

Refugee Youth & Sports-Based Initiatives



The value of sport as a tool for resiliency stems from its function as a site for integration, a safe space where youth can escape from and cope with stress, and a possible domain for language acquisition.

WHY THIS MATTERS

Sport has been widely identified as a unifying force that connects people from diverse backgrounds, a reality made possible by its flexibility and global use as a common language.

KEY POINTS

Engagement in sports has been directly credited as an effective ingredient in the restoration of resiliency and normalcy in times of upheaval.

Beyond health benefits, participation in sport and recreation opportunities has a wide range of social and emotional benefits for refugee youth, including:

- improving self-expression;
- supporting identity development;
- building trust;
- learning life skills;
- accessing resources;
- heightening cross-cultural understanding;
- and fostering social connections.

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

- Participation in sports-based programs is associated with increased prosocial behaviour, such as empathy and helpfulness towards others, as well as fewer problems with peers.
- Diversity in the cultural backgrounds of participants may provide a fertile environment for integration, though it may also challenge the cultural realities of fellow youth.
- Some programs combine sports training with language instruction, which not only helps to reinforce language skills learned in class, but also results in increased interest and focus in language studies from the participating youth.
- Other sports programs have been designed to include development of self-control, respect for others, empathy, determination, perseverance, self-direction, and volunteerism in ways that foster transferable life skills.

The social aspect seems to be one of the most compelling reasons for youth to pursue physical recreation programs; they often come to think of their sports team as a “second family.”

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

- ❑ Practical barriers such as finding transportation or the cost of program may prevent participation for some refugee youth.
- ❑ Refugee youth feel more comfortable and willing to participate when they are among peers and leaders from a similar background.
- ❑ Limited input from the youth and their families is a major gap in a number of sports initiatives; time should be allotted for peer, family, and participant-coach observations and feedback
- ❑ Cultural norms including but not limited to views on aggression, foul language and drinking should be taken into account when designing sports programs for refugee youth.

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WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

- ❑ Though sport by itself can provide an environment for social, and emotional learning, programs are increasingly integrating leadership, cultural, social justice, and language dimensions into their curricula.
- ❑ Both single-gender and mixed-gender team approaches have been shown to provide young refugee women with opportunities for exploration, challenge, and affirmation of cultural identities
- ❑ Regardless of a team’s makeup, it is imperative that both leaders and participants ensure that competition is friendly and healthy, and that rules against discrimination are enforced.
- ❑ Effective sports initiatives with refugee youth are designed appropriately through community, family, and participant discourse.
- ❑ By stimulating communication among the different parties involved, programs can be better molded to fit the diversity of the community-at-large.

Social support from peers is a key factor in well-being, and participation in sport and recreation programs is a valuable opportunity for refugee youth to build social connections in their new communities.