



CHANGE THE GAME RESEARCH

GROWING THE GAME MEANS CHANGING THE GAME



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

YOUTH FIRST, ALWAYS

MLSE Foundation launched the Change the Game Campaign in 2021 with a commitment to investing in research that influences policy, investment, and action. Since then, more than 25,000 diverse Ontario youth have engaged with the Change the Game Research Study, giving voice to issues and opportunities related to access, equity, culture, and safety in sport. Along the way, this study became the largest demographic profile of Canadian youth sport participation. More importantly, the issues and ideas raised are timely, relevant, and informative in sector-wide conversations on redefining safe spaces and reimagining positive cultures for the future of youth sport.

With Ontario's youth sport system now fully operational, the insights emerging from this third and final act of the Change the Game Research Study's return to play trilogy represent the most authentic baseline of youth sport participation and engagement since the height of pandemic-related stoppages. Youth have shared their feedback on whether, how, and why or why not they have been able to access sport opportunities. They have redefined the concept of safe sport on their terms. They have expressed their desires for change and what a reimagined sport system looks like to them.

The playbook for change is here. Let's get to work.

THE PLAYS

The percentage of youth who reported having **access to safe sporting opportunities decreased significantly from 2022 to 2023**, with **65%** of youth participating in some form of sport in 2023. The greatest barriers to access are **social isolation** and **affordability**. To address these issues, six plays describe our evidence-based recommendations, grounded in three years of Change the Game Research and the voices of over 25,000 diverse Ontario youth – **10,202 in 2023**. The plays are written for immediate uptake by coaches, volunteers, and sport leaders. Implementing these accessible tweaks in the delivery of youth sport programming can change and grow the games we love by supporting increased access, engagement, equity, and inclusion across the youth sport ecosystem.

PLAY 1

PRIORITIZE POSITIVE AND SAFE SPACES.

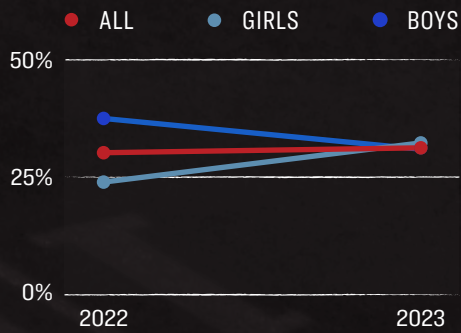
54% of youth active in sport rate their mental health as very good or excellent compared to 38% of youth not active in sport. **76% of youth active in sport report a high or very high sense of community belonging** compared to 53% of youth not active in sport. For youth active in sport, both mental health and sense of community belonging increased significantly from 2021 to 2022 and 2022 to 2023 while remaining stagnant for youth not active in sport. Centre mentorship and positive guidance in how you connect with youth. As a role model, strive to offer support, nurturance, and respect in your interactions with colleagues, volunteers, and participants. In addition, include life skills teaching on social competence in your sport programs to further enable positive, safe relationships.

PLAY 2

ESTABLISH AND REINFORCE STRONG ORGANIZATIONAL VALUES AND CULTURE.

Of youth not active in sport, 56% are girls. 33% of Indigenous youth and 41% of Black youth have experienced racism in sports. The percentage of youth who have experienced racism in sport increased significantly from 2021 to 2022 and 2022 to 2023 when considering youth overall, and more markedly when looking at Black youth. Embed values connected to positivity, safety, and inclusion into organizational culture and practices. Be conscious of how you express your organization's values and your personal opinions. Reinforce positive values in the language you use with youth, in staff meetings and other discussions, and in celebration and coach or athlete recognition initiatives. Display signage and symbols that support your values.

YOUTH BASKETBALL PARTICIPATION



YOUTH HOCKEY PARTICIPATION



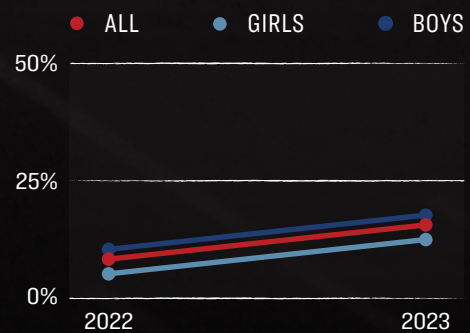
“It is the responsibility of all those involved in sports, from participants, coaches to board members and governing bodies, to create and maintain an environment where youth can thrive, develop their skills without barriers, and compete to their full potential in an environment that prioritizes their physical and mental well-being, upholds global competitive play standards, and protects them from harm and abuse.”

- Youth Participant

YOUTH SOCCER PARTICIPATION



YOUTH FOOTBALL PARTICIPATION



PLAY 3

BE INTENTIONAL ABOUT TRAINING.

The ability to be a role model and mentor, build teams, and support youth to develop essential skills doesn't always come naturally. Assess the strengths and limitations of your team and seek professional development opportunities that build upon your strengths and interests while supporting coaches to grow in areas of weakness. Prioritize training topics relating directly to the youth you serve or intend to serve.

PLAY 4

ADDRESS ACCESSIBILITY ISSUES.

Learn about the barriers to sport access that exist in your community. These may be specific to your sport or certain demographics within your community. Once you've developed an awareness of barriers, research and brainstorm tactics to reduce them. Get creative and collaborate to innovate!

PLAY 5

COLLECT AND USE MEANINGFUL DATA.

Create goals and hold your organization accountable to them by measuring your success. Methods should be as simple and transparent as possible. Focus measurement on areas where you seek to establish standards or generate improvements; great examples include staff and participant diversity, program quality, attendance, and life skills development. Assess youth experiences for quality control, but keep it simple – do youth feel safe? Are they having fun?

PLAY 6

PLAN AND IMPLEMENT OUTREACH AND INREACH.

Build genuine relationships inside and outside your organization to foster robust and sustainable engagement. Take steps to ensure that participants are valued and feel included – always. Offer extraordinary experiences and opportunities tailored to the needs and interests of youth participants. Focus outreach efforts on underserved populations within your local community.

WHAT'S NEXT?

As sport organizations across Ontario and Canada wrestle with challenging perceptions of sport, diversifying or retaining members, internal capacity, sustainability and how to grow their game – the evidence is clear.

All roads lead to change.

To learn more, please visit <https://www.mlsefoundation.org/how-we-give/research> to access the full Change the Game report and playbook, an interactive online dashboard of results and an anonymized open data set which can be downloaded for additional use.

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CHANGE THE GAME RESEARCH LEADS

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