What better time than summer to learn more about play? The Play Pulse surveys the state of PLAY through trends in related indicators.

PLAY PULSE POINTS

YOUTH SPORTS: AN ASSET OF CHILDHOOD OR NOT?

UPBEAT: The American Orthopedic Society for Sports Medicine and Department of Health and Human Services report that youth sports provide positive physical, social and psychological benefits.

DOWNSIDE: The Aspen Institutes Project Play indicates that children between the ages of 6 and 12 participate less often in youth sports than kids did just a few years ago.

ACTION: Parents, youth leagues, and community groups should consider reintroducing free play, encouraging sport sampling, and revitalizing in-town leagues.

EVERYBODY IN THE WATER!!

UPBEAT: Swimming is a great summertime play option because it is a FUN, low impact, physical activity for all ages.

DOWNSIDE: Drowning ranks fifth among the leading causes of unintentional injury and death in the United States.

ACTION: Make sure that more children and adults are able to swim and keep themselves safe in the water.

MORE WORK AND LESS PLAY

UPBEAT: Taking vacation makes employees perform better, more productive, and more satisfied in their jobs than those who do not, according to a new study conducted by the Society for Human Resource Management.

DOWNSIDE: In 2014, Americans left 169 million paid vacation days unused, effectively surrendering $52.4 billion in benefits as they essentially “worked for free.”

ACTION: Make it a point to take your vacation time – all of it. Vacation is not only good for individuals and families BUT it has positive results for employers as well.

SITTING IS THE NEW SMOKING

UPBEAT: Use of tobacco products has decreased over time and much of this success can be attributed to the Surgeon General’s warning around the dangers of tobacco.

DOWNSIDE: Dr. James Levine of the Mayo Clinic at Arizona State University’s Obesity Solutions Initiative sums up his studies of the adverse effects of our increasingly sedentary lifestyles in this succinct phrase – “sitting is the new smoking.”

ACTION: Suggestions from the Toronto Rehabilitation Institute to limit sitting include: move around every half-hour at work, stand or exercise during TV commercials and try to reduce how much you sit by realistic increments every week.

For further analysis of each of these Pulse Points, you can view the full report.
We measure children on what they have learned and publish the results. We have devices to track vital signs and calories consumed. As Americans we track many aspects of how we live, work, learn and play. But what about PLAY itself.

We all think about PLAY – those freely chosen options that we pursue during our leisure time. We recall the carefree days of childhood summers. We carefully choose after school programs or summer camps for our children. We even have special places and trips for older adults.

Youth Sports: An Asset of Childhood or NOT?

Few traditions are more “American” than youth sports. American children have been playing sports for generations. Of course, over time the sand lots have given way to official uniforms, turf fields, a plethora of sports, and variations on team formation. This evolution has led to dicussion around youth sports in this country. Is youth sports participation still the greatest thing for kids today, or might there be some changes that need to be made?

UPBEAT

According to the annual household survey conducted by the Sports & Fitness Industry, sports is a big part of the lives of most children in this country with over 21 million between the ages of 6 and 17 playing team sports on a regular basis.

There is no shortage of benefits that are accrued to a young person’s participation in sports. The list includes aspects of most all the skills, abilities and assets people desire for their children.

Based upon growing concerns of childhood obesity and future medical costs, the Government Accounting Office (2012) was charged with examining physical education and sporting activities among school-age children. The report cited the most obvious health-benefits such as reducing fat, controlling weight, preventing or delaying the development of high blood pressure, and building and maintaining healthy bones, muscles and joints.

The GAO report indicated that youth sports bring with them a variety of additional benefits such as:

- **Academic benefits** – A growing body of evidence indicates a relationship between physical education and sports and academic attainment and attendance. A 2010 CDC report that examined 50 existing studies concluded that physical activity can help improve academic achievement, including grades and standardized test scores. The GAO report also suggested that physical activity can affect cognitive skills, attitudes and academic behavior, including enhanced concentration and attention. It also determined that increasing or maintaining time dedicated to physical activity could help academic performance.

  - **Personal and social benefits** – A number of studies support that physical activity and sports in particular can positively affect aspects of personal development among young people such as self-esteem, goal-setting and leadership.

DOWNSIDE

Can there be a downside to youth sports participation? Possibly. For the past two years, the Aspen Institute has undertaken Project Play. The impetus of the project has been to ensure that more children either return to sports or to provide access for more children to participate. Project Play discovered there were fewer children participating and suggested alternatives for expanding participation. With support from the Robert Woods Johnson Foundation, the Aspen Institute recently released, Sport for All, Play for Life: A Playbook to Get Every Kid in the Game.

Some of the data given in this report cited decreasing levels of participation by youth:

- Only 40% of children played team sports on a regular basis in 2013, down from 44.5% in 2008. *Source: Sports & Fitness Industry Association*
- Despite the growth of sport as an entertainment industry, children between the ages of 6 and 12 participate less often than kids did just a few years ago.
- Participation among pre-adolescents is down not just in football (from 1.8 million to 1.3 million),
where parents have become concerned about brain injuries, but in many other sports, including softball, baseball, track and field, soccer and basketball.

• The amount of physical activity acquired through sports is also down. In 2013, less than one in three children engaged in high-calorie sport or fitness activity three times a week.

There are a plethora of reasons for the less than desirable participation levels. Some of them include:

• Budget reductions in schools often result in the elimination of physical education classes, an activity that often inspire sports participation.
• Public park and recreation departments have been increasingly unable to sponsor youth leagues due to their evolving sophistication. Instead, individual communities form youth sports leagues that fund and run these activities.
• The increasing focus on professional-like approaches among community youth sports programs has led to specialization in one sport and eliminates opportunities for trying other sports.
• Many youth sports leagues now play with professional uniforms, travel teams for all-stars, expensive trophies, and banquets, and these costs can limit access for some youngsters. For many working families, the inability of parents to get youth to practices and games can also be a barrier to participation.
• Young people are attracted to non-sporting activities including adventure and outdoor physical activities.

**ACTION**
The Aspen Institute identifies promising strategies to involve more children in youth sports:

• Ask kids what they want.
• Reintroduce free play.
• Revitalize in-town leagues.
• Think small (to create more play spaces).
• Design for development.
• Train all coaches.
• Emphasize prevention (to limit injuries).

People interested in creating more opportunities for sports participation can contact their local school district, parent-teacher associations, public parks and recreation departments, or other youth-serving agencies for ideas on how to affect change in their community.

The Aspen Institute has published a report that offers over 40 ideas, eight promising strategies, and eight key sectors that reach and involve children. The report can be accessed at http://www.aspenprojectplay.org/reports.

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**EVERYBODY IN THE WATER!**
The traditional cry of “everybody in” almost always meant it was summer and time for everyone to jump into the pool, lake or ocean. There are plenty of positives about swimming. It’s good for people’s health. It’s fun. It’s a lifetime activity. It can relieve stress. It is a source of physical activity for people with chronic conditions. Oh yes, and did we mention that it’s fun?

**UPBEAT**
Besides being a great opportunity for play, swimming is a healthy activity that can continue over a lifetime. It is low-impact and has many physical and mental health benefits. The Better Health Channel out of Australia features a comprehensive list enumerating the benefits of swimming:

• Raises heart rate up while taking some of the impact and stress off your body
• Builds endurance, muscle strength, and cardiovascular fitness
• Helps maintain a healthy weight and a healthy heart and lungs
• Tones muscles and builds strength
• Improves coordination, balance and posture
• Enhances flexibility
• Provides an all-over body workout
• Promotes relaxation
• Alleviates stress
• Provides low-impact therapy for injuries
• Provides a pleasant way to cool down on a hot day
• Is available in many places

**DOWNSIDE**
Swimming has an unfortunate and serious downside as well. Despite the extensive listing of benefits, swimming can involve a health risk. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) reports that:

• Every day, approximately 10 people in the United States die from unintentional drowning.
• Two of those 10 individuals are children age 14 or younger.
• Drowning ranks fifth among the leading causes of unintentional injury or death in the United States.
• More than 50% of drowning victims treated in emergency departments require hospitalization or transfer for further care. This is compared with a hospitalization rate of about 6% for all unintentional injuries.
• Nonfatal drowning injuries can cause severe brain damage that may result in long-term disabilities such as memory problems, learning disabilities, and permanent loss of basic functioning.

**ACTION**

In order to understand actions that can be taken to support swimming, it is necessary to look at some of the barriers related to learning to swim:

- Accessibility to pools and swim lessons
- Cultural issues like not wanting/not choosing to learn to swim
- Racial and ethnic factors, including hair care and other norms
- People embarrassed to be seen in swimsuits
- Parents who fear water or are unable to swim, which discourages children from learning to swim
- Negative publicity
- Bad experiences

Other barriers to swimming include:

- Public swimming pools that are closed due to old age and the substantial repair costs
- The high operating costs of public pools
- Difficulty in securing trained lifeguards
- The unavailability of free swimming lessons

Some of the reasons for less swimming can be transformed into actions such as supporting the repair of public swimming pools and encouraging pool operators in an area to partner with others that provide access to swimming lessons, such as the Make a Splash program (http://bit.ly/1Okih2h). Local affiliates of the Red Cross are also available across the country to provide lifeguarding certifications and safety classes for when people are around the water.

Other actions that can be taken include:

- Checking to make sure the important people in your life are satisfactory swimmers, and if they are not, finding and attending lessons along with them.
- Suggesting to fitness clubs with pools that they offer swim lessons for adults or scholarship programs for youth lessons.

The US PLAY Coalition network consists of individuals and organizations that recognize play as a valuable and necessary part of a healthy and productive life. We are housed within Clemson University’s College of Health, Education and Human Development and express our gratitude to the university and the college for their continuing support.

The Coalition formed as a result of The Summit on the Value of Play, which took place at Clemson University in 2009. The attendees at this important summit made a commitment to create a coalition whose purpose would be to bring together organizations and individuals in support of play and to open up opportunities for people of all ages, backgrounds and abilities to incorporate play into their lives. Our network is 2,500 strong and is open for anyone to join via our website. We continue to build connections between organizations and people, globally.
Play is good for you, and as it turns out, vacation time can be good for individuals, families, and society as well.

Recently, the Gallup-Heathways Well-Being Index linked higher overall well-being to taking vacations and trips. Increased well-being was found across all income groups, but it was especially true for Americans who earn less than $24,000 annually (scoring 66.3), as opposed to those who earn $120,000 or more but say they don’t regularly make time for vacations (55.1). The survey results suggest that vacation frequency was a better predictor of well-being than income.

A recent Society for Human Resource Management study found that people who take most or all of their vacation time each year perform better, are more productive, and more satisfied in their jobs than those who do not. The data suggests that fully utilizing vacation leave drives higher employee performance and productivity, boosts organizational morale, contributes to employee wellness, and results in higher employee retention.

Nielsen Consumer Research found the following about people’s perceptions of vacation benefits:

- 74% believe vacations are important in their life
- 78% who take vacations at least once a year are happier and more satisfied with their lives
- 71% of people were more satisfied at work when they regularly took a vacation
- 88% feel vacations are important for rest and relaxation
- 58% feel vacations improve health and well-being
- 61% of people in relationships believe that vacations with their partners are important to maintaining a strong and healthy relationship
- 69% of people in relationships say that their partner would prefer to receive a trip with them as a gift as opposed to a material item (16%)
- Of those who vacation at least once a year, 86% have a strong bond with their family

In the United States, our work ethic seems to supersede our play ethic, particularly when it comes to vacations.

- In 2014, a Google Consumer Survey queried Americans about their vacation plans, and 63% said they did not plan on taking a vacation.
- According to a study by HR consulting from Randstad, 42% of employees reported feeling obligated to check their email during a vacation, while 26% felt guilty using all of their vacation time.
- According to the Center for Economic Policy Research, most Americans received 10 paid vacation days in addition to the six federal holidays. In 2014, Americans left 169 million paid vacation days unused, effectively surrendering $52.4 billion in benefits since they essentially “worked for free.”

Some suggested actions to help take vacation time:

- Make it a point to take your vacation time – all of it. Vacation is not only good for individuals and families, but it has positive results for employers as well.
- Plan ahead, especially if your workplace has a policy on signing up for vacation time.
- If the end of August is already approaching, take a mini-vacation by using days off on Fridays and Mondays to create some space for yourself.
- Ask your children and the other important people in your life to list the reasons they want you to take vacation time and pay attention to their reasons.
- If you do not have school schedules to consider, plan right now to take vacation time during what many Americans consider the non-traditional times of October through April.
- Don’t use money as an excuse because “staycations,” where people seek out local or day trip opportunities that they have not previously or recently experienced, can be very refreshing and affordable.
• Making changes that could include active workstations or standing desks
• Changing policies so sedentary time could be reduced such as allowing employees regular desk breaks
• Changing the norms surrounding prolonged sitting, including stand up meetings

For a long time, the public health message has been to move more and squeeze in as much active time as possible into the day. According to Alter, that message is still important, but it needs to change as new research on the dangers of sitting starts to emerge. That’s where the sitting is the new smoking comes into play.

And, speaking of play, the Play Coalition has a few more playful suggestions of its own.

• Play card and board games standing up.
• Every time someone passes “GO” in Monopoly, make it an occasion for everyone to stand up for two to three minutes.
• Make a new rule that everybody stands while the other competitor(s) are considering a move in Scrabble or Words with Friends.

Remember this research is not suggesting doing specific physical activities as much as it is highlighting the importance of standing during activities where we normally sit.

For more information please visit www.usplaycoalition.clemson.edu or contact us by email at usplaycoalition@clemson.edu or by phone at 864.656.2525.