

Adults hurting youth sports, report says
panel cites parents' behavior over-emphasis on winning
By Mark Emmons
Mercury News

A national report card released Wednesday probably only confirmed what many parents who enroll their children in athletic programs already suspected.

There are serious problems in the world of youth sports.

And the finger of blame is being pointed squarely at adults for spoiling the fun.

The first Youth Sports National Report Card, prepared by a group called Citizenship Through Sports Alliance, issued low grades for parents' behavior and a win-at-all-cost mentality fostered by the grown-ups who oversee kids' sports.

"We really hope that this will be a wake-up call," said Jim Thompson, executive director of Stanford's Positive Coaching Alliance. "This is such an important part of kids' lives. And if there's something wrong with youth sports, then we ought to start thinking about the ways we can change it."

A panel of experts based its results on evaluations of youth sports programs for children 6 to 14. But the report is a sharp rebuke of adults. The worst grades -- Ds -- were issued in the categories of parental behavior and "child-centered" philosophy. And a C-minus was given for coaching.

The report card indicates that adults are micro-managing their kids' sports careers, placing too much emphasis on winning and setting bad examples with their own poor sportsmanship.

This assessment of kids' sports doesn't come as a surprise. Reports of violence at events -- usually perpetrated by angry parents -- have become more common. And even if those incidents remain the exception and not the rule, any parent of a sports-playing child probably has witnessed uncomfortable scenes in which adults took the game too seriously.

"Nearly all the problems in youth sports are caused by people over the age of 18," said panel member Doug Abrams, a University of Missouri School of Law professor. "I coach hockey and I know some parents can learn from the behavior of their 7-year-olds. The kids are the role models."

The panelists indicated there are some bright spots: They gave a B-minus for officiating and a C-plus for health and safety.

But overall, the assessment was negative.

"There is a real silent majority of parents who don't like what's going on and are uncomfortable with the direction youth sports has taken," said Thompson, a member of the panel. "Yet even though they have this anxiety, they also don't know what to do."

Dan Gould, director of Michigan State's Institute for the Study of Youth Sports, said part of the problem is what he calls the "professionalization" of children's athletics. Adults are applying a professional model of training at ever-younger ages.

An investigative series in the Mercury News in April also showed how the growing emphasis on earning college scholarships -- although only about 1 in 100 high school seniors actually receive one -- has played a key role in heightening the pressure.

Even parents who are interested solely in a healthy experience for their kids can find themselves navigating a system where the philosophy is shifting away from making sure all kids get to play and toward developing only the most talented youngsters.

That's evident in the growing phenomenon of traveling teams and club sports, for which parents shell out thousands of dollars so their kids can compete year-round and receive the best training.

"Youth sports has become an arms race," Abrams said. "If some team has nicer uniforms than ours, then we've got to get better ones next year. If they play 20 games, then we've got to play 25. Next thing you know, you have year-round specialization with 75 games a season and all the problems that come with it."

John Murphy, chairman of the Pleasanton-based California Youth Soccer Association, had mixed feelings about the report card. He agreed with the criticism directed at the "elite" programs that stress winning. But he noted that the vast majority of the 217,000 kids and 25,000 or so adults in CYSA are involved at the recreation level.

"We're a volunteer organization and most of our adults are in this for the right reasons," said Murphy, whose three grown children all played soccer. "We're not trying to put anyone on the U.S. World Cup team."

One concern that all youth sports experts share is research that shows 70 percent of kids drop out of sports by 13 -- and the primary reason is pressure exerted by adults. That age is about when kids begin to face the influences of drugs and alcohol.

"This is exactly the time we should be encouraging kids to participate in sports," Abrams said.

Both Thompson and Abrams said there is more good than bad in youth sports. But they also defended the report card's negative tone.

"There are coaches and parents all across the country who are doing great things in youth sports," Thompson said. "But that's not the trend."