
Book and Resource Reviews

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Sports in the Lives of Children and Adolescents: Success on the Field and in Life

By Robert S. Griffin. Copyright 1998 by Praeger (1-800-225-5800).

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Robert S. Griffin, professor in the College of Education and Social Services at the University of Vermont, received a letter from a concerned parent named Ken Heise. Heise was having a disagreement with his wife about whether organized sport participation would be energy well spent for their 10-year-old daughter and 6-year-old son. Heise viewed sport involvement as constructive, leading to character development and a work ethic, whereas his wife viewed it as an activity that interferes with schoolwork and social development. After a relatively unproductive day at the library (we've all been there), Heise wrote Griffin trying to obtain references on sport participation and later success in life. Griffin began working on a response to the letter but soon came to the realization that he had not thoroughly explored questions regarding the character-building potential of sport, sport and academic achievement, and others. It was at that point he decided to write a book for parents that would carefully address long-held assumptions about organized sport participation and help parents settle upon their own conclusions about the value of sport for their children. His finished product, *Sports in the Lives of Children and Adolescents*, provides a thought-provoking treatment of organized sport as a context for youth development.

In the introductory chapter Griffin discusses the Heise letter and provides an overview of his research process for exploring the role of sport in youths' lives. Here and throughout the book, Griffin draws upon research literature from education, sport psychology, sport sociology, as well as the popular press to support his points and raise questions. The second chapter is used to detail concerns or issues salient to children and adolescents, referred to as the "agenda of childhood." Elements within this agenda include the pursuit of personal autonomy, gender identity formation, moral and social development, personality formation, and several others. These elements are discussed relative to sport participation, and Griffin raises several questions that are addressed in greater detail in subsequent chapters. Unfortunately, the number of elements precludes an in-depth examination of each issue later in the book. In some cases this might lead readers to draw inaccurate conclusions based on what is presented in this chapter. For example, I found the section on personality to be short on documentation and long on stereotypical characterizations of athletes. After presenting three forms of the sport persona, Griffin

states: "I have noticed that verbally expansive, analytical, self-revealing personalities don't often appear in the physically-oriented, no-nonsense sports world" (p. 31).

In the third chapter Griffin examines sport participation and academic achievement. Sport advocates believe that sport participation enhances academic performance, whereas others argue that sports distract youth from academic pursuits. Research that has bearing on this debate is presented, and readers are encouraged to weigh this evidence when forming their own conclusions. Griffin concludes that while certain individuals may suffer or benefit from sport participation, its effect on youth academic performance is generally minimal. This is a particularly strong chapter that not only explores this important debate but also educates about the distinction between correlations and cause-and-effect relationships, the importance of assessing the magnitude of relationships reported in research studies, and how the media frequently misinterpret research findings. Griffin tops off this chapter by sharing criticisms of the NCAAs Proposition 48 and forwarding his belief that the pursuit of sport and academics need not be an either-or proposition. He believes that parents should convey the expectation to their children that top effort be given to everything they do.

Griffin tackles the classic debate about sport as a character-building enterprise in the fourth chapter. He begins by discussing numerous qualities that make up character and then discusses moral development and contemporary theoretical perspectives on this topic (without overwhelming the lay reader). Griffin additionally discusses issues such as the development of competitive and cooperative attitudes, sport and conformity, sport and prosocial qualities, and others. Finally, Griffin explains to parents why there is so much faith in sport as a vehicle to promote character. Consistent with the research literature in sport psychology and sociology, Griffin concludes that sport does not necessarily promote moral development and that characteristics learned in sport do not readily translate to other achievement contexts. I believe a shortcoming of this chapter, however, was Griffin's failure to overview the growing intervention literature on moral development in physical activity contexts. While he suggests that a carefully designed sport experience can foster moral development, he proceeds to advocate participation in martial arts. This could easily lead the reader to believe that particular sports build character rather than to understand that many sport environments can be engineered to promote positive moral development. This highlights a more general shortcoming of the book: its exclusive focus upon organized sport. Most of the intervention research has been conducted in the physical education setting. Furthermore, clearly informal sport participation should contribute to the agenda of childhood. For example, informal physical activity settings that are youth governed and independent of adult-imposed values seem particularly germane to developing perceptions of personal autonomy and the development of social skills, such as conflict resolution.

The fifth chapter addresses why organized sport is afforded a central role in U.S. schools. Griffin presents several reasons, such as tradition, the perception that sport promotes well-roundedness, and its power to bridge conflicts between generations. There is wonderful food for thought in this chapter, and several of Griffin's observations will be eye-opening to parents. For example, he engages in a discussion of what he perceives as a conservative, anti-intellectual ideology that