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TO HAVE FUN: WHAT IT MEANS AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE IN SPORT

Amanda J. Visek, Andreas Ivarsson, Gary Putt, and Jordyn L. Learner

Introduction

Among children's rights in sport is their right to positive experiences that are fun. This right is reflected in the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) *Children's Rights in Sport Principles*, the World Players Association's *Declaration on Safeguarding the Rights of the Child Athlete*, Norway's *Children's Rights in Sport,* and the Aspen Institute Project Play's *Children's Bill of Rights in Sports*, to name a few. They draw on the United Nation's *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989) that asserts children's right to play and recreational activities, including children's right to have their views taken seriously in matters affecting them, like youth sport. Whether the goal is to provide children with a health-promoting leisure activity or talent development, their continued, or discontinued, involvement in sport is typically determined by their having fun or not having fun. Importantly too, in sport, positive experiences affect children's immediate and future human capital – benefiting them physically, socially, emotionally, and intellectually (Bailey *et al.*, 2013b). Though "designing play and practice activities that focus on fun" (Côté and Hancock, 2016, p. 60) is among the evidence-based recommendations for coaching children's sport, what it means for children to have fun still begs to be fully understood and appreciated among the adults responsible for delivering children's sport programming and supporting children in their athletic pursuits. In turn, children's right to have fun has not (yet) been fully realised. As such, the objectives of this chapter are to (a) synthesise empirical research that has given rise to the significance of children's enjoyment of sport and what it means to them to have fun, (b) connect current knowledge of fun with evidence-based theories and models that account for children's participation motives in sport, (c) discuss the implications of a rights-based approach to coaching children's sport with an obligation to make it fun, and finally, (d) suggest future research directions for bridging what is known about fun scientifically with the practice of making children's sport fun.

Review of Current Research

The review of literature herein presents key findings of early research that underscored the benefits and significance of enjoyment and fun in children's sport with contemporary research that unpacked what having fun really means and children's prioritisation of determinants, i.e.

DOI: 10.4324/9781003199359-7

factors that affect the nature or outcome, that make sport fun. To call attention to the criticalness of fun as a focal point in children's sport, the review connects the fun determinants identified by children with prominent and scientifically supported theories commonly applied to understanding their sport participation motives.

Early Research

Among the first models to propose and test enjoyment as a central element explaining children's motivation to continue in sport was the sport commitment model (i.e. Scanlan *et al.*, 1993a, 1993b, 1993c). Enjoyment (i.e. described as having fun), along with personal investments (e.g. time, effort, money), social constraints (e.g. social pressure to stay involved in sport), and involvement opportunities (e.g. the chance to engage in valued experiences) were found to positively affect sport commitment. A fifth construct, involvement alternatives (e.g. opportunities to engage in non-sporting activities), negatively affected sport commitment. Among the constructs, children's enjoyment and personal investments were the predominant predictors of their sport commitment. Another study (i.e. Carpenter *et al.*, 1993) also found greater sport enjoyment explained greater sport commitment among children.

Additional studies sought to identify precise predictors and sources of children's sport enjoyment. Among them, getting sufficient playing time, exerting greater effort, perceived athletic ability, experiencing mastery and competence along with performance satisfaction, elements of practice and competition design (e.g. balance between skill level and challenge), having family support, the presence of positive social interactions, and having coaching support positively contributed to children's sport enjoyment (Scanlan and Lewthwaite, 1986; Scanlan *et al.*, 1993a). Another study identified having fun was attributed to children's free choice along with their involvement (i.e. physical action, social interaction), sense of competence (i.e. doing well, improvement), and opportunity to play the sport again (Harris *et al.*, 1995). Later studies identified a positive social climate and pinpointed the role of children's social orientation (i.e. affiliation orientation, status orientation, social recognition) in their sport interest (e.g. Allen, 2003), and the association of peer relationships and positive friendships with children's continued participation (e.g. Ullrich-French and Smith, 2009; Bailey *et al.*, 2013b), enjoyment (Gardner *et al.*, 2016), and fun (e.g. Weiss and Amorose, 2008). Finally, studies also pointed to the role coaches have in promoting fun (e.g. Bengoechea *et al.*, 2004; North, 2007) and the significant influence their behaviors and approaches to interacting with children have on children's motivation in sport and their continued participation (e.g. Barnett *et al.*, 1992; Vallerand and Losier, 1999; Bailey *et al.*, 2013a).

Contemporary Research

Indeed, early research used the terms 'fun' and 'enjoyment', often interchangeably, to describe an affective experience that is satisfying and pleasurable. Children, though, ordinarily describe their sport experiences bimodally, either as 'fun' or 'not fun' rather than 'enjoyable' or 'not enjoyable'. In addition, "Let's have fun!" is commonly said in coaches' pre-game talks and half-time huddles and "Have fun!" is a popular last message from parents as their children step out onto any playing surface. What though does it really mean to children to have fun and how can this experience be carefully curated? To these ends, contemporary research purposely sought to investigate children's sport experiences from their perspective by mapping fun, i.e. the FUN MAPS, with the intention the findings could assist sport national governing bodies (NGBs), and coaches, in their efforts to make fun the center stone of children's practice and competition experiences.

What Makes Sport Fun

With the rights of the child in mind, and the objective of leveraging children's voices in sport, the FUN MAPS (Visek *et al.*, 2015) are the result of engaging child-athletes (U9–U19, girls and boys) as the experts of what makes sport fun, along with coaches, and sport parents, who collectively mapped fun. The series of interpretable maps visually display 81 determinants of fun arranged in 11 fun factors: *Trying Hard* (10 fun determinants), *Positive Team Dynamics* (6 fun determinants), *Positive Coaching* (12 fun determinants), *Learning and Improving* (9 fun determinants), *Games* (6 fun determinants), *Practices* (7 fun determinants), *Team Friendships* (7 fun determinants), *Mental Bonuses* (4 fun determinants), *Game Time Support* (6 fun determinants), *Team Rituals* (7 fun determinants), and *Swag* (7 fun determinants). These findings included many of the sources of enjoyment proposed by Scanlan *et al.* (1986, 1993a, 1993b) and tested by Wiersma (2001) through construction of a 28-item enjoyment measure. The FUN MAPS, however, offer a more robust 'big picture' overview of fun's integration in all aspects of children's athletic development, whilst serving as the data-driven blueprint for the fun integration theory. This theory posits development is central to children's sport and having fun is derived from four overarching sources. These include (a) contextual sources (*Practices, Games*), (b) internal sources (*Trying Hard, Learning and Improving, Mental Bonuses*), (c) social sources (*Positive Team Dynamics Team Friendships, Team Rituals*), and (d) external sources (*Positive Coaching, Game Time Support, Swag*). The 81 determinants of fun that make up the 4 sources and 11 factors, respectively, offer coaches a nuanced understanding of how to cultivate fun; see Visek *et al.* (2015) for illustrations of the FUN MAPS and the list of the 81 actionable fun determinants that make up the 11-factors. The fun integration theory's FUN MAPS are consistent with research by Vierimaa *et al.* (2017) that immediate, positive experiences described as enjoyable, accumulated over time, have lasting effects on athletes' development.

Notably, the FUN MAPS are evidence that having fun in sport is not synonymous with being silly, smiles and laughter, and goofing around (see Visek and Feiler, 2021 for further reading on the misconceptions of fun). Rather, contrary to popular (adult) belief, fun can broadly be described as a development-driven, task-oriented, multi-modal experience. Coaches can draw on the 81 fun determinants to intentionally source fun for children, across five domains that encompass the whole sport experience: (1) environmentally (e.g. by setting up well-organised practices that include small-sided games and partner-based drills, allowing children a voice, and opportunities to play different positions), (2) physically (e.g. providing children opportunities to compete and try hard, getting them lots of touches on the ball/puck, giving them high-fives/fist-bumps), (3) verbally (e.g. teaching children about the sport; talking to them in ways they can easily understand, providing feedback and encouragement that builds their confidence), (4) emotionally (e.g. actively listening to children, allowing them to make mistakes and handling mistakes as learning opportunities, being fair and approachable), and (5) socially (e.g. encouraging collaboration and sportsmanship among children, creating team routines/rituals, promoting team identity). Note the examples given here across the five domains are fun determinants drawn directly from the FUN MAPS.

Children's Fun Priorities

When it comes to further understanding fun in children's sport, very often, the immediate questions asked are centered around the ways in which youth sport typically organises children by sex, age, and playing level. For example, how do girls and boys differ when it comes to fun? Does fun evolve as children develop and mature in age? Is what makes playing sport most fun different for children at recreational levels compared to those at highly select elite levels?

Table 5.1 Fun factors by order of importance

Importance	*Fun factor*	*No. of determinants*
Primary	1. Trying Hard	10
	2. Positive Team Dynamics	6
	3. Positive Coaching	12
Secondary	4. Learning and Improving	9
	5. Games	6
	6. Practices	7
	7. Team Friendships	7
	8. Mental Bonuses	4
	9. Game Time Support	6
Tertiary	10. Team Rituals	7
	11. Swag	7

Research has indicated, that regardless of whether child-athletes are girls or boys, younger or older in age, or play on recreational or more elite teams, when it comes to what makes playing sport the most fun, their priorities are overwhelming the same (i.e. Visek *et al.*, 2020). Of primary importance are the fun factors *Trying Hard*, *Positive Team Dynamics*, and *Positive Coaching*. Of secondary importance are *Learning and Improving*, *Games*, *Practice*, *Team Friendships*, *Mental Bonuses*, and *Game Time Support*. Of tertiary importance are *Team Rituals* and *Swag*. Of note, *Team Rituals* and *Swag* must not be misconstrued as being absent of value in having fun. Rather, when considered in tandem with the other nine fun factors, *Team Rituals* and *Swag* do not contribute as much to fun as those of primary and secondary importance, though they are certainly additive to having fun, as identified by children, and illustrated by the FUN MAPS.

In addition to examining children's priorities across the 11 fun factors, Visek *et al.* explored children's prioritisation of all 81 fun determinants. Irrespective of children's sex, age, and playing level, children's prioritisation of the fun determinants from utmost to less importance was also extraordinarily the same. In other words, children's fun priorities have been found to be more similar than they are different. Table 5.1 provides a list of the 11 factors, in order of relative importance, and denotes the number of actionable determinants coaches can utilise to construct fun in practice and competition settings. See Visek *et al.* (2020) for a comprehensive list of all 81 determinants, according to importance.

Parents and Coaches Understanding

In addition to exploring children's fun priorities, parents' and coaches' understanding of children's fun priorities was also investigated. This study, by Visek *et al.* (2018a), indicated that overall, parents reported a relatively high understanding of children's prioritisation of the fun factors and fun determinants, as did coaches of younger children (U9–U13). Interestingly though, coaches of older athletes (U14–U19) reported significantly less understanding. This finding was noteworthy considering adolescence is the period during which most will typically leave sport; and, research has consistently found over time that sport being 'not fun' is the often-cited reason for dropping out (e.g. Durant *et al.*, 1991; Ewing and Seefeldt, 1996; Fraser-Thomas *et al.*, 2008; Armentrout and Kamphoff, 2011; Crane and Temple, 2015; Gardner *et al.*, 2017; Sport New Zealand, 2018; Back *et al.*, 2022). The findings of these studies, coupled with that by Visek *et al.* (2018a), would suggest that if coaches better understood what makes sport

fun, and could deliver on making practices and game experiences more fun, athletes who ordinarily would leave sport may perhaps be motivated to stay involved.

Understanding Determinants of Fun through Prominent Models and Theoretical Frameworks

Whilst the sport commitment model was pivotal in leveraging the role of children's enjoyment of sport and fun in their continued involvement, the fun integration theory's FUN MAPS have been a very nuanced and actionable advancement in understanding what makes playing organised sport fun. Next, the fun integration theory's factors and determinants are considered within the scope of research that empirically supports other sport participation models and theories explaining psychological constructs for understanding children's motives in sport. These constructs, including competence, motivation, and achievement, are associated with sources of enjoyment for children playing sport (see Weirsma, 2001), and are determinants of fun (see Visek *et al.*, 2015). Finally, a leisure constraints model is considered through the lens of the fun integration theory to offer an understanding of why children may find one sport more fun than another.

Competence Motivation Theory

Competence motivation theory (Weiss and Chaumenton, 1992) asserts individuals are motivated to feel competent and, to satisfy this desire for competence, they must attempt mastery in their sport. For children, perceived control over their learning and performance skills, along with perceptions of self-confidence, competence, mastery, and success generate emotional states such as fun, enjoyment, happiness, and pride (Weinberg and Gould, 2011). Inversely, low perceived control in conjunction with low levels of confidence, competence, mastery, and success lead to anxiety and shame. Klint and Weiss' (1987) study found competence motivation theory explained the relationship between perceptions of competence and motives for children's sport participation. They found high perceived physical competence was associated with greater skill development and greater likelihood to participate than children who perceived themselves as less physically competent. Similarly, for children with high perceived social competence, the social aspects of sport were a stronger reason to take part than for those with low perceived social competence. Hence, children who perceive themselves as competent and successful are more likely to have fun and continue their sport participation, while those with low perceived competence and success are likely to experience negative emotional states and eventually dropout. Correspondingly, nearly 40% of the 81 fun determinants within the fun integration theory's FUN MAPS are competence-based within the fun factors *Trying Hard* (e.g. playing well, playing with confidence, reaching goals) and *Learning and Improving* (e.g. learning from mistakes, learning new skills), as well as competence-building within *Positive Coaching* (e.g. a knowledgeable coach), *Practices* (e.g. well-organised practices), and *Games* (e.g. getting playing time), which foster children's athletic development.

Achievement Goal Theory

To fulfill our need for competence, achievement goal theory (Nicholls, 1984) posits individuals approach tasks with distinct goal orientations (i.e. outcome goal orientation, task goal orientation, social goal orientation) that differentially influence cognitions, emotions, and behavior. Outcome goal orientation, referred to as ego goal orientation as well, is described as setting goals to perform

and defeat others (e.g. winning). Task goal orientation is setting goals to improve upon past performances (e.g. personal best). Social goal orientation is setting goals to achieve social connections (e.g. belonging to a group) whereby competence is judged by group affiliation and being liked by others (Weinberg and Gould, 2011; Lavallee *et al.*, 2012). Strong task goal orientation tends to be associated with stronger work ethic, persistence in the face of failure, and optimal performance (Weinberg and Gould, 2011). Further, for those with strong task orientation, perception of their ability is their reference, therefore it is easier for them to feel confident and have fun in sport. Likewise, research has shown a positive correlation between social goal orientation and enjoyment, perceived competence, and intrinsic motivation (Stuntz and Weiss, 2009). Within the scope of the fun integration theory's FUN MAPS, nearly 28% of the 81 fun determinants align with the task and social goal orientations of achievement goal theory (Visek *et al.*, 2015, 2018b). Whereas, high outcome goal orientation, in which children tend to compare their abilities to others with a focus, for example, on winning, has been associated with low perceived competence resulting in reduced effort, excuse-making, and less fun (Weinberg and Gould, 2011). Of the 81 fun determinants within the fun integration theory's FUN MAPS, just 1% was reflective of ego goal orientation; that is, winning (Visek *et al.*, 2015, 2018b). Coalescing achievement goal theory and the fun integration theory would suggest having fun is determined more significantly by the moment-to-moment task and social experiences accumulated within practices and games and less determined by a singular ego-oriented outcome of these events, such as defeating the other squad in a practice scrimmage or winning a game. Befittingly, this inference is supported by research (e.g. Visek *et al.*, 2020) which had found winning ranked #40 in importance among the 81 fun determinants, indicating there are 39 task- and social-oriented fun determinants ranked higher than winning when it comes to having fun; see Petlichkoff (1992) for additional discussion.

Self-Determination Theory

Self-determination theory (Deci and Ryan, 1985, 2000) is based on the premise individuals are motivated to undertake an activity, or play a sport, based on innate psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and social connectedness. Many of the fun integration theory's 81 fun determinants promote children's autonomy, competence, and social connectedness in sport (Visek *et al.*, 2015, 2018b). Further to understanding motivation, self-determination theory suggests motivation lies along a continuum from amotivation (i.e. lack of desire to do an activity or sport; an absence of motivation) on one end of the continuum, to extrinsic motivation (i.e. doing an activity or sport as a means to an end; outcome driven), to intrinsic motivation on the other end (i.e. doing an activity or sport as a means in and of itself; process driven). These motivations are influenced by behavioral regulations described as autonomous (i.e. integrated regulation [confirming one's identity] and identified regulation [achieving personal goals]) or controlling (i.e. introjected regulation [to satisfy obligations] and external regulation [for reward or to avoid penalty]). Research suggests those who are motivated either intrinsically or extrinsically, and whose behavior is influenced more autonomously through either integrated regulation or identified regulation, tend to persist in their sport participation compared with those whose extrinsic motivation is controlled through introjected regulation or external regulation (Pelletier *et al.*, 2001; Sarrazin *et al.*, 2007; Rottensteiner *et al.*, 2015). Research by Visek *et al.* (2014) found experiences children described as 'not fun' to be controlling, whereas nearly 84% of the 81 fun determinants within the fun integration theory's FUN MAPS are based on fostering children's autonomy, competence, and social connectedness in sport (Visek *et al.*, 2015, 2018b). In other words, determinants of fun drive motivation, and further to this point, research has

shown having fun is among the foremost reasons elite and Olympic athletes persist and pursue the highest levels of their sport (e.g. Snyder, 2014; Berntsen and Kristiansen, 2020).

Hierarchical Model of Leisure Constraints

The hierarchical model of leisure constraints (Crawford *et al.*, 1991) helps explain why children find a particular sport more fun than others. This model identifies constraints (barriers) to leisure activities, including sport, into three categories: (a) intrapersonal, (b) interpersonal, and (c) structural, and are theorised to operate hierarchically. To explain, a child's intrapersonal constraints (e.g. beliefs and personal values; psychological attributes and states; perceived physical attributes and self-skills; and perceived competence and mastery) directly affect their preferences, or what they like or dislike, and are considered foundational to influencing their participation in leisure activities (Crawford and Godbey, 1987). Scanlan et al. (1993a) also identified liking, along with enjoyment and fun, as similar terms to describe the emotional appeal of a given sport. According to the hierarchical model of leisure constraints, children must like a sport and find it sufficiently fun for participation to be initiated or continued. As an example, a child who does not value close physical interaction may avoid contact sports or not find them as much fun as other activities. Only when intrapersonal constraints are overcome do interpersonal constraints impact participation. Interpersonal constraints stem from the interpersonal interactions involved in undertaking a sport, such as parents, coaches, teammates, and competitors. While intrapersonal and interpersonal factors can constrain participation, they also positively influence the fun experience children have while participating. Finally, when intrapersonal and interpersonal constraints are overcome, structural constraints may have a role in constraining or preventing participation, which include environmental constraints on participation, such as availability of competitions, facilities, and resources necessary to play.

Relatedly, the hierarchical model of leisure constraints can be viewed through the lens of the fun integration theory's fun factors to identify intrapersonal (*Trying Hard*, e.g. trying one's best, playing with confidence, working hard; *Learning and Improving*, e.g. learning from mistakes, learning new skills), interpersonal (*Positive Team Dynamics*, e.g. being supported by teammates, showing good sportsmanship; *Positive Coaching*, e.g. having a coach who treats children with respect, encourages the team, is friendly and knowledgeable; *Team Friendships*, e.g. getting along with teammates, being around friends; and *Game Time Support*, e.g. parents showing good sportsmanship while cheering and watching games, referees making consistent calls), and structural factors (*Games*, e.g. getting playing time, playing against evenly matched teams, playing on a nice field or surface; *Practices*, e.g. having well organised practices, doing small-sided games and partner drills, having freedom to play creatively; *Team Rituals*, e.g. carpooling with teammates; and *Swag*, e.g. nice sports gear, a special uniform, traveling to play) – that when unconstrained and able to be experienced, result in fun and thus greater likelihood to participate in sport.

Implications for Children's Sport Coaching

More than any other physical activity, sport participation offers children the best possible pathway for sustained physical activity in childhood, as well as over their life course (Kjønniksen *et al.*, 2009; Lee *et al.*, 2018; Palomäki *et al.*, 2018; Batista *et al.*, 2019), and is associated with a myriad of positive health outcomes throughout their lifespan (Bailey *et al.*, 2013b; World Health Organisation, 2020). Research to date has shown that, for children, having fun in sport, as well as not having fun, has wide-ranging and very significant implications. For example, children's experiences, over time, clearly affect their sport involvement motivations that

ultimately influence whether they will continue their sport participation or dropout. Positive sport experiences, namely having fun, is of paramount importance for keeping children involved in sport. Though children's sport experiences should be described by them as none other than fun, achieving this for every child will require more than just efforts by coaches who operate within a larger sport ecological system (see Dorsch *et al.*, 2020). Meaning, coaches must be supported by sport NGBs in their efforts at every level. Empowering coaches with information of what is fun for children in sport is not sufficient. They must also be provided the infrastructure, resources, and opportunities to develop the knowledge, wisdom, and skills (see Zins, 2007 for discussion of these concepts) that enable them to effectively optimise the quality of children's sport. This, however, will require novel approaches to sport that press upon the responsibility sport has to children to be fun.

To move the needle more significantly in ways that ensure sport is fun for children will necessitate shifting from a needs-based paradigm toward a rights-based paradigm. For so long, much of the efforts to improve children's sport has focused on better meeting children's sport needs, particularly through athlete-centered approaches. Simply put, children who are having fun continue to play (needs met), whereas children who are not having fun dropout (needs unmet). Needs, by definition, are synonymous with necessities and requirements, though they are also synonymous with desires and wishes. The latter, consequently, can be interpreted as optional and voluntary, in turn leading to a general acceptance that some sport programming for children will be delivered satisfactorily, i.e. fun, and others unsatisfactorily, i.e. not fun. However, a rights-based approach asserts that children's rights are human rights and, accordingly, are not optional. Therefore, these rights represent an obligation sport has to children, including discussing and respecting their sport objectives, which include having fun (David, 2005, 2020). The research overviewed in this chapter leverages children's voices, providing coaches, parents, sport administrators, and sport policy makers with the empirical science needed to inform and shape children's sport programming in ways that finally realise their rights.

Summary, Future Directions, and Future Research

If children's sport experiences are positive, safe, and health-promoting, given the immediate and long-term benefits of children's participation in sport (e.g. Bailey *et al.*, 2013a, 2013b; Eime *et al.*, 2013; Harlow *et al.*, 2018), endeavoring to involve as many of them as possible in sport, and keep them playing, is desired. Research has shown that fun is critical in maintaining children's involvement in sport and identified what is fun for children and how it can be thoughtfully sourced. To further advance our understanding of fun and harness improved ways coaches can deliver on children's right to have fun, the science and evidence-based practice in this area must evolve. As an incumbent next step with the rights of the child in mind, it is recommended that sport NGBs and sport scientists, in partnership, collaboratively develop, test, and scale strategies designed to realise children's right to have fun. These approaches must position children as the experts in their lived sport experiences and exercise their right to have a voice in all sport matters that involve them. The research evidence would suggest the future of sport, for children, depends on it.

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