

While this study sets the logical baseline that youth sports helps keep kids out of trouble, a group of researchers at Dartmouth College dug deeper into the importance of the coach in this equation. Their goal was to understand if activities that were supervised and led by an adult influenced off the field behaviors, as opposed to studies that just looked at outcomes.

"Unlike those studies, we examined a younger age group, and we focused on the relationship between extracurricular activity and health risk behaviors," said Anna M. Adachi-Mejia, PhD, assistant professor of pediatrics at Dartmouth and lead author. "Rather than asking about sports participation in the context of activity only, we framed our questions to ask about team sports participation with a coach and participation in other sports without a coach -- none of the other studies have asked specifically about coaching."

Her team interviewed 6,522 "tween" students, ages 10 to 14, to find out about all of their extracurricular activities, including sports with and without a coach. Just over half of the students participated in a coached sport at least a few times per week, while 74 percent had little to no involvement with other school clubs. Less than half of the kids were in music, choir, dance and/or band. They were also asked about their level of illegal smoking and drinking.



Being on a sports team with a coach was the only activity that was linked to a lower rate of reported smoking among the kids when compared to those that had no connection to a coach. Additionally, being involved with various types of clubs was associated with a lower drinking history.

"How children spend their time matters," said Dr. Adachi-Mejia. "In a nationally representative sample we found that tweens who participate in sports with a coach were less likely to try smoking. Parents and guardians may think that tweens need less adult supervision when they are not in school. However, our research suggests that certain coached extracurricular activities can help prevent tween smoking and drinking." Her research is published in the journal ["Academic Pediatrics."](#)

The more teams the better when it comes to getting the maximum benefit for the most kids. Not every young athlete is after a college scholarship or an elite tournament team; just participating with friends in a safe environment yields the type of advantages that this study revealed.

"Unfortunately, in the transition from the tween to adolescent years, coached sports teams face pressure to shift from a philosophy of inclusion to a greater emphasis on winning," Dr. Adachi-Mejia said. "This shift potentially shuts out tweens with fewer skills and/or lesser interest in facing the pressures associated with increased competition. **I'd like to encourage communities and schools to explore the possibility of offering noncompetitive, affordable team sports with a coach.**"



Dan Peterson is a recovering sports dad who is fascinated with sports science research, skill development and the athlete's brain. He has written over 400 science-based articles across the Web and consults with parents, coaches and young players to help them understand the cognitive side of sports. You can visit him at [Sports Are 80 Percent Mental](#) and at [@DanielPeterson](#).