail to capture the complex processes that impact youth’s sport experiences (Crane & Temple, 2015; Moulds et al., 2022).

Further complicating the framing of dropout as a term is a growing body of literature that suggests the term “dropout” lacks relevance in sport and may not reflect youth’s sport experiences and/or the long-term physical activity patterns of individuals across the life span (Eime, 2023). For example, Battaglia and Kerr (2022) explored athletes’, parents’, and coaches’ interpretations of the term “dropout” and found that the term did not resonate with stakeholders when considering sport; they argued that dropout perpetuated failure messages and was a term reserved for those who leave school prematurely. The stakeholders argued that while dropout was associated with negative connotations in the scholastic setting given the mandatory nature of school and its importance for success later in life (De Witte et al., 2013; Wilson et al., 2011), they believed the term lacked relevance in the sport setting, as sport is a voluntary activity, and decisions to leave sport may represent developmentally appropriate transitions for youth (Battaglia & Kerr, 2022).

Considering the lack of conceptual clarity surrounding the term “dropout,” variations in ways of measuring dropout, and the fact that stakeholders suggest the term may not be reflective of youth’s sport-related experiences, it is surprising that the significance of current dropout statistics and findings are rarely questioned. Instead, the notion that dropout from sport is a growing crisis for youth continues to be perpetuated. To more adequately highlight the dynamic and recursive nature of youth’s sport experiences and participation patterns, we will refer to the terms engagement, disengagement, and reengagement for the remainder of this paper.

**Developmentally Appropriate Transitions and/or Opportunities**

Declines in organized sport participation may not be indicative of a final, negative outcome but instead may reflect developmentally appropriate transitions and/or opportunities, involving engagement, disengagement, and reengagement in sport and broader physical activity for youth, and across the life span (e.g., Baker et al., 2023; Battaglia & Kerr, 2022). The developmental model of sport participation highlights similar considerations for youth development and participation pathways; specifically, three stages of youth development are outlined: sampling (e.g., trying new sports), specialization (e.g., focusing on one or two sports), and investment (e.g., exclusive focus on one sport). Disengagement may often reflect appropriate developmental transitions as youth experiment with and determine which sports they enjoy most and/or focus their efforts to advance in a particular sport (Côté & Vierimaa, 2014). As youth transition from late childhood to adolescence, they also become more aware of and accurate in appraisals of their athletic abilities; adequate skill acquisition, and displays of skill are important developmental needs for youth that impact ongoing identity development (Erikson, 1994; Harter, 2012). Youth athletes may then lower their participation level to remain competitive, leave one sport for another in which they are more likely to excel, or leave sport altogether for other endeavors where they may more adequately display competencies (e.g., music; Battaglia, Kerr, & Tamminen, 2022; Eime, 2023). Battaglia, Kerr, and Tamminen (2022) also interpreted a model of the influences affecting youth sport experiences and withdrawal patterns, including within-sport transfer, sport-specific termination, and organized sport termination and youth’s movements within and between these sport contexts.

While adult-led organized sport (e.g., with formal leaders, structured practices, regular meetings) has been linked to benefits such as physical performance, academic achievement, psychological adjustment, connection with peer networks, enhanced youth identity, as well as lower rates of antisocial behaviors (Logan et al., 2019), it is not the only sport- and physical activity-related avenue
through which youth may reap developmental outcomes (Côté et al., 2016; Wiium & Säfvenbom, 2019). The view that organized, adult-led sport is the ideal is commonly recognized as an ethnocentric, Westernized view that considers the benefits of sport for optimal youth health and development to outweigh any potential detriments associated with participation (Gould, 2019; Petersen, 2021; Westerbeek & Eime, 2021). However, when considering sport-related participation across the life span, it has been argued that organized sport applies to a marginal portion of the whole population and is often not sustainable in the long-term (Westerbeek & Eime, 2021). Beyond traditional adult-led organized or competitive sports, informal, unstructured, self-organized sport and leisure activities are available to youth including, weightlifting, walking, skateboarding, running, and cross-fit style obstacle courses (Westerbeek & Eime, 2021; Wheaton, 2013). As such, the argument that youth disengagement may reflect developmentally appropriate transitions or opportunities is supported by recent findings suggesting that for many youth, declines in organized sport involvement represent their shift to participation in these informal, unstructured, self-organized activities (Eime et al., 2016; Säfvenbom et al., 2018; Shull et al., 2020). Among a sample of youth girls ages 11–18, participation in organized competitive sports via membership of a sports club decreased over time (70%–50%), whereas involvement in organized but noncompetitive physical activity (e.g., weight training) and nonorganized activities (e.g., running, rollerblading) increased from 32%–55% and 70%–92%, respectively (Eime et al., 2016). In Canada, participation trends indicate that among those who participate in sport, 48% participate primarily in a structured or organized environment (e.g., sport facility or club), 20% participate in a primarily unstructured or casual environment (e.g., pick-up games), and 32% participate in both types of environments, with youth reporting the greatest proportion of involvement in both settings (Canadian Fitness & Lifestyle Research Institute, 2013). Avenues for youth to maintain an active lifestyle beyond organized sport has become more apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, while organized physical activity levels for youth in Australia decreased by 65% during the pandemic, there was a reported increase of 23% in the minutes per week of unstructured physical activity (Nathan et al., 2021); likewise, Dunton et al. (2020) found that the most common physical activity among children in the United States during the pandemic was free play/unstructured activity (90%).

Informal, unstructured, self-organized sport and leisure activities have often been overlooked in favor of traditional adult-led organized sport as avenues for positive youth development, yet youth who participate in such activities experience positive outcomes and may find these activities as more appealing in satisfying their psychosocial needs (e.g., engagement, autonomy; exploration; Gilchrist & Wheaton, 2017; O’Connor & Penney, 2021; Säfvenbom et al., 2018). Furthermore, engaging in organized and self-organized activities concurrently has been considered more developmentally beneficial for youth than only engaging in one type of activity (Wiium & Säfvenbom, 2019). Supporting a more expansive view of sport and physical activity patterns, Baker et al. (2023) acknowledged the complex and intertwined pathways of sport experiences (entry, exit, and reentry) and contexts (recreational-competitive) during youth development and across the life span more broadly. Participation pathways are not viewed as fixed outcomes; instead, individuals may engage, disengage, and reengage in sport-related contexts throughout life (Baker et al., 2023).

Irrespective of sport- or physical activity-related transitions, the shifting interests, priorities, and needs for experimentation in activities within and outside of sport are common and important as youth age (Erikson, 1994); for example, time usage studies indicate that as youth interests change, they experience competing demands and difficulties balancing education, work, socializing, and sports (Gracia et al., 2020; Livingston, 2019). Researchers of athlete career transitions also highlight competing demands and shifting interests outside of sport; the holistic athlete career model (Wylleman, 2019; Wylleman et al., 2013) outlined transitions athletes face in various life domains (e.g., athletic, psychological, psychosocial, vocational-educational, financial, and legal). Findings indicate that while many youth disengage due to lack of opportunities and available spots during the junior-to-senior transition across various sport contexts, additional factors such as academics, work, and social supports, also impact sport participation decisions (Wylleman, 2019; Wylleman et al., 2013). Youth who explore interests in sport and physical activity (e.g., try different sports) and various interests outside of sport, such as student clubs or part-time jobs, are more likely to experience positive identity development (Côté et al., 2016; Harter, 2012). However, the failure of organized sport programs to accommodate competing demands and interests in other activities (e.g., school, music, community activities) is one of the most common reasons for youth disengagement (Battaglia, Kerr, & Tamminen, 2022; Crane & Temple, 2015; Gould et al., 1997; Moulds et al., 2022).

Of particular interest, youth desire interactions with individuals who share similar interests, values, and beliefs, and thus peers significantly impact sport decisions during youth development (Bukowski et al., 2018; Howie et al., 2020). Peer-group dynamics change as youth may observe peers leave sport, their peer group may develop new interests, or they may experience more positive associations with peer relations beyond sport compared to those in sport, further contributing to competing demands and disengagement decisions (e.g., going to parties, spending time with friends; Battaglia, Kerr, & Stirling, 2022; Smith & Ulrich-French, 2020). To adapt to shifting peer-group interests and, perhaps more importantly, avoid missing out on opportunities for peer interactions—a reality which is incongruent with youth’s desires for connection—youth may direct their attention to forming, developing, and maintaining meaningful connections in alternative settings (e.g., school, community engagement).

Moreover, research comparing boys’ and girls’ sport participation may reflect developmentally appropriate opportunities. Disengagement rates during youth development are most pronounced for girls (LaVoi, 2018; Zarrett et al., 2020), and indeed, in many cases, the decline in organized sport participation for girls is problematic and representative of the lack of access and opportunities afforded to girls (Crane & Temple, 2015; Eime, 2023). However, the competitive nature of sport is not appealing for many youth girls compared to other social play options ( Rowe et al., 2018; Somerset & Hoare, 2018), and developmentally, girls experience different life priorities (e.g., education, social connections), which may stimulate the pursuit of alternative settings and activities that better satisfy their developmental needs (Eime et al., 2015; Murray & Sabiston, 2021).

As argued in the current section, disengagement from organized sport may signify normal and important developmental processes. Given concerns regarding youth achieving recommended activity levels (Batista et al., 2019; Pfeiffer & Wierenga, 2019), we are not encouraging the termination of an active lifestyle, but instead highlight that there are other avenues for youth to remain...
active and achieve developmental needs satisfaction. As such, while it is developmentally appropriate for youth to engage in different transitions within organized sport (e.g., switch teams, levels, or sports), it is also normal and healthy for youth to leave all organized sport for less formal sport and physical endeavors and/or other activities that may better satisfy their needs.

**Alleviating Experiences of Harms**

The benefits associated with organized youth sport involvement (e.g., personal growth, prosocial behaviors, and civic engagement) are often (falsely) viewed by many among the sport community to be automatic (Gould, 2019). However, organized sport may not be designed and delivered in a developmentally appropriate manner for youth to reap positive outcomes, and thus many youth report negative experiences (Bean et al., 2014). In such circumstances, disengagement may represent ways for youth and their parents to mitigate further harms and protect their developmental needs. Broadly, developmental needs during youth development pertain to autonomous exploration, competence, and meaningful relationships (Bukowski et al., 2018; Harter, 2012), and thus we will present research on negative youth sport experiences that relate to these needs.

Sport culture, even at the youth level, has shifted away from holistic athlete development toward performance excellence (i.e., win-at-all-costs mentalities)—a reality which has resulted in what many scholars refer to as the professionalization of youth sport (Camiré & Santos, 2019; Gould, 2019). This paradigm shift is evidenced through talent identification strategies that select athletes exclusively on skill, the growth of early specialization and privatization of youth sport programs, and public rankings and statistics/accolades which often encourage displays of superior performance relative to others and interindividual comparisons (Camiré & Santos, 2019; Gould, 2019). Youth athletes who specialize in sport and engage in intensive training often report burnout, overuse injuries, reduced physical and mental engagement, and a lack of diversity and control of their experiences within and outside of sport (Normand et al., 2017; Waldron et al., 2019). Early specialization and all-year-round training experiences also often entail physical (e.g., training at remote locations) and psychological (e.g., lack of relationships outside of sport) isolation, risk factors associated with harmful exposures for youth in sport (Roberts et al., 2020). Despite advocacy and research to support the importance of diversity of experiences and balance between adult-led and youth-led programming, administrators, coaches, and parents tend to encourage specialization and prioritize sport around their needs as opposed to youth’s needs (Côté et al., 2016; Gould, 2019). Consequently, early specialized athletes disengage from organized sport sooner than athletes who engage in diversified experiences (Bean et al., 2014; Waldron et al., 2020), which may suggest that youth athletes reduce their involvement in sport in attempts to alleviate negative outcomes (e.g., burnout) and to assert their autonomy and explore alternative roles and activities that contribute to identity formation. To better accommodate youth’s needs for autonomy and exploration, arguments have been made for informal, unstructured, self-organized sport-related activities as alternatives to traditional adult-led organized sport: such activities are more time and commitment flexible, prioritize athletes’ interest, focus less on normative comparisons and skills, and remain cost-effective (Eime et al., 2016; Säfvenbom et al., 2018).

The prioritization of performance excellence (e.g., displaying superior skill and outcompeting opponents) in youth sport can encourage athletes to engage in negative social comparisons and become hyperaware of their athletic incompetence (Harwood & Thowrer, 2020). As an example, playing time is a key determinant of youth’s worth within the performance-oriented sport landscape; researchers have found that when playing time is removed, athletes were often consumed with negative thoughts about their incompetence and what significant others, such as coaches or teammates, thought of their abilities (Battaglia et al., 2017). Furthermore, in the pursuit of performance ideals, many athletes will endure harmful interpersonal dynamics (Roberts et al., 2020). Parent and Vaillancourt-Morel (2021) examined interpersonal violence experiences in youth sport perpetrated by coaches, parents, and teammates or opponents and found that among a sample of 1,055 youth athletes, 79.2% of athletes reported at least one experience of psychological violence followed by 39.9% reporting physical violence, 35.7% reporting neglect, and 28.2% reporting sexual violence. Other researchers have indicated that youth athletes may endure abusive and punitive coaching practices (e.g., body shaming, degrading comments; Wilinsky & McCabe, 2020); parents may promote unhealthy perfectionism, provide criticisms on the car ride home, and engage in bystander inaction when witnessing harm in sport (Elliott & Drummond, 2017; Kerr & Stirling, 2012; Tamminen et al., 2021); and peer bullying and hazing remains a prevalent concern at high-school and university sport levels (Nery et al., 2021; Waldron, 2021). Harmful interpersonal dynamics are problematic for youth as they impact the attainment of other developmental outcomes in sport, such as fun and enjoyment, motivation, and sport maintenance (Holt et al., 2017).

Compounding the potential for negative youth sport experiences is that physical competence in sport (i.e., skill) has a direct impact on the nature and quality of relational dynamics (Battaglia, Kerr, & Stirling, 2022; Vierimaa & Côté, 2016). Relational experiences defined by performance outcomes create fragile bonds where youth experience positive and supportive interactions when performing well, and negative and rejecting interactions when performing poorly. In fact, athletes who display inadequate performances experience harmful interactions with coaches, parents, and peers, including punitive feedback, bullying, exclusion, and denial of attention and support (Battaglia, Kerr, & Stirling, 2022; Elliott & Drummond, 2017; Nery et al., 2021). For example, Willson et al. (2022) examined experiences of harm in Canadian national team athletes (n = 995) and found that 27.6% and 23.9% of athletes reported being intentionally ignored for poor performance and criticized as a person for poor performance, respectively. Likewise, among a sample of student-athletes (n = 122), 31.1% reported being bullied, and 49.2% reported witnessing bullying in sport for performance (e.g., lack of skill; Mishna et al., 2019). Collectively, such relational dynamics are problematic as they fail to provide youth opportunities to learn, develop skills, and integrate with others, especially at a time when they are trying to understand how they appear in the eyes of important others and develop meaningful relationships (Bukowski et al., 2018; Harter, 2012).

To avoid the challenges of year-round sport, feelings of inadequacy, and harmful relations, youth may disengage from organized sport and/or seek alternative settings (e.g., self-organized sport, community engagement) that may provide them opportunities for autonomy, to display competence, and fulfill their needs for connection. Burnout, lack of competence, and detrimental relationships with critical social agents (e.g., athletes, coaches, and parents) remain prevalent reasons for youth leaving sport (Battaglia, Kerr, & Tamminen, 2022; Crane & Temple, 2015; Moulds et al., 2022). Considering the negative experiences endured
by many youth, we highlight an often-overlooked perspective: namely, youth may disengage from organized sport to alleviate harms, and in doing so, their disengagement may be positive and protective.

Moving Forward: Advancing Youth Sport and Physical Activity

Understanding youth’s sport and broader physical activity experiences remains an important area of research as it may educate stakeholders on the processes that contribute to engagement, disengagement, and reengagement, and how to create experiences that are developmentally appropriate for youth. Informed by the more critical and comprehensive perspective of the youth dropout phenomenon discussed, recommendations for future research and practice are provided.

Engagement, Disengagement, and Reengagement Patterns for Sport and Physical Activity

Given the lack of conceptual clarity surrounding the term “dropout,” youth’s sport engagement, disengagement, and/or reengagement experiences remain unclear, raising questions regarding claims that declining participation rates represent a crisis, concealing the accuracy of reported statistics, and preventing comparisons across studies (Crane & Temple, 2015; Fraser-Thomas et al., 2016; Moulds et al., 2022). A single standard definition of dropout across all sport contexts is not achievable nor should it be the goal, especially when considering that the term may not be reflective of youth’s experiences or long-term participation patterns over the life span.

Explicitly identifying the sport engagement, disengagement, and reengagement pattern being explored (e.g., recreational or competitive, organized or self-organized) and how researchers intend to measure such experiences (e.g., percentages, frequencies; Moulds et al., 2022) are important for advancing the literature. For example, Battaglia, Kerr, and Tamminen’s (2022) theoretical model may provide a template for future research as identified youth sport withdrawal patterns included, within-sport transfer, sport-specific termination, and organized sport termination. Exploration of these patterns may be particularly relevant as the theoretical model was grounded in athletes’, parents’, and coaches’ perspectives; specifically, youths’ sport experiences and withdrawal patterns were underscored by stakeholders’ interpretations of personal, social, and organization influences. Baker et al.’s (2023) model, which highlights the complex process of sport participation across the life span and how individuals may frequently enter, exit, and reenter recreational and/or competitive sport contexts, may also be considered for future exploration. Although these models have yet to be tested empirically, a strength of both models is that sport and physical activity patterns are not viewed as fixed outcomes. For example, an athlete who terminates all organized competitive sport involvement at the youth level may return to sport or perhaps decide to reenter other sport- and/or physical activity-related activities in adulthood after reevaluating personal, social, and environmental factors (see Baker et al., 2023; Battaglia, Kerr, & Tamminen, 2022). Specifying the participation pattern may allow researchers to infer generalizability from research findings and provide insight for sport stakeholders of when youth sport disengagement may be cause for concern, representative of developmentally appropriate transitions, or a way to alleviate further experiences of harms.

Youth’s sport-related experiences and participation patterns are highly nuanced and will vary depending on factors, such as sport type, age, gender, cultures, and time. It may be difficult to derive one theory or model that adequately captures the variability of such experiences for participants across all contexts. However, this complexity should not deter researchers from developing a research program that promotes a more comprehensive understanding of youth’s sport experiences and participation patterns. Informed by the tenets of Battaglia, Kerr, and Tamminen’s (2022) and Baker et al.’s (2023) models, we propose an adapted model (see Figure 1). The model provides a template that may be modified by future researchers to suit the contexts in which they examine youth sport experiences and broader participation patterns. For example, researchers might specifically explore the adolescence stage of development and how personal, social, and organizational influences may impact sport experiences and participation patterns for these participants. To test the proposed model and to expand on the predictive power of the model, mixed-methods approaches would be particularly beneficial. Qualitative approaches may be used to assess the extent to which the proposed model may be representative of youth’s experiences and to gain in-depth understandings of the influences on youth’s sport experiences and associated impacts for their participation decisions. Quantitative and statistical approaches (e.g., structural equation modeling) may be used to test the relationships between factors such as the stage of development, gender, sport context, youth’s experiences, and participation patterns (e.g., disengagement in organized sport and engagement in self-organized sport and leisure activities).

Methodological Approaches

To-date, researchers have relied predominantly on quantitative approaches to examine youth disengagement from organized sport with relatively less use of qualitative and/or mixed-methods approaches; specifically, motivational constructs (e.g., achievement goal theory), self-report surveys, and questionnaires have been utilized (Gould & Walker, 2019; Moulds et al., 2022). Quantitative methodological approaches have shaped our current understanding of the reasons why athletes disengage from sport, yet opportunities to gain deeper insight on youth’s experiences are limited by a reliance on these approaches. For example, contributors to reported reasons for sport disengagement have not been fully explored, and it remains unclear if athletes’ experiences are adequately represented by predetermined categories within scaled measures (Battaglia, Kerr, & Tamminen, 2022; Moulds et al., 2022).

To address these gaps, future research examining youth’s disengagement experiences would benefit from qualitative methodological approaches including narrative (e.g., Barker et al., 2010; Battaglia et al., 2022) and case study (e.g., Bergin & Lagedast, 2023; Gould et al., 1997). The duty of qualitative researchers is to provide those being studied with an opportunity to share their personal stories and reflect on areas of inquiry to advance our understanding of phenomena (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). Qualitative research may provide a more comprehensive perspective on topics, such as whether the term “dropout,” models of youth sport engagement, disengagement, and reengagement, and suggested strategies for positive youth development, are relevant to sport stakeholders and/or encompass their experiences. For example, narrative inquiry may be used to explore athletes’, coaches’, parents’, and administrators’ stories about dropout in youth sport; specifically, questions of interest may include the following: “What
Figure 1 — A proposed model of youths’ sport and broader physical activity (PA) experiences and participation patterns across the life span. The nature and quality of youths’ sport-related experiences and subsequent participation patterns are underscored by their interpretations of personal, social, and organization influences. Identity characteristics (e.g., age, gender, culture, ethnicity) and developmental stage (e.g., childhood, adolescence, adulthood) are also thought to exert an impact on youths’ sport-related experiences and participation patterns across the life span. Participation patterns for youth are categorized according to organized sport and informal, unstructured, self-organized sport and physical activity. In organized sport participation, youth may move between recreational and competitive sport systems; more specifically, in recreational and competitive sport, youth may engage, disengage, and reengage via within-sport transfer (i.e., switching levels, leagues, and/or teams), sport-specific termination (i.e., leaving a specific sport but remaining involved in others), and organized sport termination (i.e., no involvement in organized sport). Additionally, youth may transition from organized sport contexts to more informal, unstructured, self-organized sport and physical activity (e.g., running, weightlifting). In this participation pattern, youth may engage, disengage, and reengage via in-sport and PA transfer (i.e., switching gyms, running trails), sport and PA-specific termination (i.e., stop running in favor of pick-up basketball), and sport and PA termination (i.e., no involvement in any activity). The dotted line from the participation patterns to the influences on the nature and quality of youths’ experiences indicates that youths’ sport-related experiences and participation patterns are not fixed; instead, they will continuously be impacted by interpretations of personal, social, and organizational influences, as well as identity characteristics and the developmental stage. For example, adolescent girls who terminate all organized sport involvement for more informal, unstructured, self-organized sport and physical activity may return to organized recreational sport during adulthood after reevaluating personal, social, and organizational influences on the nature and quality of their experiences. Note. Adapted from “Lifespan Models of Athlete Development: What Have We Learned From Previous Attempts?” by J. Baker, A. Gayman, and K. Johnston, 2023, Frontiers in Sports and Active Living, 5, Article 1179767, and “A Grounded Theory of the Influences Affecting Youth Sport Experiences and Withdrawal Patterns,” by A. Battaglia, G. Kerr, and K. Tamminen, 2022, Journal of Applied Sport Psychology, 34(4), pp. 780–802.
meanings are being conveyed through their stories about dropout?” “How are their stories about dropout structured?” and “In what ways might their stories perpetuate cultural norms around continued participation and the failure associated with stopping organized sport participation?” Case study research may also be beneficial to compare youth’s sport experiences and subsequent participation patterns across specific organizations, teams, levels, and sport types, and in doing so, may highlight unique factors that contribute to positive experiences for youth and continued engagement versus negative experiences for youth and disengagement.

We are not suggesting the abandonment of quantitative research; in fact, rigorous prospective longitudinal mixed-methods research exploring youth’s complex movements to and from different sport contexts (e.g., recreational-competitive) and their developmental experiences is needed (Baker et al., 2023). Such research efforts may help provide a deeper understanding regarding the process of youth engagement, disengagement, and reengagement, as well as the quality of youth’s experiences postsport involvement and across the life span, a current limitation in the literature. Westerbeek and Eime (2021) recently proposed the physical activity and sport framework, which integrates sport and physical activity into a whole sport ecosystem approach; physical literacy is the foundation to this framework. Within this framework, they encourage a shift from traditional sport policy which largely focuses on competitive club-based sport and elite performance and instead advocate for a more inclusive sport policy where the offering or the development of activities is consistent with the skill levels of the participant. This policy approach is thought to be fundamental to maximizing enjoyable sport and physical activity experiences for youth as well as lifelong activity retention. Informed by the public health perspective that switching between types of activities and contexts (e.g., club-based sport, walking) is normal, longitudinal research is needed to evaluate the extent to which this policy is effective in improving participation as well as maximizing continued participation (Westerbeek & Eime, 2021). Collectively, the breadth and depth of information afforded by both quantitative and qualitative approaches may help to further educate stakeholders on youth participation patterns and ways to foster developmentally appropriate sport and physical activity settings for youth while actively involved.

**Embedding Developmental Perspectives**

To date, studies examining youth’s sport experiences and participation patterns often lack grounding in broader developmental theory from the parent disciplines of psychology and life-span development (Holt et al., 2017). A recent review conducted by Dunn and Tamminen (2023) found that when researchers integrate developmental theories in the exploration of youth’s sport and transition experiences, most do so in a peripheral way (e.g., to contextualize or discuss findings in reference to theory or theoretical frameworks). Fewer researchers implemented theory centrally which entailed testing a specific theory or using a theoretical framework to interpret, organize, and present findings (Dunn & Tamminen, 2023).

To adequately understand youth’s sport and broader physical activity experiences, it is important to ground research and practice within life-span and developmental psychology literature. A developmental approach may help encourage a more critical and comprehensive perspective of youth organized sport disengagement which acknowledges that while cessation of sport may be problematic for some youth, for others, it may represent normal, developmentally appropriate transitions and/or a way to reduce negative experiences and harms. As a result, identifying methods of ensuring programs are developmentally appropriate and safe for young people as well as assisting youth through their transitions into different sport levels, types of sport-related activities, or out of sport contexts entirely for other experiences that contribute to their development, remains an important area for future research.

Various theories on developmental processes exist, however, within the context of the current paper, we suggest the Psychosocial Stages of Development Theory (Erikson, 1994) and Bioecological Theory of Human Development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) as theories researchers may use to explore youth sport engagement, disengagement, and reengagement patterns. Both theories adopt a holistic perspective to examining youth development; specifically, they highlight aspects of physical, emotional, cognitive, and social development across the life span, as well as address contextual factors that influence development.

**Psychosocial Stages of Development**

This theory outlines unique psychosocial challenges at each life stage and suggests that contextual aspects influence the resolution of these challenges. Considering the youth context, the life stages of industry versus inferiority (~ages 6–12) and (group) identity versus role confusion/alienation (~ages 13–22) are relevant for researchers to consider as these are when declines in organized youth sport participation reportedly occur (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2016; Woods & Butler, 2021). Across these stages, youth seek to develop competence through skill acquisition, maintain meaningful relationships, balance the need for individuality with the need to be accepted and validated by others in the social environment, and engage in autonomous exploration in different roles/settings (Erikson, 1994). Youth who demonstrate competence are more likely to experience satisfaction of achievement, a positive sense of self, and relationships (industry), whereas youth who receive failure messages about their capabilities from important others may endure feelings of worthlessness and perceptions of inadequacy (inferiority; Erikson, 1994). Within the sport context, perceived competence has been identified as a critical construct influencing sport commitment and participation decisions for youth (Weiss & Williams, 2004; Weiss et al., 2010). Furthermore, youth who can explore various roles autonomously and integrate with others in the social environment are more likely to experience positive (group) identity; however, youth who are unable to develop a positive identity may be more likely to experience role confusion/alienation, which involves negative self-perceptions and difficulty integrating into the social environment (Erikson, 1994).

By grounding research in this psychosocial developmental theory, researchers may be better positioned to answer questions such as: “Are sport environments designed to meet the developmental needs of youth or may they experience developmental benefits in other domains?” “How might philosophies and values in sport contexts impact youth development?” “How may youth athletes develop a sense of competence and meaningful relationships through sport?” “If athletes perceive themselves as incompetent, what impact may these perceptions have for other aspects of their experiences, such as peer and coach dynamics?” “How may athletes’ psychosocial needs satisfaction impact their sport experiences and participation patterns?” To date, the use of Erikson’s theory to conceptualize and design research projects as well as interpret findings concerning youth in sport contexts remains limited (Dunn & Tamminen, 2023). See MacPherson et al. (2016) for a comprehensive overview of Erikson’s theory and its application to sport contexts.
and Battaglia, Kerr, and Stirling (2022) for examples of research examining youth sport experiences and participation patterns informed by the psychosocial stages of development theory.

**Bioecological Theory of Human Development**

This theory identifies how factors interact across the ecological system to impact individuals and social interactions; more specifically, central to this theory is the process-person-context-time (PPCT) model, which provides a comprehensive understanding of the factors that facilitate, hinder, or impede behavior (i.e., processes) at a given time point or which may change over time (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Process refers to the direct and reciprocal nature of interactions over time, between an individual and others across levels of the ecological system; person refers to bio-psycho-social individual characteristics (i.e., age, gender), which may impact development and sport outcomes; context refers to the constant or dynamic characteristics of an individual’s ecology where the individual spends time; and time refers to the period under consideration (e.g., practice session, tournament, season; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Although researchers have acknowledged the various interrelationships between intra- personal, interpersonal, and organizational factors that impact youth sport experiences and disengagement, most research to-date has focused on person-level characteristics (e.g., psychological attributes), thus providing a limited perspective (Balish et al., 2014; Crane & Temple, 2015). Moulds et al.’s (2022) systematic review found that process (e.g., competitive level), person (e.g., competence, context (e.g., parent support), and time (e.g., schedules) factors contribute to youth sport disengagement; however, of the 69 studies considered in their review, 15 examined multiple factors across PPCT levels, and only one study specifically applied the PPCT model in the examination of youth disengagement. The use of the bioecological PPCT model may present challenges due to its comprehensive nature; however, this should not serve as a deterrent for its application. In fact, applying more encompassing sociocultural perspectives is needed to move past the predominant emphasis on personal and interpersonal dynamics when examining youth sport and withdrawal experiences (Moulds et al., 2022). Purposefully integrating the PPCT model in the exploration of youth sport experiences would provide such a perspective on the interrelationships between factors known to commonly affect youth participation patterns.

Collectively, youth sport and physical activity literature that is grounded in developmental theories would help provide a more nuanced understanding of youth’s experiences and contextually youth’s development according to their life experiences and the context in which they engage (Dunn & Tamminen, 2023). Furthermore, a developmental lens may provide insight on what happens to youth beyond sport; for example, to-date the impact of sport disengagement for youth has been limited to studies that highlight a decline in mental health or physical activity later in life (Batista et al., 2019; Vella, 2019). It remains unclear what happens to youth who disengage from sport programs that are positive and developmentally appropriate versus programs that are unsatisfactory and harmful; thus, future research attention is needed.

**Promoting Holistic and Developmental Intervention Research**

Framing youth disengagement as a crisis has resulted in researchers and stakeholders prioritizing interventions and retention strategies to keep youth in organized sport (Balish et al., 2014; Gould, 2019). Applied interventions often focus on the interpersonal level, such as improving coach-athlete dynamics (e.g., autonomy-supportive coaching), with less attention focused on structural or organizational elements (e.g., competitive philosophies; Balish et al., 2014). Considering the more critical and comprehensive perspective to youth sport experiences and participation patterns presented in the current paper, future applied intervention research should prioritize designing and delivering sport and physical activity-related programs that maximize the benefits youth may achieve while they are actively involved. To achieve this aim, researchers may consider the developmental perspectives listed above and adopt a macro- to micro-intervention approach, whereby aspects of youth sport experiences are examined concomitantly, such as understanding how philosophies and values in sport (e.g., athlete-centered) may inform stakeholder education, coach, parent, and peer relational climates, and ultimately, youth’s development. This perspective encourages a holistic approach to fostering developmentally appropriate experiences and is consistent with researchers’ recognition for a more integrated approach that considers ways in which persons and contexts influence and are influenced by one another in youth sport-related settings (e.g., Battaglia, Kerr, & Tamminen, 2022; Dorsch et al., 2022; Moulds et al., 2022).

Researchers have also outlined applied recommendations and programs (e.g., policy revisions, coach and parent education) for fostering positive youth experiences in sport and physical activity settings more broadly (e.g., Côté & Hancock 2016; Dorsch et al., 2017; Gould, 2013). Sport-based positive youth development interventions address the suggestion for designing and delivering programs that maximize the benefits youth may achieve while they are actively involved, yet outcomes and intervention designs remain limited and are rarely informed by life-span or developmental theory (Bruner et al., 2021; Whitley et al., 2019).

To further enhance developmentally appropriate sport, it is important to develop and test educational programs or interventions intended to foster positive youth experiences that are informed by developmental theories. As mentioned, during youth development, important psychosocial tasks include, but are not limited to, displaying competence, achieving meaningful relationships, autonomous exploration, and positive identity development (Bukowski et al., 2018; Harter, 2012), and thus interventions designed around these tenets would be beneficial. For example, from an organizational perspective, this may include objectives such as designing environments that allow flexible attendance (drop-in sessions) to support experiences in other sports or activities, emphasizing the progressive development/mastery of skills, allowing athletes to learn from discovery, engendering coaching practices that provide support and encourage participants to engage in personal exploration and expression (e.g., personalized goal setting), and adopting a holistic approach to athlete development by addressing areas of development beyond skill domains (e.g., well-being, life skills, leadership opportunities). Likewise, fostering meaningful relational dynamics for youth development is important, including, for example: opportunities for frequent coach–athlete, parent–athlete, and peer–peer communication throughout program sessions; adopting a consultative planning approach between coaches, parents, and athletes to allow athletes the opportunity to collectively contribute to their training sessions; and encouraging activities (e.g., team building) that promote cohesion, cooperation, sense of belonging, and positive social skills.

Furthermore, the increased awareness of potential negative outcomes for youth in organized sport suggests that disengagement experiences may be indicative of youth avoiding further harms.

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To combat harms, numerous safe sport education and training initiatives have been implemented (Kerr et al., 2014). Although safe sport education is needed to inform stakeholders on positive and safe sport experiences for youth, to date, education focuses on the prevention of harm (what not to do), with little information provided on the optimization of the sport experience through the promotion of positive values (what to do: MacPherson et al., 2022). Another limitation is that safe sport education is not adequately informed by athletes’ voices (Mountjoy et al., 2022). It remains important to understand youth’s perspectives on conditions that make sport harmful and ways in which to create safer sport. Such information may help to limit youth disengagement decisions that are a consequence of harmful, toxic, and abusive environments, as well as inform strategies to ensure that when they are actively participating, youth are experiencing safe, welcoming, and growth enhancing experiences.

**Conclusion**

Declining rates of organized sport participation for youth (sport “dropout”) has become a growing concern, as it is believed that youth who disengage are not reaping the benefits associated with organized sport (Cobley & Moulds, 2023; Fraser-Thomas et al., 2016). To challenge the binary understanding of organized sport involvement as “good” and dropout from sport as “bad,” we aimed to provide a more critical and comprehensive perspective regarding the complexity of youth sport experiences and participation patterns. First, we outlined the conceptual and methodological issues regarding how dropout is currently defined when exploring youth participation patterns (Moulds et al., 2022) and research that indicated sport stakeholders interpret the term “dropout” as lacking relevance in sport (Battaglia & Kerr, 2022). Second, we discussed how declines in organized sport participation may actually reflect developmentally appropriate engagement, disengagement, and reengagement patterns for youth and broader physical activity patterns over the life span (Baker et al., 2023; Eime, 2023). Third, confronted with growing reports of youth experiencing abuse and neglect (Parent & Vaillancourt-Morel, 2020), we suggested that youth’s decisions to disengage from organized sport may be positive and protective when the sport environment is harmful. Collectively, such realizations call into question current statistics and the overarching narrative of disengagement from organized youth sport as a problem or crisis to be solved.

To advance our understanding of youth’s sport and broader physical activity experiences, several suggestions for future research were discussed. Recommendations included specifying the engagement, disengagement, and reengagement pattern being explored; the use of methodological approaches, such as qualitative and/or mixed-methods longitudinal research; embedding developmental perspectives; and promoting holistic and developmental intervention research. These research efforts may provide a more comprehensive understanding of youth sport experiences and participation patterns and emphasize the importance of designing and delivering sport-related programs that maximize the benefits youth may achieve while they are actively involved.

As researchers, our goal is to educate populations on relevant issues, highlight areas of improvement, flaws in current practices, and provide varied perspectives on topics that question the rigidity of current thinking (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). Research perspectives and practices are expected to be dynamic and evolving, continuing to create novel contributions, and improve experiences for the (sport) participants and communities being studied. To continue to advance our understanding of youth sport participation patterns, including withdrawal, a critical and comprehensive perspective of the complexity of youth sport experiences and participation patterns, such as the one put forward in the current paper, requires consideration.

**References**


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