

# Sports help kids develop important trait linked to adult success

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Here's another good reason for kids to participate in organized sports: They can develop the "grit" that helps them overcome challenges as adults, a new study suggests.

Grit is defined as the combination of passion and perseverance that helps people achieve their long-term goals. This new research found that [adults](#) who played [sports](#) as a kid scored higher on a measurement of [grit](#) than adults who didn't play at all or said they quit.

The results suggest that the lessons children learn in sports can have a positive impact on their lives long after they grow up, said Emily Nothnagle, lead author of the study and recent graduate of The Ohio State University.

"Kids who participate in sports learn what it is like to struggle as they learn new skills, overcome challenges and bounce back from failure to try again," Nothnagle said.

"The grit they develop playing sports can help them the rest of their lives."

But all is not lost for adults who didn't play as children—the study also found that adults who said they participated in sports during the past year showed more grit than those who didn't, said study co-author Chris Knoester, associate professor of sociology at Ohio State.

The study was published recently in the journal *Leisure Sciences*.

Survey data came from the National Sports and Society Survey (NSASS), sponsored by Ohio State's Sports and Society Initiative.

The survey was completed by 3,993 adults who volunteered to participate through the American Population Panel, run by Ohio State's Center for Human Resource Research.

Participants, who live in all 50 states, answered the survey online between the fall of 2018 and spring of 2019. Because NSASS

participants are disproportionately female, white and Midwestern, the researchers weighted the [survey results](#) to reflect the U.S. population more accurately.

Grit was measured by asking participants to rate themselves on a scale of 1–5 on eight statements, including "I am diligent. I never give up" and "I am a hard worker." None of the statements was directly related to sports.

Initial results showed that 34% of those who played sports as a youth scored high on the grit scale, compared to only 23% of those who didn't play sports.

And 25% of those who never played sports scored low on the grit scale, compared to just 17% of those who did play sports.

More sophisticated statistical analyses that accounted for respondents' demographic characteristics supported these findings, too.

But to get the benefit of sports participation, kids have to keep at it and play continually, results suggested.

"Adults who played [youth sports](#) but dropped out did not show higher levels of grit. They actually demonstrated lower levels of grit after we included a proxy measure of how sports mattered for the development of grit while growing up," Knoester said.

The proxy measure was based on respondents' perceptions of how their athletic experience affected their work ethic.

"Quitting could reflect a lack of perseverance, which is a crucial component of grit. It could also make quitting an activity, and not persevering, easier the next time."

Adults who played sports as kids generally perceived that the experience helped improve their work ethic. And that perception was linked to their grit scores as adults.

But even after taking this finding into account, sports participation boosted grit scores, findings showed.

"Sport participation seems to have improved people's development of grit even more than they realized," Nothnagle said.

But could some people just be born with the grit to help them succeed at sports as a young person and then continue to benefit from that trait as an adult? Knoester said this study can't definitively prove the answer to that question, but the results suggest that people can gain or lose grit throughout life.

Adults who said they participated in sports regularly within the last year exhibited higher levels of grit, regardless of whether they played sports early in life and the extent to which they felt that their athletic experiences affected their work ethic while growing up.

"This additional finding about sports participation in adulthood suggests that you can build and perhaps lose grit during different points in your life," Knoester said. "It is not a static quality."

Participants in the study weren't asked how they participated in sports as an adult. It may be that many challenged themselves through personal training or workouts, rather than in organized sports as they did as kids, the researchers said.

The results shouldn't be interpreted as meaning that grit doesn't have a downside, though, Nothnagle noted.

"There can be issues if you use grit without some limits. An overemphasis on applying grit in sports activities can lead some people to overtrain and injure themselves, for example," she said.

But overall, the results suggest that along with the health and other benefits of sports, the development of grit could be another positive impact.

"Sports offer this valuable place in society where you can work hard and practice and take it seriously, but it is also not real life to some extent—typically, sports are thought of as a separate sphere of life and the stakes in sports are not as far-reaching and extreme," Knoester said.

"But you can take those lessons you learn and practice in sports, such as building grit, and apply them in your life outside of sports in very useful ways."

**More information:** Emily A. Nothnagle et al, Sport Participation and the Development of Grit, *Leisure Sciences* (2022). [DOI: 10.1080/01490400.2022.2090037](https://doi.org/10.1080/01490400.2022.2090037)

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