



TOP 10 REASONS CHILDREN FIND *Physical Activity to Be* ‘UNFUN’

By Christine J. Hopple

Those who have chosen to work as youth sport coaches or physical education teachers have likely done so in part because they both enjoy and are good at physical activity (PA). Therefore, the idea that youth under their care may not find PA to be particularly enjoyable (and possibly, never will) could be difficult to understand. Yet, it is important for professionals to understand more about these youths’ nonenjoyable (or “unfun”) PA experiences if they wish to assist all children in becoming physically literate — that is, having “the ability, confidence, and desire to be physically active for life” (The Aspen Institute, 2016, p. ^{AQ1}). Recent research has begun to illustrate the impact of negative experiences on youths’ PA participation; for example, the lack of enjoyment was a major reason children gave for dropping out of organized PA (Crane & Temple, 2014; ^{AQ2} Ewing & Seefeldt, 1990), and a link has been established between children’s *current* negative PA experiences and their desire to withdraw from *future* PA (Visek et al., 2015). These and other initial research efforts are reminders that there is a strong need to learn even more about children’s reasons for not enjoying PA — especially if those reasons can come from the children themselves (McCarthy & Jones, 2007).

To gain a more in-depth perspective into children's nonenjoyment of PA, then, the author of this article involved more than 90 boys and girls in Grades 4, 5, and 6 who attended three nontraditional schools in a midsized Mid-Atlantic community in various research activities. Guiding these endeavors were three main questions: 1) What are the characteristics of physical activities (in the physical education, recreation, and organized youth sport settings) that children perceive to be nonenjoyable in nature? 2) Is it possible for a child to enjoy an activity in one activity setting but dislike that same activity in another, and if so, why? 3) Will factors such as an individual's skill level affect his or her nonenjoyment of PA?

To this end, all children completed a quantitative survey that included both open-ended and Likert scale questions regarding their nonenjoyment of PA in the three aforementioned activity settings. They also drew a picture of "the first thing [they] think of when [they] think of physical activity." From the pool of children who assented and whose parents consented to them taking part in follow-up interviews, select children were then chosen to be interviewed in one of six focus groups (of 4–5 students each; 28 children total) and/or 1 of 13 duo interviews (2 students together; 26 children total). (All interviews were guided by a semistructured interview protocol; these and all other research activities had previously been piloted and/or validated with a similar population of children.) Because obtaining the perspectives of children of differing skill levels was desirable, all individuals were asked to rate themselves via a series of questions on the survey. From their responses, they were then assigned to one of three groups — low-, medium-, or high-skill level. These ratings were subsequently confirmed by the children's teachers.

Children from the lower- and higher-skilled groups were included in an interview, whenever possible, to gain contrasting views; a concerted effort was made to interview children of similar skill levels together. After all data were compiled, the quantitative survey was analyzed using descriptive statistics. Drawings were analyzed according to the type and frequency of elements found in all drawings, and qualitative data were inductively analyzed (using standard techniques) to arrive at common themes that ran across all the data sources. After the themes were identified, they were organized according to overarching assertions, which both reflected and summarized the findings from all the data sources. (Please see Hopple, 2015, for a detailed description of the complete study's methodology.)

This article shares the "top 10" things children found to be unfun or nonenjoyable about PA, and it discusses the implications of these findings for professionals who work with children in activity settings. Children in this study utilized the terms "(dis)like," "(not) fun," and "(not) enjoy" interchangeably and to mean the same thing (even though adults may discern some differences between these terms). That is, if children felt an activity was not enjoyable (i.e., unfun), it meant they did not like it and vice-versa. All names utilized are pseudonyms that each child chose for himself or herself, and they are initially accompanied by the child's gender (B/G), grade level (4/5/6), and skill level (low [L], medium [M], high [H]) provided in parentheses.

(A "C" given in a quoted conversation denotes the author of this study.) Children's original thoughts are provided verbatim. Also, the data provided are only a representative sample of all data that were collected and represent only a small number of children and therefore cannot be generalized to all children. It also may be helpful to know that the more strongly a reason was supported by the various data sources in the study, the lower it is found in this "top 10" list (i.e., the No. 1 reason was more strongly supported by children's thoughts than any other reason). Now, let the list begin!

10. Too Much Focus on Winning

Sometimes, children just want to have fun! Forget about winning, they said — the enjoyment is found in the process of actually playing. In organized youth football, Osiris (B/4/H) thought that worrying about winning during a game "does not matter in fun." To him, thinking about winning would make him "nervous in a game," and "if I got nervous, that would mean I was not having fun." JoAnn (G/4/H) said that in her physical education class soccer games, "Sometimes people . . . if it's a soccer game . . . all they care about is winning, not really fun." Her advice to teachers and other kids was, "Try not to make it too organized. Try not to focus on winning. It's the fun that matters!"

9. Performing Poorly in Front of Others

Many children viewed performing poorly in public — which allowed everyone to view their incompetence — as being unfun. For example, Jo (G/6/M) thought that skateboarding "in front of people, it's weird . . . [you wouldn't want people to see] you falling on your face; that would be bad!" — but she did not mind skateboarding at home where she could mess up by herself. Jeffri (G/5/L) thought that doing yoga in class was not enjoyable because "when you're doing it publicly . . . it's uncomfortable." Running laps each day, for Bobbi (G/4/L), was a public exhibition of doing poorly; she did not like "running laps or walking laps or doing anything that has to do with laps . . . because most of the time I'm always last."

8. Favoritism, Bias and Being Ignored by Coaches and Teachers

Adults' behaviors such as demonstrating favoritism or bias to certain children while ignoring others can make PA unenjoyable for some children. Brandon (B/5/H) said that his physical education teacher demonstrated this behavior during class: "[S]ometimes there's certain athletic people she favors over the other [children]," which made the experience no fun for him and others. Jeffri did not like playing youth basketball because "my coach was someone I knew, and he had two daughters that were on the team and his daughters were always doing the main parts [forward, guard]." Kevin (B/5/M) indicated that even though his current youth baseball coach helped him improve his skills, all his coaches from previous years ignored him be-

cause “they didn’t care to do stuff with me because I wasn’t that good.” Mike’s (B/6/H) advice for coaches was, “[I]f we’re (kids) quitting, just don’t ignore them, because some coaches do.”

7. Ball Hogs and Bullies

Children who exhibited behaviors such as being a ball hog or bully definitely made PA unfun for those with whom they played. Bullies, Lizzie (G/4/M) said, are “hurtful kids, who like dodgeball . . . [who] like hurting other children . . . [who] would go for [the target child] more than for anybody else.” Pack (B/4/L) thought that “ball hogs” are “rude”; he said they are the kids who are always “holding [the ball] off from others, not giving them a chance.” Elizabeth (G/6/M) used to enjoy playing soccer at recess, but “ball hogs started to not pass to you and try to do everything themselves and it got really boring because you would never get passed to and so if people are being like really mean then it’s not fun.” KTMartin (G/6/M) agreed that it is not fun and said that “some people will get the ball and then won’t let anyone else do anything.”

6. ‘Really Strict’ Coaches and Teachers

Butler (B/6/H) thought that playing a sport could be fun, but it “depend[s] on the coach. If they’re really strict with you, it can’t be fun.” “Really strict” coaches or teachers, children said, are those who get upset or angry, yell at and mete out punishment for poor performance, causing the activity experience to become unenjoyable. Jo and Larri (G/5/M), for example, ap-

preciated that their gymnastics teachers “don’t get upset if you don’t know how to do something,” but they said other teachers, such as the teacher for their baseball unit, “expect you to be able to know how to do something, and [if you don’t] they’ll get mad at you.” In youth football, Brandon talked about how his coach would get upset when players did not perform well:

If you mess up, they (the coach) might get angry at you or sit you down. Like also it’s kinda frustrating sometimes, because people can do things better than others, so if there are certain skills that you’re not very good at, maybe you can’t necessarily do that and they’re going to get upset if say you’re walking and somebody gets past you.

Other children also felt that being yelled at made participating in activity unenjoyable. Kris (B/5/H) described how “my old gym teacher . . . he would yell at you if you would just stop to take a break . . . this teacher could yell as loud as the fire drill.” This yelling made Kris feel “very, very scared, spooked . . . like in the cartoons, all white.” Jo described how a friend of hers did not enjoy playing her sport because a coach was “constantly yelling at her.” Jason (B/4/M) and Joann, in response to watching a video where two girls’ teams were playing in a basketball game, explained why they thought that at least some of the girls were not having fun:

Jason: They’re like, I’m going to lose, my coach is going to yell at me for losing.

Joann: I had a coach yell at me for missing a ball . . . that’s not fun.



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Running, especially, was an activity that elicited unenjoyable feelings from many children.

Too-strict coaches and teachers also sometimes punished children for performing poorly. Elizabeth described an incident with her youth softball coach:

Elizabeth: I had a really strict coach a few years ago and it just wasn't as fun because she always kept us like really, 'You have to win, you have to win' and I liked having fun and being free.

C: So what kinds of things would she say that would not be enjoyable?

Elizabeth: Sometimes she didn't really say things until like after the game, but if she says that we didn't try our best then we would have to like clean up the field.

C: You have to do what?

Elizabeth: You have to clean up the field. And it wasn't always enjoyable to have to think, 'Oh I have to do good or else I'm going to be punished.'

5. Activities That Are 'Pointless' and 'Boring'

Children in this study found activities that they perceived as having no purpose or goal or in which no learning took place to be nonenjoyable. JohnPeter (B/4/M), for example, did not enjoy yoga because "it has no point in this world at all. I don't get it." In the same vein, Mike did not like wall-ball "because I don't see the point of it; all you do is throw the ball against the wall and then you run up to the wall; I mean, I know how to play it, I know the rules and stuff, I don't really see the main point of it." Other children found the parachute to be unfun and said it was "pointless" and "very boring 'cause you don't really do anything" (Osiris, DeathReaper, Jason, JJHardy; B/4/H, H, H, M).

Children also found activities that had no educational value (to them) to be unenjoyable; for example, Sethicus (B/5/M) used to participate in youth karate, but "I never used it . . . it was just for show and absolutely useless." For Duke (B/6/M), activities such as playing tag and jumping on the trampoline "have no real objective" and are therefore no fun, but he disliked running laps even more because "this one has even less of an objective; you just have to run around the track." Jeffri agreed that running is "kind of boring. Like, you are not really doing anything all that much, just kind of running around and around and around."

4. Competition and Pressure

Some children found competing against others to be an unenjoyable aspect of PA. Jeffri, for example, preferred activities such as the trampoline because "there's no competition, because I suck at competition." Anon (B/5/M) did not enjoy playing soccer because "it was too competitive," while Mungoia (B/4/L) did not understand his classmates' interest in competitive soccer games; he asked, "Why do [they] care about the ball? Why do you care about if you scored a goal? It is . . . too competitive." His activity drawing portrays him in a negative situation during an archery competition (see

Figure 1), although in his survey he wrote that he actually enjoyed the activity:

C: But then this [drawing] is making me think that archery, that you don't like it?

Mungoia: I like it, I just don't like the competition.

C: So, for you not fun means . . .

Mungoia: Competition.

In the same interview, MrISuckatPE (B/4/L) joined the discussion:

MrISuckatPE: I don't like competitions either.

C: How does it make you feel when you get in that kind of a situation?

MrISuckatPE: Like, yeah . . . I'm really . . .

Mungoia: Stressed.

MrISuckatPE: I'm only good at basketball . . . when there isn't, like, 10, 9 other kids, no wait . . . 9 other kids . . . like, 1 kid jumping up in front of me (uses loud voice, pounding on the table), 'You can't shoot it, you can't shoot it!' or 'Come on [MrISuckatPE] . . . come on [MrISuckatPE]!'

As Mungoia and MrISuckatPE alluded, competition and pressure go hand in hand, and too much of both in an activity situation can be unenjoyable. To Lizzie, pressure when competing in youth softball made her feel like "someone is putting a rock on your head and pushing! Pushing! Pushing!" Anya (G/4/M) actually preferred playing soccer in a recreational setting, because "when I play [competitive] soccer, I have the feeling of pressure, I don't know why, but I feel like if I have the ball, there's something about it that makes me feel like, 'Oh no, you have to do this and you have to pass, and you have to make it to the person, or you have to make it in the goal.'" Jason similarly preferred swimming for recreation, because "there is pressure [on a team] . . . you have to swim perfectly."

Name: AMINZO MUNITOIA J. KING
MUT-oxe + hp : III

When you think about Physical Activity (either Organized sports or activities, PE at school, or activity at home), draw the first thing that comes to your mind:



Very briefly describe your picture below – for example, what is happening in your picture? In which setting (Organized sport, PE, or recreation) is your picture taking place?

I'm shooting an arrow and loosing.

Figure 1. Student depiction of PA. AQ9

Children realized that a person's skill level can influence his or her feelings about competition. Michael (B/5/H) thought that "[n]ot everybody is more athletic or feels good about themselves as being athletic, and so they don't really feel like they're going to do well if you compete and they don't like that." He and Brandon agreed there are also some kids who *are* athletic but still don't like to compete, because "maybe they don't like to be as competitive, and they might not think that their friends will be happy if they compete and win or something." Brandon also thought that competition was OK in the youth sport setting, but not so much in school physical education:

If you're gonna compete, like if you join a team to compete, that's one thing; but if you're gonna play in gym, it doesn't really [matter]. Especially because a lot of people don't really necessarily want to play that or don't want to be on a team with that, so you don't want to be that competitive about it, and so they don't want all those rules that they might have to follow, and they might not know all those rules.

3. Feelings of Physical Pain, Injury or Overexertion

Experiencing feelings of pain detracted from children's enjoyment of PA. Larri, for example, disliked yoga because "it makes my butt . . . hurt! . . . It makes my face hurt . . . because there are some poses where you have to put your face down on the mat and it hurts you." For Jeffri, it "hurts, and is painful," while Elizabeth thought it was "too physical . . . it hurts your muscles more." A substantial proportion of children also said that becoming physically "tired" or "overtired" was a major reason for not enjoying certain activities. When Bob (B/4/M) did an activity for too long "like for 25 minutes," even if it is one he liked, such as the trampoline, "it's not fun . . . because I get so tired." TheOtherGuy (B/6/M) disliked "martial arts a little because it worked me really hard and I was always tired," while Smile (G/6/M) disliked scooter soccer because she "gets tired easily."

Running, especially, was an activity that elicited unenjoyable feelings from many children. Jeffri did not enjoy getting "overactive" when she ran laps "a lot and you don't really have time to stop and cool down for a bit before you can start back up," while Jason did not like running laps before games because "it makes me all tired. I'm like, how am I supposed to play this game if I'm already tired?" Bob said that running "makes my lungs burn if I run for too long," while Joann and Jo both did not like running laps when "it makes you hot and sweaty," which results, as JohnPeter said, in "having to take a shower — and I hate showers!" Other activities that children mentioned as being overtiring included swimming, playing tag and basketball.

So where is the fine line between being active, being *too* active, and still having fun? TheOtherGuy and Duke gave their thoughts:

C: I noticed . . . you said you like being active . . . but you don't like to run a lot because you lose energy . . . so it seems like there is this balance between . . .

TheOtherGuy: Having fun and wasting your energy.

C: How do you know when you've wasted your energy? How do you know when you've done too much?

TheOtherGuy: If I didn't enjoy it in the first place but I still did it I would consider that a waste of energy, or if I wanted to try something new but I didn't like it then . . . I actually wouldn't consider that a waste of energy because you were trying it out.

Duke: And I would consider something a waste of energy if I was playing something for so long and without a break and I would be feeling so much strain on myself and that would just be, you can already tell that it is just going to be a waste.

2. Arguing and Disagreements in Activity Situations

Children in this study intensely disliked the many instances of verbal arguing and fighting that took place in activity situations, in part because these "arguments and disagreements . . . wasted time" (Keven, G/5/M), and after games, "others would hold grudges" (TheOtherGuy). Some of the arguing and fighting occurred during recess. As Anya said, "[I]t's kinda sad, because everybody starts arguing over the rules; it kinda ruins the game because if you argue over the rules, you can't get anything done, you sit there arguing all day." Arguing and fighting also happened during physical education class. MrISuckatPE said that at his school, "PE (physical education) is like dumb, it's just arguments." Mungoia agreed, saying that kids at their school "will fight even if it (the ball) clearly was in the middle of the goal; they say, 'No, it missed, it went off the edge!'" For Lizzie, playing games like soccer or baseball during physical education was "not fun . . . they (kids) would fight even though they're a

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team.” Osiris agreed with her and said, “[T]here’s always arguments and everyone thinks they have to win and they cheat.”

Suzy (G/5/M) ^{AQ3} and Super (B/5/M) thought that soccer and kickball in physical education were not fun, because “everyone fights,” while Brandon said that kickball can sometimes be fun, but “then we have lots of issues that aren’t fun, like it’s really unfair . . . the teams, people always fight . . . and people are getting upset for no reason just because someone catches their ball or something.” Michael, in the same interview, described what happened way too often after his class played games such as kickball and soccer:

Most people after gym class, it usually ends up like four people crying, like six people pushing each other in the hallways, like out of anger and like the rest of the class is arguing. In one class it was so bad . . . when we went back to class everybody was crying and everybody had said that they wanted math class better than gym class.

1. Being Unskilled or Competent in Physical Activity

The No. 1 reason children gave for finding PA to not be fun or enjoyable was because they were not able to perform the skills involved in the activity. Bob found volleyball to be unfun and said, “It’s just, every time I miss the ball. It’s just not my thing.” Elizabeth thought that skateboarding was not fun simply “because I don’t know how to do it!” while Brandon did not like yoga and Hula-Hooping because “I really don’t care for it, but I also don’t know how to do it.” In the open-ended questions on the survey, children noted that certain activities

were not fun for them because they were not competent in the requisite skills: “I don’t like kickball because I am bad at it” (Fanona, G/4/M); “I can’t hit with the bat!” (CodyTaylor; G/5/M); “Because I can’t hit the ball [in baseball]” (Mooley, B/6/M; Pack); “I was never good at it (soccer)” (Lilly, G/5/H); “Because it’s hard (badminton)” (Jeffri); “[Dodgeball] because it is hard to turn [and] twist” (Lizzie); and “I don’t like soccer because kids just pass to the best players and I’m not the best player” (Suzy). ^{AQ4}

Basketball-related games seemed to engender many strong feelings by students, especially those who were not able to play them well. While watching a video of two girls’ teams playing basketball, students in one sixth-grade focus-group interview thought that the “one girl in the back” likely was not having fun in the activity because “she is not as good at it.” Mordici (G/4/H) said she did not enjoy “[b]asketball . . . because I am not good at it,” and MrISuckatPE “really hate[s] H-O-R-S-E, because I can’t shoot.” Bob said he did not want to play basketball because “I suck; I don’t even know how to shoot,” while Kevin did not like basketball because:

Everybody thinks that because I am kind of tall that I would be really good at it, but when I actually tried playing it I was actually really, really bad at it, so it was kinda hard for me to get past everybody without holding the basketball without losing control of it . . . it was too hard for me to play.

For some students, not being able to physically complete certain tasks due to poor fitness made activities unfun. For example, MrISuckatPE disliked football because “I don’t have the physical strength to do any of it; I can’t throw a ball, I can’t run fast, I can’t tackle”; other activities were not fun for him because they were “too hard for a weakling like me.” Anya said, “I don’t exactly like gymnastics because I’m not very flexible,” while Pack disliked yoga because “I just really don’t like [it] . . . I just hate stretching . . . it’s a little hard sometimes.” On his survey, AlexMercer (B/6/H) said that he initially did not like basketball “because I did not have nearly enough stamina when I first started playing.” Lastly, Megan (G/5/H) thought that basketball might not be fun for some boys:

Megan: Some boys, no offense to them, are absolutely hopeless . . . every single day, every single time . . . they turn into penguins (shows waddling, as if too large to move).

C: So, if you are out of shape would that make things not so fun?

Megan: Yep, pretty much.

Conclusions and Implications

This study sought to discover children’s thoughts about their nonenjoyment of PA. While some of the results mirrored those found by other researchers (e.g., Ew-

Arguing
Bullies
Pressure
NoSkill
Ball-Hogs
Competition
TooStrict
Teachers
Non-Enjoyment
Pain
Favoritism
Boring
Fighting
NotGood
Un-Fun
Hurt
NoFit

ing & Seefeldt, 1990), others were unique and unexpected. Taken together, what are the implications of these children's thoughts for those who teach and coach? First and foremost is the critical role that (perceived) competence plays in children's enjoyment of different activities. Children — just as many adults — simply *do not enjoy* participating in activities in which they do not feel skillful, especially if their nonsuccess is visible to others. This finding is consistent with the findings of others (e.g., Davison, Schmalz, & Downs, 2010; Woods, Graber, & Bolton, 2009). Children also preferred to be engaged in meaningful, goal-oriented activities that allowed them to learn and improve their skills, rather than those that they believed had no purpose or value. Thus, communicating the importance and worth of activities that educators know to be helpful in the long run may help children to understand there is a “bigger picture” in mind, even if they are not able to fully comprehend it at the moment.

The thoughts of children in this study also call into question the notion that competition is beneficial for all students. On the contrary, not every child relishes competitive games and pressure-packed situations. Thus, it seems prudent to revisit the idea that the “winning is everything” mentality of many youth sports is actually driving children *away* from sport programs at a time when keeping youth involved in activity should be paramount. It would be advantageous to also revisit the notion that physical education curricula composed of solely or mostly competitive large-group games may be inadequate for helping all children to enjoy their PA experiences.

Also, these same large-group games — once designed to keep children “busy, happy and good” in physical education — may be those that in actuality promote “boring, bullies, and discontent.” Teachers and coaches should find it alarming that children in this study so greatly disliked the arguing and fighting that took place in their classes. Certainly, there are a number of possible reasons for this negative climate, including teachers' behaviors (e.g., yelling, favoritism, use of punishment), the use of inappropriate pedagogical strategies (e.g., public humiliation for nonsuccess), poor curricular choices, and/or a negative school climate. Although the exact causes were not entirely evident, what is clear is that children of all skill levels found contextual factors such as these to greatly diminish their enjoyment of *any* adult-led activity program. Thus, daily reflection on teaching and coaching practices and program offerings, in addition to the periodic assessment of children's affective domain (e.g., a survey given at the end of a sporting season or school year), can help ensure that educators are providing an environment that allows all children involved to feel emotionally safe and secure and enjoy the physical activities.

It may also be helpful to ensure that the administrators in charge of these programs have the appropriate tools to make accurate evaluations of staff and programs, provide informed recommendations for program improvements, and offer continuing education opportunities, which can positively impact the affective climate of physical education programs. It is also important to provide expanded opportunities outside of school and organized sports for children to play and participate in ac-

tivities that are loosely monitored but not led or organized by adults — a call that has been mirrored by youth sport and activity authorities as well (The Aspen Institute, 2016).

Lastly, children's feelings of being overexerted during activity are a reminder that they are small humans who do occasionally get tired and hurt and feel physically taxed. Although some children do enjoy pushing themselves to their physical limits, it is clear from this study that many children do not, and that pain and overexertion are, in fact, deterrents to their enjoyment of PA.

Taken together, the thoughts of children in this study suggest that what they do *not* enjoy about their PA experiences can be just as illuminating as what they *do* find to be enjoyable. For some children who may already be turned off to PA, this perspective is likely even more critical to understand whether educators can “flip the switch.” It is also a reminder that it is no small feat to provide PA experiences that are enjoyable for all children. In fact, given the variability in what different children find to be enjoyable (and not), activity leaders must use sound, positive instructional strategies that focus on the teaching of a variety of skill-related, developmentally appropriate activities so that every child in the physical education program (no matter the skill level) has an opportunity to find *some* activity to be enjoyable. When this occurs, educators increase the probability that each child will make the decision to be and stay active and hopefully become physically literate — a goal to which all educators aspire.

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