

# A family affair: Children's participation in sports

by Frances Kremarik

*“What do you mean, you went and joined the rugby team?” Kids love to do different things, sometimes with and sometimes without their parents’ permission. But no matter what their parents may think, kids probably don’t join sports teams on a whim. Certainly having fun and feeling good about themselves are probably the primary determinants of a child’s decision to play a sport,<sup>1</sup> but the family environment in which they live also counts.*

## CST What you should know about this study

This article is based on data from the 1998 General Social Survey (GSS) on time use. The survey interviewed almost 11,000 Canadians aged 15 and over in the 10 provinces and provides information about how people spent their time and who was with them during one day's activities. Included in the data collected is information pertaining to the sports activities of household members. Respondents were asked whether they or any other household members had regularly participated in any sport during the previous 12 months; they were also asked whether they or any other household member had participated in amateur sport as a coach, sports official/referee/umpire, administrator or helper. About 2,200 respondents in households with at least one child between the ages of 5 and 14 were identified in order to examine children's sport participation in terms of various parental and household characteristics.

**Sport:** mainly team or organized sports such as hockey, basketball, baseball, golf, competitive swimming, downhill skiing, soccer, volleyball and tennis. A number of popular recreational physical activities were not defined as sport by the survey, so data were not collected for them; for example, walking, aerobics/dancercise, aquafit, bicycling for recreation or transportation, body building, hiking, jogging, and skate boarding.

**Athletically active/athlete:** parent or child who regularly participates in organized sports. Regular participation was defined as being active at least once a week during the season or for a certain part of the year. Parents and children classified as “inactive” may in fact be very physically active in activities that were excluded from the survey's definition of sport.

**Volunteer administrator/volunteer:** parent involved in amateur sports in secondary or support roles as a coach, sports official/referee/umpire, administrator, or a team helper within a structured organization.

Parents provide an environment that can significantly influence a child's desire to participate in organized athletic activities, and their support may be paramount in encouraging participation during a child's formative and adolescent years.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, parents who instill a belief in the value of athletic activity may exert a lasting effect on their children.<sup>3</sup> This article uses the 1998 General Social Survey (GSS) to look at the household characteristics of children aged 5 to 14 who play sports, with special focus on their parents' involvement in sport.

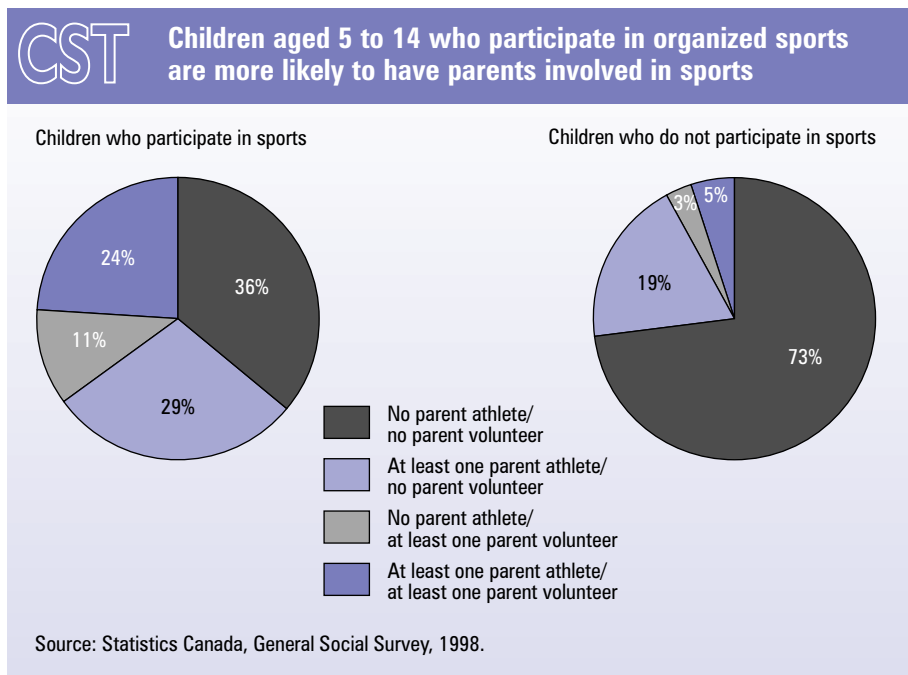
### The apple doesn't fall far from the tree

In 1998, about 54% of Canadian children aged 5 to 14 living in two- or one-parent households — almost 2.2 million — regularly took part in some kind of organized sport activity. Almost 48% of these active children participated in more than one sport over the year.

Soccer is the king of sports among children aged 5 to 14, with 31% of athletically active kids participating regularly. Swimming and hockey are tied for second and third place, at 24% each. At the bottom of the top 10 list were figure skating and karate (6% each), volleyball (5%) and cycling (3%).

Active kids generally have supportive families: almost two-thirds of them (1.4 million) had at least one parent who was also involved in organized sport. Most often these parents were athletes themselves; they were also volunteer administrators (for example, coach, manager, fund-raiser); and both athletes and volunteers. Not surprisingly, a far smaller proportion of inactive kids (27%) had parents who were involved in sport.<sup>4</sup>

One might expect family structure would affect children's participation, since it is probably easier to support a child's involvement in organized sports — for instance, taking the child



**CST Soccer, swimming and hockey are the most popular sports among children aged 5 to 14**

Top 10 sports	% <sup>1</sup>
Soccer	31
Swimming	24
Hockey	24
Baseball	22
Basketball	13
Downhill skiing	7
Figure skating	6
Karate	6
Volleyball	5 <sup>2</sup>
Cycling	3 <sup>2</sup>

1. Figures will not add to 100 due to multiple response. For example, about half of all active children participate in more than one sport.  
 2. Subject to high sampling variability.

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 1998.

- Martens, R. 1996. "Turning Kids on to Physical Activity for a Lifetime," *Quest*, 48, 3: 303-310.
- Martin, S., A. Jackson, P. Richardson, and K. Weiller. 1999. "Coaching Preferences of Adolescent Youths and Their Parents," *Journal of Applied Sports Psychology*, 11: 247-262.
- Welk, G.J. 1999. "The Youth Physical Activity Model: A Conceptual Bridge Between Theory and Practice," *Quest*, 51: 5-23.
- It should be noted that "inactive" individuals (both parents and children) might in fact be very involved in recreational activities like running, hiking, biking for recreation, and aerobics/fitness classes. These types of non-competitive activities were not classified as sports by the GSS.

to and from practices, attending games or competitions — if two adults are able to share the responsibilities. But participation rates were similar whether the children lived in two-parent (54%) or lone-parent (53%) families.

Nor do participation rates seem to differ depending on which parent is involved in sports. In two-parent households where only the father is involved, either as an athlete or in an administrative role, 66% of children participated in organized sports; in those where the mother was the only involved parent, the rate was just over 64%. In lone-mother families, over 81% of children whose mother was athletically active or a volunteer administrator took part in organized sports activities.<sup>5</sup>

The rate of children's sports participation does differ, though, depending upon the type of involvement their parents have. For example, 64% of children with at least one athletically active parent were also involved in sport. If at least one parent helped as a volunteer administrator, 83% of kids participated in sports; when parents were both athletes and volunteers, the proportion was even higher, at 86%. In contrast, in households where neither parent was involved in organized sports, only 36% of children were active.

Children's much higher rate of participation if their parents are volunteers is easily explained, since many sports organizations rely upon volunteers to function successfully. In children's sports, most volunteer labour is provided by parents whose assistance is implicitly mandated by their children's membership on the team. Thus parents take on duties as coaches, team managers, umpires, fund-raisers and so on. On the other hand, a parent currently involved as a volunteer may be a former athlete who maintains his or her ties to their old sport in an administrative capacity.



## Children's participation in sports differs depending on their parents' involvement in sports

Parental involvement	% of children aged 5 to 14 active in sports
<b>All families</b>	<b>54</b>
Neither athlete/neither volunteer	36
At least one athlete/neither volunteer	64
Neither athlete/at least one volunteer	83
At least one athlete/at least one volunteer	86
<b>Two-parent families</b>	<b>54</b>
Neither athlete/neither volunteer	35
At least one athlete/neither volunteer	64
Neither athlete/at least one volunteer	83
At least one athlete/at least one volunteer	85
<b>Lone-parent families</b>	<b>53</b>
Not athlete/not volunteer	41
Athlete/volunteer or both	76

Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 1998.

Often, children and their parents are athletically active in the same sport, even though the principle of self-determination states that children prefer sports they can choose themselves. In families where both the parents and the children were athletically active, over 30% of children had at least one sport in common with a parent.

### Family income also a key determinant of sports activity

Participating in organized sports may require the purchase of equipment, the payment of user fees, contribution to travel costs and so on. Spending can range from tens to thousands of dollars. Although research in the United States has suggested that cost and lack of equipment are not deterrents to a child's participation,<sup>6</sup> a recent Canadian study has strongly suggested that income is a barrier for children from households in lower income groups.<sup>7</sup>

Data from the GSS support the Canadian findings. Only 49% of children in households with incomes

under \$40,000 were active in sports, compared with 73% of those in households with incomes over \$80,000. And while about one in five children from lower- and higher-income households played hockey, those from homes with incomes under \$40,000 were more likely to be involved in relatively inexpensive sports (baseball and basketball) than children from households with incomes over \$80,000. As well, high-income kids were more likely to be downhill skiers and swimmers than children from lower-income families.

- Children's participation rates cannot be calculated for male lone-parent families because the sample size is too small to produce reliable estimates.
- Welk, G.J. 1999. "The Youth Physical Activity Model: A Conceptual Bridge Between Theory and Practice," *Quest*, 51: 5-23.
- Offord, D., E. Lipman and E. Duku. 1998. *Sports, The Arts and Community Programs: Rates and Correlates of Participation*. Ottawa: Human Resources Development Canada. 19.

Child's age		Odds ratio
5		1.0
6		1.2*
7		2.0
8		2.1
9		2.8
10		2.4
11		3.7
12		3.2
13		2.5
14		3.4
<b>Income/activity<sup>1</sup></b>		
<b>Less than \$40,000</b>	Both parents inactive	<b>1.0</b>
	Mother active/father inactive	1.5*
	Father active/mother inactive	1.2*
	Both parents active	4.8
<b>\$40,000 to \$79,999</b>	Both parents inactive	1.2*
	Mother active/father inactive	3.6
	Father active/mother inactive	3.9
	Both parents active	13.3
<b>\$80,000 and over</b>	Both parents inactive	1.5
	Mother active/father inactive	3.9
	Father active/mother inactive	5.4
	Both parents active	12.2

\* Not statistically significant difference from benchmark group.  
 1. Involvement as athlete, volunteer or both.  
 Note: This table presents the odds that a child participates regularly in sports, relative to the odds that a benchmark group participates (odds ratio) when all other variables in the analysis are held constant. The benchmark group is shown in boldface for each characteristic.  
 Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey, 1998.

**What has the greatest influence on children's sports participation?**

A logistic regression was used to estimate the likelihood that a child would participate in organized sport, when controlling for the effects of selected characteristics. The model was developed for two-parent households only, and parents were defined as being active, whether their involvement was

as an athlete, a volunteer administrator or both. (A model for lone parents was not developed due to data constraints.)

Results show that, compared with a child aged five, the odds of a child participating in sport increases steadily from age seven onward. This may be due to more organized athletic activities being available to children as they grow older.

More importantly though, the results show that households with active parents and higher incomes are key predictors of a child's participation in organized sport. Children with two active parents and a household income of \$80,000 or more have odds over 12 times higher than those of children with inactive parents in a household whose income is under \$40,000. Nevertheless, even in lower-income households, children with two active parents have 4.8 times higher odds of sports participation than children with inactive parents. When parents are not involved in sports, however, household income has little effect upon the odds of children's sport participation.

**Why playing sports is good for kids**

Physical activity — whether playing team soccer or going for a bike ride with the family — provides both immediate and long-term health benefits to children. Most importantly in the short term, a physically active lifestyle helps combat childhood obesity, a condition that has been steadily increasing since 1980.<sup>8</sup> Not only are children who become obese likely to develop into obese adults, but the earlier the onset of the condition, the greater the likelihood of retaining it into adulthood.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, the earlier onset of obesity in children has resulted in previously "adult" conditions, such as Type II diabetes, now being observed in children.

Participating in organized sports appears to have benefits additional to physical health. Research in other countries indicates that young people

8. Flegal, K.M. 1999. "The obesity epidemic in children and adults: current evidence and research issues," *Medicine & Science in Sports & Exercise*, supplement, 31, 11: s510-s511.  
 9. N.A. 2000. "Med Watch," *Globe & Mail*, January 25, 2000: R8.

who are involved in athletics are less likely to engage in risk behaviours.<sup>10</sup> Team sports can also provide an environment that enables children to integrate and develop in a group setting. For example, researchers studying children with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder at a sports camp found that low intensity intervention involving instruction and positive reinforcement produced some positive outcomes.<sup>11</sup>

### Summary

More than half of Canadian children aged 5 to 14 are active in organized sports like soccer, swimming, hockey, basketball and baseball. If their family provides a supportive environment for athletic pursuits, however, children are more likely to take part than if the family does not. Children who come from families where parents are involved in organized sports as athletes or volunteer administrators are significantly more likely to participate than other children. But income also plays an important role in determining

whether children will be athletically active. Having adequate funds gives children more opportunities to have fun playing sports.

10. Thorlindsson, T. 1999. "Sport participation, smoking and drug and alcohol use among Icelandic youth," *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 6: 136-143; Hasted, D.N. et al. 1984. "Youth sport participation and deviant behaviour," *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 1: 366-373; Miller, K.E. et al. 1999. "Sports, sexual behaviour, contraceptive use and pregnancy among female and male high school students: Testing cultural resource theory," *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 16: 366-387.
11. Hupp, S. and D. Reitman. 1999. "Improving sports skills and sportsmanship in children diagnosed with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder," *Child & Family Behavior Therapy*, 2, 3: 35-51.



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