



## Review

## Correlates of youth sport attrition: A review and future directions

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## ABSTRACT

**Objectives:** This review aims to (a) identify correlates of youth sport attrition, (b) frame correlates within a multilevel model of youth sport participation (i.e., biological, intra-personal, inter-personal, institutional, community, and policy levels), and (c) assess the level of evidence for each correlate.

**Design:** Review paper.

**Methods:** Systematic review method.

**Results:** Entering relevant search terms into PubMed, PsycINFO, SPORTDiscus and Web of Knowledge databases identified 23 articles with a total of 8345 participants. Satisfactory articles largely examined sport-specific attrition and sampled youth from western countries (e.g., Canada, France, Spain, United States). Of the 141 correlates examined, most were framed at the intrapersonal (90) and inter-personal levels (43). The level of evidence for each correlate (i.e., high, low, insufficient) was systematically assessed based on the quantity and quality of supporting articles. In total, 11 correlates were categorized as having a high quality level of evidence and 10 as having a low quality. High quality correlates included, among others, age, autonomy, perceived competence, relatedness, and task climate.

**Conclusions:** Overall, established correlates of youth sport attrition are largely social in nature. Future directions surrounding (a) the need to examine correlates at lower (i.e., biological level) and higher (i.e., institutional, community, policy) analytic levels, (b) to sample participants from more culturally diverse societies and (c) to examine sport-general attrition are offered.

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Converging evidence suggests that sport is a powerful context for promoting the health and well-being of youth (see Holt, 2008). Although sport is associated with some negative outcomes such as underage drinking (Denham, 2011), injuries (Khan et al., 2012) and negative affect (Slater & Tiggemann, 2011), positive outcomes are considered to be more substantial (for discussions see Fraser Thomas, Côté, & Deakin, 2005; Holt, 2008). Youth who participate in sport maintain healthy lifestyle habits including continued physical activity and healthy nutrition (Pate, Trost, Levin, & Dowda, 2000). Those who participate also experience positive emotion (Snyder et al., 2010), sense of belonging (Allen, 2006), life-satisfaction (Vilhjalmsson & Thorlindsson, 1992), and supportive peer relationships (see Smith, 2007). In addition, sport participation is associated with increased academic achievement

(Marsh & Kleitman, 2003) and decreased depression and suicidal ideation (Oler et al., 1994; Sabo, Miller, Melnick, Farrell, & Barnes, 2005). Given the potential benefits of youth sport, sporting professionals as well as applied social scientists have highlighted the need to use established empirical research to engage in an ongoing redesign of the sport-relevant environment. Moreover, as the majority of youth sport occurs in an organized fashion wherein rules, procedures, and practices are intentionally designed and largely implemented in a top-down manner, this ongoing redesign is often considered viable (e.g., Fraser Thomas et al., 2005; Gould, 2007).

One intended outcome of this continual redesign is lowered rates of youth sport attrition (Gould, 2007). Recent cross-sectional survey data (Boiché & Sarrazin, 2009) and longitudinal data from sport clubs (Delorme, Chalabaev, & Raspaud, 2011) suggest 30% of

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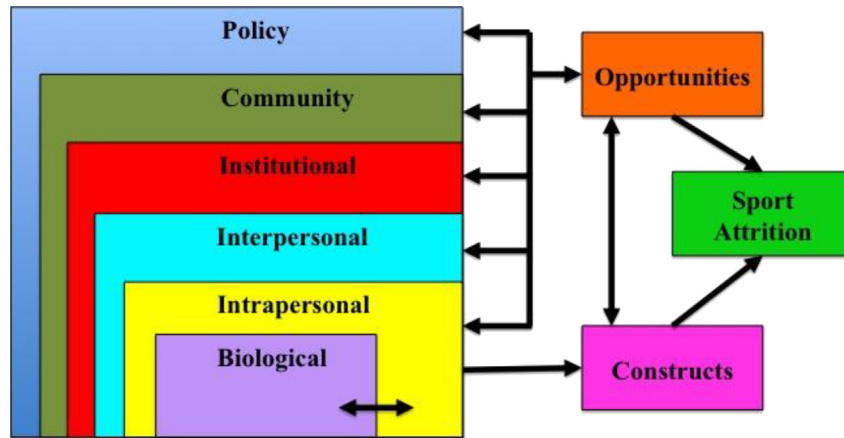


Fig. 1. The social ecological model of sport attrition. Adapted from Emmons (2000).

youth discontinue participation in at least one sport club annually. In Canada, an attrition rate of 30% equates to approximately 600,000<sup>1</sup> instances per year in which youth between the ages of 5 and 14 discontinue participation in a sport club.

One difficulty of building a sound theory of youth sport attrition that can guide this ongoing redesign is the practical constraints of employing experimental designs in youth sport contexts. Accordingly, researchers have placed emphasis on identifying and assessing correlates of youth sport attrition (Gould, 2007). Although youth sport attrition literature traditionally examines individuals and dyads, behavioral correlates can exist at multiple levels of the human environment (Emmons, 2000; Green, Richard, & Potvin, 1996; Spence & Lee, 2003). As recent research suggests correlates of youth sport attrition do, in fact, exist at different analytic levels (e.g., Fraser-Thomas, Côté, & MacDonald, 2010) there is also a need to frame correlates of attrition within a social ecological model of sport attrition (see Fig. 1).

Although several studies have examined youth sport attrition (e.g., Cervelló, Escartí, & Guzmán, 2007; Figueiredo, Gonçalves, Silva, & Malina, 2009; Robinson & Carron, 1982), there has yet to be a systematic review of relevant correlates. This study uses a systematic review method to (a) identify correlates of youth sport attrition, (b) frame correlates within a social ecological model of youth sport attrition, and (c) assess the strength of evidence for each correlate. The following section outlines the methods that guided this review. The full details of the results are presented the online supplementary material in the form of five tables of correlates, with each table corresponding to one level of the proposed social ecological model of sport attrition. The review closes with a critical discussion of the results and recommendations for future research.

## Methods

### Selection of the literature

A search of the relevant literature was conducted using a sequential four-step process among the PubMed, PsycINFO, SPORTDiscus, and Web of Knowledge databases (see Fig. 2). First, to identify relevant articles, the term 'sport participation' was entered

into each database search engine in combination with keywords associated with sport attrition (i.e., adherence, attrition, burnout, cessation, continued, continuation, dropout, drop-out, discontinued, discontinuation, prolonged, quit, sustained, termination, withdraw, withdrawal) and keywords associated with different social ecological levels (i.e., club, community, correlates, determinants, environment, policy). After removing duplicates, this process resulted in a total of 2133 articles.

In the second step the title and abstract of the identified articles were examined for relevance to the aims of the review, resulting in a total of 118 remaining articles. In Step 3 the body of each article was assessed for the inclusion criteria. To satisfy inclusion criteria, each study was required to be (a) published in a peer-reviewed journal during or after the year 1980, (b) written in the English language, (c) the majority (>50%) of participants are under the age of 20 years, (d) document either a subjective or objective dichotomous measure of sport attrition (i.e., 0,1; participators and discontinuers), and (e) report a statistical test and the descriptive data of at least one correlate of sport attrition. This third step resulted in 17 satisfactory articles. In the last step the reference lists of satisfactory articles were reviewed for additional articles that would meet the inclusion criteria. An additional 6 articles were added to the list of satisfactory articles, resulting in a total of 23 articles for inclusion in the review.

### Defining youth, sport, and youth sport attrition

Following Deaner et al. (2012), we define sport as a *game requiring physical skill where two or more sides compete according to agreed upon rules*. According to this definition, any games or physical activities that commonly do not include organized competition (e.g., yoga, aerobics, surfing) are not considered sport and thus do not meet the inclusion criteria. We define youth as *the transition from early childhood until early adulthood where the young adult is no longer reliant on their parents for essential means*. We quantified this transition as between the ages of 7 and 20 as evidence suggests an individual's home/parental environment explains the majority of physical activity and sport participation (Stubbe, Boomsma, & De Geus, 2005). However, once individuals seem to leave the home/parental environment (between ages of 17–20), the explanatory value of this environment significantly diminishes. It should be noted that this definition of youth is more broad than previous definitions that often describe youth as the period of transition between early

<sup>1</sup> This number was calculated by multiplying attrition rate of 30% and Clark's (2008) estimate that 2,000,000 million youth in Canada participate in sport between the ages of 5 and 14.

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