



CHANGE THE GAME RESEARCH

GROWING THE GAME MEANS CHANGING THE GAME



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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.

For three consecutive years, in partnership with Dr. Simon Darnell, Director of the *University of Toronto's Centre for Sport Policy Studies*, and supported by an Advisory Team of sport industry, research, and community-based experts, this census-inspired research project has challenged sport leaders to actively – and consistently – ask **whom** they are working to grow and change the game **for**.

In year one, amidst a series of provincial lockdowns in Ontario in 2021 and in the context of a growing global Black Lives Matter movement, ideas for building a better sport system for youth in the wake of the pandemic were explored alongside the demographics of access and engagement, barriers to participation, and experiences with racism and discrimination in sport.

In year two – shortly after the 2022 removal of public health restrictions on sports activities and against the backdrop of deepening social disconnectedness – consistent themes of access, engagement and equity were explored alongside a sub-focus on mental health, sense of community belonging, and the quality of culture for youth in sport.

The Change the Game campaign is dedicated to raising funds and awareness to address systemic barriers preventing youth from reaching their potential. Told through the lens of real youth, it shows us what's possible when you level the playing field. Our hope is that if we all play a role in changing the game, then every kid will have a fair chance to write their own story.

Learn more at mlsefoundation.org

In year three, after extra-curricular school sports returned to Ontario in 2023, a third exploration of access, engagement, and equity was conducted alongside a sub-focus on safe spaces and positive sport environments for youth to recognize and reach their potential.

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.

MLSE Foundation now challenges sport policymakers, providers, funders, and participants to actively – and consistently – consider two key questions: *So, what? What next?*

What will we do about it? How will we utilize this rich and informative dataset? What – collectively and individually – are our next steps to bridge the gap between the status quo and the future of sport that youth desire and deserve?

The playbook for change is in your hands.

LET'S GET TO WORK.



UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO
FACULTY OF KINESIOLOGY & PHYSICAL EDUCATION

OUR DIFFERENCE MADE THE DIFFERENCE

In total, **10,202 youth and parents across Ontario participated in the 2023 survey**, growing the total return to play dataset to more than 25,000 youth engaged over the past 3 years to share their perspectives and stories relating to sport access, engagement, equity and safety. The sample was robust and representationally diverse in gender, age, geography, race, income, and disability status. Respondents included youth who have collectively participated in more than 50 different sports, as well as youth who have either left or have not engaged in sport within the past year. Research questions were aligned with MLSE Foundation's overall [Change the Game](#) campaign themes, and included items informed by youth study participants from both 2021 and 2022, items adapted from feedback provided by partners and advisors, and items adapted from standardized population surveys such as the [Canadian Community Health Survey](#). Data collected included both qualitative and quantitative inputs. In 2023, the project grew in scope with support from Canada's [Abuse-Free Sport](#) Research grant

program to create innovative and practical solutions to real-world issues in youth sport access, engagement, and community belonging. Collaborating partner organizations include the Argonaut Rowing Club, Ausome Ottawa, MLSE LaunchPad, Toronto Football Club (TFC) Academy, and the University of Toronto BIPOC Varsity Association.

All key insights and recommendations emerging from this research are being shared broadly across the sport and Sport For Development sectors, including with providers, coaches, funders, policymakers, youth, parents/guardians, and researchers. To access the data directly and learn more about how youth overall, from different regions, sports or demographic groups responded, please visit www.mlsefoundation.org/how-we-give/research to access an interactive data dashboard and an anonymized open data set, which we encourage users to download for additional utilization and analysis.



THE PLAYBOOK

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. The plays are written for immediate uptake by coaches, volunteers, and sport leaders. Running these plays – 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

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.

Ensure these measures are supported by:

- a) curriculum and activities that focus on fun and deprioritize unneeded competition*
- b) clear and concise policies making clear that there is zero tolerance for physical and mental abuse, intimidation, violence, or harassment.*

When youth have access to safe and high-quality experiences, it can be a powerful catalyst for a myriad of benefits and positive youth development outcomes aligned with the promise and potential of sport. This is supported by the **54% of youth who are active in sport rating their mental health as either very good or excellent**, compared to 38% of youth who have not participated in a sport in the past year. Further, in the past three years, quality sport participation has been highly correlated with a sense of community belonging among all demographics of youth in the study sample. In 2023, for example, **76% of youth active in sport report a high or very high sense of community belonging**, compared with 53% who have not participated in sport in the past year. Youth particularly spoke about the need for beginner-friendly programs where they could learn without pressure, entry-level leagues focused on fun and socializing, opportunities to try a sport without committing to several weeks of programming, buddy systems, multi sport programs, and sport-based “meet-ups” where they could connect and find others to play with.

In terms of gender, noteworthy engagement challenges persist pertinent to themes of prioritizing fun, safe and social spaces. Women and girls, for example, are over-represented among youth who have not been able to play a sport within the past year, at 56% compared to 40% of boys. Further, non-binary youth are less likely to be able to access a safe sport environment, at 72% compared to 80% of young women and girls, and 83% among young men and boys. Non-binary youth having less access to sport spaces deemed safe further compliment insights from the [2023 Canadian Non-Binary Youth in Sport](#) report, which found that approximately 50% of non-binary youth in a national sample across Canada have avoided joining an organized sport because of discrimination and spaces deemed unsafe for them. All youth will benefit from positive and safe spaces – and many youths’ participation will depend upon it. Youth definitions of safe sport varied regionally within shared themes; the key elements identified across regions were inclusiveness, no bullying or discrimination, supportive peers and coaches, being comfortable, having fun, and physically safe/accessible environments.



“I think having a larger variety of recreational sports leagues for young adults where you can select the level of league competitiveness would be helpful to allow people who want to learn sport or simply continue participating in sport while having fun.”

“I consider cost, access and how it will make my child feel during the sport when deciding whether and/or what to sign them up for. Meaning, it is very important that sports leave them feeling energized and positive, not bullied, belittled or with lower self-esteem.”

PLAY #2: ESTABLISH AND REINFORCE STRONG ORGANIZATIONAL VALUES AND CULTURE

Embed values connected to positivity, safety, and inclusion into organizational culture and practices. As sport coaches and leaders, 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 recognition initiatives such as end-of-season awards. Display signage and symbols that support your values, such as PRIDE flags or cultural designs, to reinforce values related to inclusion. Recognize coaches who demonstrate positive coaching qualities.

When youth cannot access safe, accepting and inclusive environments, the experience can be isolating and long-lasting. Whereas Indigenous and racialized youth, non-binary and two-spirit youth, and youth with visible disabilities are disproportionately impacted by experiences of racism and discrimination in sport, comparatively few have an outlet or access to a supportive environment or culture to work through it. Significant increases in the percentage of youth who experienced racism in sport were seen over the three years across racial groups, but more markedly among Black youth. When focusing on the experiences of Indigenous youth, the same significant increase was not seen, although experiences of racism remain high at 33% in 2023. Consistent across all demographic groups in the study, **only 21% of all youth in 2023 feel comfortable trying to stop incidents of racism or discrimination when they see it**, and only 16% feel like they have someone to talk to about it if they experience one in a sporting environment.

PERCENTAGE OF YOUTH WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED RACISM IN SPORT



Sobering insights such as these are consistent with trends in the data across multiple years of MLSE Foundation's *Change the Game Study* and also complement insights published by sector leaders such as the [Coaches Association of Ontario](#) who in 2023 found that 43% of coaches in an Ontario-wide sample expressed concern that their actions could be interpreted as harassment or abuse. Further, **82% of coaches aware of hazing activities within their clubs or organizations felt it was part of team building.**

Findings such as these further support widespread calls for change across the system while reinforcing calls to action in 2023 *Change the Game Study* data by youth for improvements to sport cultures rooted in supportive environments where they feel physically and psychologically safe to be themselves (39%); where they are welcomed and accepted by peers and teammates (34%); and most of all – prosocial environments where they can make friends (58%).



"A safe sport environment is where there are other people like me who understand that being autistic is a power, not a problem."

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. For training in the Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion space, prioritize topics relating directly to the youth you serve or intend to serve. Use opportunities to learn from successes and challenges by collaboratively debriefing your initiatives and programs.

Youth have been clear about what they want, what they need, and what will inspire a lasting connection to sport. Despite sobering statistics and challenging experiences, youth have also shared ideas for improving sport safety, culture, and experiences. In doing so, the feedback of participants in this study further challenges leaders to consider what motivates and inspires a lifelong connection to the idea of sport and consider change as a means toward sustainability and growth for their sports. Training coaches on how to create an inclusive, welcoming environment that supports a range of skill levels is a meaningful investment in the future of sport.

In the words of youth and parents/guardians, three core themes emerged when they were asked to reflect on their desires for change.

- 1) Sport spaces that facilitate learning and development of social and emotional life skills;
- 2) Sport environments which foster a sense of community through the facilitation of healthy relationships, acceptance, mentorship, and support;
- 3) Reduced travel and cost barriers to improve access to live events as both a participant and a fan.

Conversations, casual and professional consultation, and formal professional development may be needed to develop expertise in these areas. Find out what others are doing. Read about what has worked. And most vitally – try something new.





“A lot of women, non-binary folks, and racialized people are basically in a self-esteem torture chamber in environments that don’t support them, understand them, or accommodate them. We create more lifelong athletes, and people with healthy, positive relationships with sports, when we spend our time uplifting others and building their confidence.”

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. The Change the Game Research [data dashboard](#) is a great place to start learning about what gets in the way of access within specific regions, sports, or demographic groups. Formal and informal conversations with community members are also great data sources. Once you've developed an awareness of barriers, research and brainstorm tactics to reduce them. Can you create a carpooling email list? Offer a sliding scale for registration fees? Provide free, subsidized shoes, apparel, or equipment or offer rentals or swaps? Recruit volunteers fluent in the languages youth speak at home? Get creative and collaborate to innovate!

Ontario's state of safe play has taken a step back in 2023, following the steep initial rise in sport access observed alongside the immediate bounce back from lockdowns between 2021 and 2022. Whereas 65% of youth overall in 2023 report having played a sport within the past year, the proportion of youth who report being able to access safe sporting opportunities has contracted from 88% in 2022 to 84% in 2023. This contrasts motivation levels, which remain consistently higher, with more than 89% of youth from all demographic categories indicating that their interest in sport participation is either unchanged or growing. With large proportions of youth and parents increasingly aware of the physical, mental, community and youth development benefits of sport, recreation and play, demand continues to exceed access.

Soccer, swimming, and basketball are among the top sports played since reopening from pandemic lockdowns. Year-over-year growth trends are visible in soccer and football, particularly pronounced for girls in soccer and boys in football, but significant across genders. No significant change was seen in basketball or hockey participation, but the resumption of school sports in Ontario in 2023 contributed to a noteworthy rise in interest and participation in specific sports for whom schools are a vital access point for youth. Across Ontario, extra-curricular school teams and clubs have traditionally been a pivotal pathway to access low-cost programs, coaching, competition and equipment for youth and families. Outside of schools, and most notably impacting participation among 6-10 and 19-29-year-olds, affordability remains a crucial barrier across income, race, gender, ability, and geography, with inflation and decreased disposable income outweighing the rising costs of play.

These trends appear most noticeable when considering the factors of gender, race, income, and age. Barriers related to affordability, social isolation, not having friends to play with or not feeling included as part of a team continue to have a disproportionate impact on participation levels of 6-10 and 19-29-year-olds, non-binary and two-spirit youth, Black, Southeast Asian, Indigenous, and Middle Eastern youth, youth born outside Canada, youth from the Greater Toronto Area, and youth from lower-income households.

YOUTH BASKETBALL PARTICIPATION



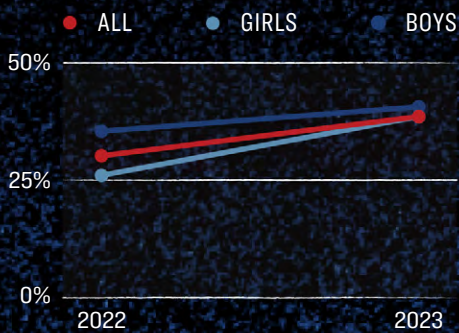
YOUTH HOCKEY PARTICIPATION



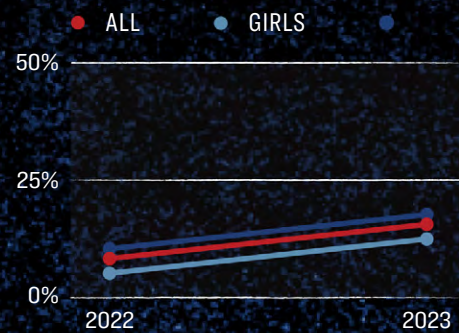


“Cost and practical accessibility details are needed to sign up or start. A fun and friendly environment where I feel comfortable to make mistakes, try new things and make friends are what is needed to stay.”

YOUTH SOCCER PARTICIPATION



YOUTH FOOTBALL PARTICIPATION



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?

Consistent multiyear insights regarding inclusion, belonging and the quality and safety of sport environments for youth are reinforced and solidified in 2023. Overall, youth and parents widely understand access to sport, play, and physically active recreation opportunities as potentially powerful interventions for facilitating positive development outcomes among youth – when it is fun, when it is social, and when it is safe.



The continuously unfolding timeline of well-documented issues in sport quality and safety have shown us that we cannot assume sport outcomes to be positive without standards that are upheld through consistent temperature checks in our organizations and environments, and with the communities, families, and youth we serve. Immediately post-pandemic, many youth sport organizations scaled back measurement and evaluation efforts out of financial necessity or to prioritize re-establishing regular staffing and programming; now is the time to rebuild, re-assess, or introduce simple measures for evaluating program quality, experiences, and outcomes. Let's ensure the new growth is healthy as we change and grow the game.

Using existing data is another great way to incorporate a data-driven approach. For example, referencing the *Change the Game* data dashboard can tell you that GTA youth most value affordability, convenience of location, friends to participate with, quality coaching and inclusion and diversity when choosing to participate in a sport, compared to Northeast Ontario, where cost, transportation, and convenient scheduling take priority.



“A high-quality space is somewhere that youth can feel free to explore the joy of play and movement. A place to learn imperfectly and grow from mistakes without fear of judgement. A place to welcome kids, regardless of any genetic quality. Where zero-tolerance policies for negativity are monitored and lived beyond the establishment of a code of conduct.”

“A place where I can be taught to play and excel at a high level with strong competition. A place that isn’t abusive of myself, my teammates, my opponents, my coaches or officials. A place where I can be challenged and learn how to become better, both in sport and in life, from my failures and successes. A place where my coaches and teammates are supportive but also expect my best.”

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.

In 2023, youth active in sports continued to experience a significantly stronger sense of community belonging than youth not active in sport. [Toronto Foundation's 2022 Social Capital Report](#) shed insight on weakening social networks and social trust, particularly among Toronto's young people, reflecting a context of social disconnectedness. Sport connections and experiences are vital to building the social glue to combat and reverse this negative trend. The good news is that this effect seems to be growing more robust over time; **significantly more youth active in sport reported a very strong sense of community belonging in 2023 compared to 2022 (22% compared to 17%)**. This positive effect hinges on an intentional approach to outreach and inreach that continues to build the value proposition for youth and families to stay connected as a community through the power and potential of sport.



DESIRES FOR CHANGE

INVEST IN WHAT ENABLES AND MOTIVATES YOUTH TO PLAY.

Youth have been clear about what they want, what they need, and what will inspire a lasting connection to sport – enabling sustainability and growth in the sport ecosystem.

Listening to what they had to say means changing the game through:



49%

MAKING SPORT MORE AFFORDABLE



43%

FURTHERING DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL LIFE SKILLS IN SPORT SETTINGS



40%

IMPROVING ACCESSIBILITY OF PLAY SPACES



39%

ENABLING SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENTS WHERE YOUTH FEEL PHYSICALLY AND PSYCHOLOGICALLY SAFE BEING THEMSELVES



36%

INCREASING OPPORTUNITIES TO EXPERIENCE A SPORTING EVENT LIVE



34%

GIVING ACCESS TO MENTORSHIP OPPORTUNITIES WITH ROLE MODELS AND INDIVIDUALS WHO WORK IN SPORT

WHAT'S NEXT?

FOSTERING A BRAVE, SAFE AND POSITIVE CULTURE FOR YOUTH IN SPORT.

To grow the game, we need to change the game.

This report falls on the heels of the federal government announcing the creation of a Future of Sport Commission to review the Canadian sport system and make recommendations to improve sport safety, governance, funding, and culture. While there remains much debate regarding the best path for this to occur, it is an acknowledgement that the sport system needs widespread reform, and youth and parents/guardians participating in this study have been clear about what they want, need and are calling for from sport.

A system that is broadly accessible for young people to try new things and thrive regardless of gender, race, ability, geography and income.

A funding formula that sustains and supports both national and provincial organizations, as well as community-based clubs, leagues, teams and organizations providing the majority of youth sporting opportunities.

A sector that actively works to “de-risk” what sport participation means for non-binary youth, women and girls, Indigenous youth, Black youth, newcomers to Canada, and others who have disproportionately not found safety in sport spaces.

A network of providers across sports whose outcomes align with what youth and families are looking for: Access to safe spaces where healthy relationships and healthy competition can co-exist, and environments where participants can develop social and emotional life skills along the way.

A system that (re)defines safe sport and sport culture on the terms of those most vulnerable in the system – its full diversity of youth. For MLSE Foundation and the participants of the Change the Game Research Study, that means zero tolerance for bullying or discrimination, and a physically safe and accessible environment where youth and athletes are supported by peers and coaches to feel comfortable as themselves, have fun, and be there for each other in sport and in life.

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.

“It is the responsibility of all those involved in sports, from participants, coaches to board members and governing bodies, to create and maintain such an environment where youth and athletes 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.”

END NOTES

This report may be cited as:

MLSE Foundation, Change the Game Research: Growing the Game Means Changing the Game, (January 2024).

All key insights from this research will be shared broadly across the sport and Sport For Development sectors, including with sport organizations, funders, policymakers, and researchers. For an anonymized version of the data and to learn more about how youth overall or from different regions or demographic groups responded to the questions, please visit <https://www.mlsefoundation.org/how-we-give/research> to access an interactive online dashboard of results and an anonymized open data set, which can be downloaded for additional use.

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