

Review Article

Open Access

Adultification and the Youth Sports Industrial Complex

Bashyam Iyengar MD, MPH

Family Medicine Faculty at Ascension St Vincent's Jacksonville Florida

ABSTRACT

Adultification bias is where children are treated as being more mature than they actually are by a reasonable social standard of development. There are deleterious effects of treating children as adults. This has been shown in children of minority groups, specifically African Americans and their treatment in the justice system. It is postulated that a form of adultification is occurring in youth sports. Over the past several decades, there has been the increase of the youth sports industrial complex with concomitant phenomena of youth specialization. It has been noted that these individuals undergo more biomedical issues such as more musculoskeletal injuries, however other risks that have yet to be discerned. It is postulated, the youth sports industrial complex also is a form of adultification, with most children at risk for this, which may impact minority children even more so. We aim to introduce the concept of adultification in the context of youth sports, in order to spur more discussion, debate and research into the issue.

*Corresponding author

Bashyam Iyengar MD, MPH, Family Medicine Faculty at Ascension St Vincent's Jacksonville Florida.

Received: August 09, 2023; **Accepted:** August 11, 2023; **Published:** August 25, 2023

Adultification and Parentification

Adultification bias is where children are treated as being more mature than they actually are by a reasonable social standard of development [1]. Transition is defined as the movement from adolescence to adulthood in all areas, including home, health care, education, and community. Transition should be a process rather than an event [1].

Adultification has been shown to impact children of minority groups, such as African Americans. Adultification bias has been reported in the juvenile justice system [2,3]. It has been noted that African American youth are more likely to be viewed as adults more often compared to their white counterparts, which subsequently leads to penalties that are much harsher with less forgiveness. These in turn have downstream effects regarding how that individual can navigate the rest of their life [4].

This has been exemplified in the landmark study by Georgetown University, entitled *Girl Interrupted* [2]. The study shows that in the United States adults view African American females as less innocent and more adult-like than their white peers. Within the study, they identified that adults see African-American girls as needing less nurturing, less protecting, less support and less comfort [2]. Epstein et al, show that African American girls are punished disproportionately in schools and the juvenile justice system. African American girls are 2.7 likely to be referred to the justice system, as well twice as likely to be disciplined for minor violations. Further, there is a 20 percent more likely chance African American girls will be charged with a crime.

Looking at similar phenomena called parentification gives us insight to what happens to individuals when they are not afforded a proper childhood and grow up and are asked to assume the roles of adults too prematurely. Parentification—a form of emotional abuse or neglect where a child becomes the caregiver to their parent

or sibling. Researchers are increasingly finding that in addition to upending a child's development, this role reversal can leave deep emotional scars well into adulthood [5]. Many experience severe anxiety, depression, and psychological distress. Others report succumbing to eating disorders and substance abuse [5]. Yet there has been limited exploration of the role adultification plays in the realm of sports.

Children's Rights

Before we discuss youth sports, it is important to set the stage with regard to children and their rights, specifically when it comes to their right to play. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1990 defined a child as any human being under the age of eighteen [6]. The UNCRC further states, "the child, by reason of his/her physical and mental immaturity, needs special safeguards and care, including appropriate legal protection, before as well as after birth". The UNCRC further developed rights of children based on civil, economic, political, social, health and culture spheres. Article 31 is central to our exploration and it states, "The right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in **Play and Recreational Activities** appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts."

Every child has the right to play and enjoy their youth. Children have the right to engage in wholesome recreational activities whenever they wish and not be exploited for events that are typical for adults. As we will explore, children in the current context of the youth sports industrial complex, may be asked to participate in sports for less recreational purposes and driven by different objectives.

Youth Sports

There is increased growth in youth sports participation across the globe. Sports specialization patterns, which include year-round training, participation on multiple teams of the same sport, and

focused participation in a single sport at a young age, are at high levels [7].

There has been a growing trend in the United States of sports specialization among young athletes. The aim of this increased specialization is that the young athletes will spend more time and focus on their chosen sport, which will in turn increase their skill level with the ultimate goal of attaining the collegiate or professional ranks [8].

Across the nation, kids of all skill levels, in virtually every team sport, are getting swept up by a youth-sports economy that increasingly resembles the pros at increasingly early ages [7]. College coaches are now courting middle-schoolers, and competitive high school teams scout the club ranks. Children learn early that it's imperative to attend travel tournaments—and impress.

Sport specialization is a training method now commonly used by young athletes who hope to achieve elite-level success. This may be defined as (1) choosing a main sport, (2) quitting all other sports to focus on one sport, and (3) year-round training (greater than 8 months per year) [9]. Injury, overuse injury, serious overuse injury, and lower extremity injury were likely associated with higher degrees of sport specialization in various populations [9].

Sports specialization within youth sports, not only has harmful physical and psychological effects, but there may be an emotional toll of exposing children too soon to high level sports competition.

Sport specialization often requires increased training hours and may predispose young athletes to social isolation, poor academic performance, increased anxiety, greater stress, inadequate sleep, decreased family time, and burnout [10]. Sport specialization frequently introduces multiple stressors that could be expected to adversely affect mental health and function in young athletes and may increase the risk for burnout. This may be confounded by altered sleep duration and quality, increased drive for elite status, and perfectionistic personality types [10].

Specialized training in young athletes has risks of injury and burnout, while the degree of specialization is positively correlated with increased serious overuse injury risk [9]. Risk factors for injury in young athletes who specialize in a single sport include year-round single-sport training, participation in more competition, decreased age-appropriate play, and involvement in individual sports that require the early development of technical skills. Adults involved in instruction of youth sports may also put young athletes at risk for injury by encouraging increased intensity in organized practices and competition rather than self-directed unstructured free play [9].

Many coaches, parents, and children believe that the best way to develop elite athletes is for them to participate in only one sport from an early age and to play it year-round [11]. However, emerging evidence to the contrary indicates that efforts to specialize in one sport may reduce opportunities for all children to participate in a diverse year-round sports season and can lead to lost development of lifetime sports skills. Early sports specialization may also reduce motor skill development and ongoing participation in games and sports as a lifestyle choice.

Using youth sports as a form of adult entertainment is just one example of what we can call the adulthoodification of youth sports. It is the introduction and prioritization of adults' needs and values over those of the child. It turns the focus from process to outcome and from free play to deliberate practice.

Children sense that the stakes are rising. A 2016 study found that the more money families pour into youth sports, the more pressure their kids feel—and the less they enjoy and feel committed to their sport. This creates unwanted pressure for children to participate in sports not for the sake of sports but as a means to a higher goal, which usually has some form of financial benefit. This is antithetical to article 31 of the United Nations Convention on Child Rights. It is further postulated that this burden is even more prevalent among youth sports participants from minority groups, specifically African Americans. This increased pressure is a form of adulthoodification bias.

Discussion

We propose that there should be more research regarding the awareness, measurement and identification of adulthoodification in general but as it applies to youth sports. Anecdotally we have witnessed sports and success in sports specifically, used as a stepping stone out of poverty. This is exemplified in the documentary to Hoop Dreams, which follows two African American teenagers in Chicago who are trying to leverage their basketball acumen to propel themselves and family out of poverty [12].

It can be supposed that certain individuals, especially those in minority groups and those who are marginalized, view success in sports as a means out of their socioeconomic status, which in turn can change the experience of play and sports participation from one of enjoyment to one of achieving success. This further would place a different emphasis on the child and create a more pressure filled environment, where the child is now viewed as a “meal-ticket” for the family [13].

We propose that further study be conducted regarding the role of the current youth sports landscape with the further emphasis on sports specialization coupled with the role adulthoodification of these youths plays in their participation. Participation in youth sports can be a risk in itself for adulthoodification bias.

This adulthoodification bias shifts the purpose away from play for play's sake and adds a much more pressurized environment for the children to participate in sports. There may be differences in adulthoodification bias from a racial and socioeconomic perspective that helps elucidate how adulthoodification bias may be enacted differently based on these parameters. Using the foundation of the United Nations Convention on Child's Rights, especially Article 31 which articulates the child's right to play, we can further expand that there are certain inherent risks to current youth sports with regard to adulthoodification bias. We aim to start the conversation regarding this topic, as well as to spur further discussion and research to look into this bias. Further, it is recognized that quantitative research modalities may be insufficient to discern this issue and additional inquiry should be garnered in the form of qualitative research, such as case studies, ethnographic research and one on one interviews.

Just as the adulthoodification studies in juvenile justice showed that certain minority groups are perceived to need less nurturing and less protection during youth, there may be a similar occurrence happening with minority youth who participate in sports. Those children may be subjected to coaching and training that is less focused on fun and participation, but more focused on achievement and goal attainment. This focus has the potential to have harmful effects on the youth participant.

References

1. Shaw Tressia M, David E Delaet (2010) Transition of adolescents to young adulthood for vulnerable populations. *Pediatr Rev* 31: 497-504.
2. Epstein Rebecca, Jamila Blake, Thalia Gonzalez (2017) Girl Interrupted: The Erasure of Black Girls' Childhood. Center on Poverty and Inequality Georgetown Law <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3000695>.
3. Schmitz Rachel M, Kimberly A Tyler (2016) Growing Up Before Their Time: The Early Adulthood Experiences of Homeless Young People. *Child Youth Serv Rev* 64: 15-22.
4. Cooke Alison N, Amy G Halberstadt (2021) Adulthood, anger bias, and adults' different perceptions of Black and White children. *Cogn Emot* 35: 1416-1422.
5. Jankowski Peter J, Lisa M Hooper, Steven J Sandage, Natalie J Hannah (2013) Parentification and mental health symptoms: mediator effects of perceived unfairness and differentiation of self 35: 43-65.
6. UN General Assembly (1989) Convention on the Rights of the Child, United Nations, Treaty Series 1577: 3.
7. Gregory Sean (2017) How Kids' Sports Became a \$15 Billion Industry. *Time Magazine* <https://time.com/4913687/how-kids-sports-became-15-billion-industry/>.
8. Myer Gregory D, Neeru Jayanthi, John P DiFiori, Avery D Faigenbaum, Adam W Kiefer, et al. (2015) Sport Specialization, Part I: Does Early Sports Specialization Increase Negative Outcomes and Reduce the Opportunity for Success in Young Athletes?. *Sports Health* 7: 437-442.
9. Jayanthi Neeru A, Eric G Post, Torrance C Laury, Peter D Fabricant (2019) Health Consequences of Youth Sport Specialization. *J Athl Train* 54: 1040-1049.
10. Brenner Joel S, Michele La Botz, Dai Sugimoto, Andrea Straccioli (2019) The Psychosocial Implications of Sport Specialization in Pediatric Athletes. *Journal of Athletic Training* 54: 1021-1029.
11. Myer Gregory, Neeru Jayanthi, John P DiFiori, Avery D Faigenbaum, Adam W Kiefer, et al. (2016) Sports Specialization, Part II: Alternative Solutions to Early Sport Specialization in Youth Athletes. *Sports Health* 8: 65-73.
12. Goldman Justin (2011) Sports and Society: Can Sports Be an Effective Path out of Poverty for Youth? *Bleacher Report* <https://bleacherreport.com/articles/994442-sports-and-society-can-sports-be-an-effective-path-out-of-poverty-for-youth>.
13. Roy Kevin, Lauren Messina, Jocelyn Smith, Damian Waters (2014) Growing up as "man of the house": adulthood and transition into adulthood for young men in economically disadvantaged families. *New Dir Child Adolesc Dev* 55-72.

Copyright: ©2023 Bashyam Iyengar. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.