

Navigating the highs and lows of travel sports

[Tens of millions](#) of kids in the United States participate in organized sports. Roughly one in five of them are on a travel sports team.

In Illinois, the Aspen Institute's Project Play [reports](#) 62% of kids ages 6-17 play on a team or take sports lessons.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services launched an initiative called Healthy People 2030, where one of the objectives is to have 63.2% of children ages 6-17 participating in sports. As of the most recent data reported in 2022-2023, the status of this initiative is reported as "getting worse," and sits at 54.6%.

A major goal of these initiatives is to promote physical activity in kids. But how do travel sports, and sports in general, have an impact on kids' mental health? Jessica Higgs, MD, the primary care managing medical director, Central Region, with OSF HealthCare shares the pros and cons.

"If a student is not performing the way they should, or they're not getting as much playing time and this is their identity, that can really have a detrimental effect if they suddenly think they're not very good at their one thing," Dr. Higgs says.

This can cause low self-esteem, among other mental health challenges.

"It can also be very isolating for them if they are playing on a travel team that doesn't have anybody else from their school," Dr. Higgs says. "They may not have those close school connections and may feel like they don't have anyone they can talk to during the day."

It's not all negative though, Dr. Higgs says travel sports have plenty of mental health benefits. It's a chance to share additional time with your team and your family.

"There are a lot of protective benefits from sports. You do get to experience a lot of teamwork, camaraderie and you get resilience training," Dr. Higgs says. "Things don't always go your way in sports. There's a bad break, a bad loss and you must work your way through that. So, there's a lot of mental health benefits from sports."

The National College Athletic Association (NCAA) [published a survey](#) in 2022 regarding college athletes and their mental health, stating that 65% of women's sports participants and 58% of men's sports participants agreed or strongly agreed that their teammates took each other's mental health concerns seriously. Additionally, 56% of both men's and women's athletes reported they knew how to help a teammate who was going through a mental health issue.

According to the [American College of Sports Medicine \(ACSM\)](#), approximately 30% of women and 25% of men who are student-athletes report having anxiety, and only 10% of all college athletes with known mental health challenges seek care from a professional.

Parents: don't make your children carry the burden alone. Dr. Higgs recommends frequent check-ins to see how they're enjoying the sports they're playing. If they speak up that they need to take a break, give them that opportunity.

Taking a few weeks, or even a few months, can help your child evaluate whether they truly enjoy the sport, and if they want to continue playing it. Your child should also be empowered to discuss any mental health concerns during their annual sports physical with their primary care provider.