

The FUN MAPS: A Youth Sport Scientific Breakthrough

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Fun. Everyone wants to have it. However, few can easily describe what “it” is. Such is no longer the case – at least for kids participating in organized athletics. The FUN MAPS are the result of new and exciting sport science research that engaged hundreds of youth sport players, parents, and coaches in the creation of innovative, three-dimensional maps that identify the *exact* determinants of what makes sports fun for kids. Like any road map or sophisticated GPS system, the FUN MAPS display the entire landscape of fun and provide navigational directions for optimizing fun based on precise metrics.

Much of the popular media buzz and excitement generated by this new research stems from the need and desire voiced by many to put the fun back into the ever increasing ultra-competitive youth sport environment. What’s more, the FUN MAPS are challenging one of the most common perceptions in the youth sport arena today – that “having fun” is synonymous with “goofing off”. Not so, according to the FUN MAPS.

Contrary to what many may think, fun does *not* come at the expense of individual athlete and team achievement efforts. In other words, it appears that greater athletic performance is more likely to be achieved if kids are engaged in the most fun sport experiences possible. So, exactly what *is* fun?

The Fun Topography

Fun is complex – and all of the things that make playing sports fun for kids are many. So many, in fact, most people are surprised to find out that the FUN MAPS display as many fun-determinants as they do. How many fun-determinants do *you* think there are? Take a quick guess. Think big. Think double digits big.

There are 81 fun-determinants. That means there are 81 independent things that make participating in team sports fun for kids! Fortunately, all of the 81 fun-determinants are organized into 11 larger fun factors. As you might guess, factors such as *Games* and *Team Friendships* are among the 11 fun factors, but surprising to many, so are *Learning and Improving*, *Practice*, *Trying Hard*, *Mental Bonuses*, *Being a Good Sport*, *Team Rituals*, *Swag*, *Game Time Support*, and *Positive Coaching*. Driven by scientific data, the position of each of the factors on the FUN MAPS facilitates understanding and navigating the inter-relatedness among all of the factors.



Navigating the FUN MAPS

Games and *Practice*, the two contexts in which youth sport is organized, are positioned centrally on the FUN MAPS and include 6 and 7 fun-determinants, respectively. Using a compass, head due north and you'll find *Team Rituals*, *Team Friendships*, and *Being a Good Sport*, which collectively include the 20 social fun-determinants. To the west is *Positive Coaching*, which alone boasts the greatest numbers of fun-determinants at 12; and, closely adjacent are other external factors including *Game Time Support* and *Swag*, which contain 6 and 7 fun-determinants. To the east are all of the internal things youth athletes find fun about playing sports including *Mental Bonuses*, *Trying Hard*, and *Learning and Improving*, which together include 23 fun-determinants.

When surveying the fun landscape in three-dimensional space, a fun factor's height is directly proportional to its reported importance. This makes the FUN MAPS easy to navigate and discern the factors of greatest and least importance. So, if you are interested in getting directions on how to start optimizing fun for kids amid the vast fun landscape, use the FUN MAPS to take a tour of the youth sport ethos which represents the trifecta of the most important fun factors surrounding *Practice* and *Games*. To start your tour, begin at *Being a Good Sport*. Next stop? *Trying Hard*. Final destination? *Positive Coaching*. These three fun factors are of greatest importance when it comes to making sports fun for kids and as such tower above other factors of minimal importance, such as *Team Rituals* and *Swag*.

A Grassroots Approach to Mapping Fun

The FUN MAPS are the result of using a highly robust, mixed-methods scientific research design known as concept mapping, which engaged the most relevant community-based youth sport stakeholders – athletes, their parents, and coaches – as key informants in the development of concept maps which both identify and quantify fun.

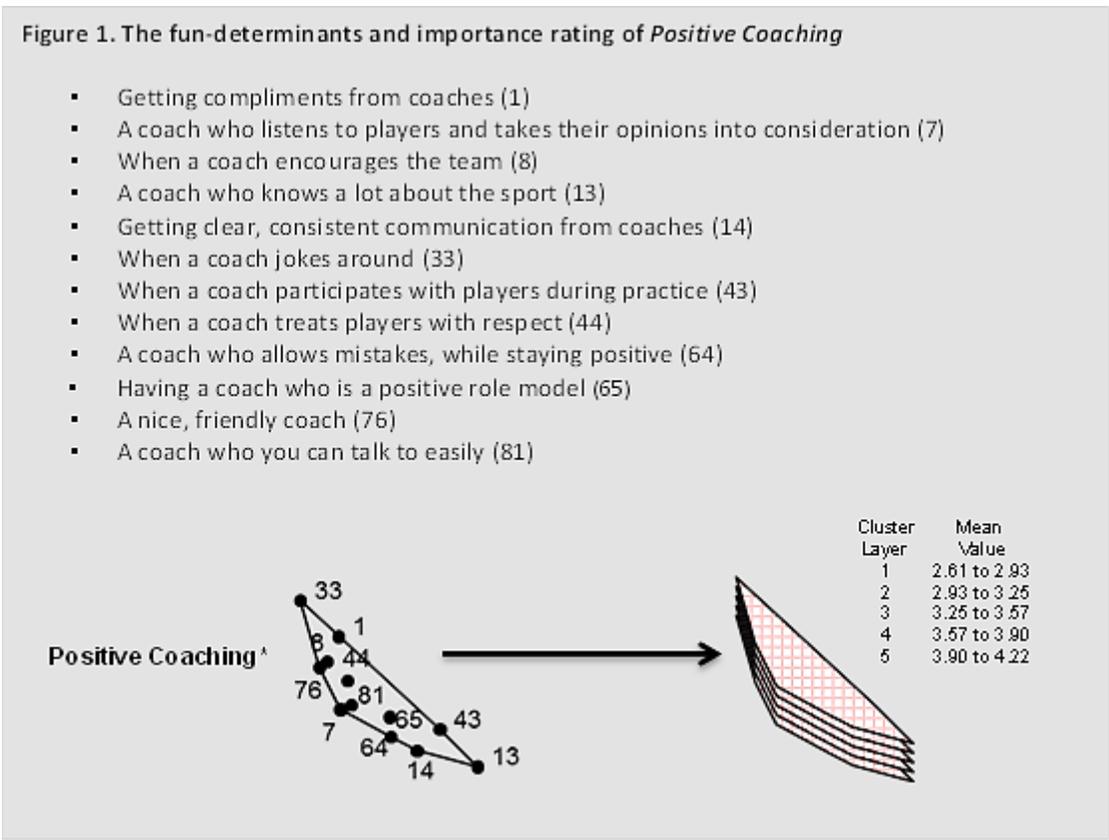
First, these stakeholders brainstormed as many fun things they could think of by completing the sentence stem, “*One thing that makes playing sports fun for kids is...*” Thousands of ideas were brainstormed. These fun ideas were then analyzed and synthesized into a list of 81 fun-determinant statements that was representative of the entire saturation of ideas that had been contributed. This alone was a significant scientific advancement in sport science. For the first time *fun* had been operationally defined in its entirety by youth sport's most significant and primary stakeholders.

Next, each stakeholder conceptually organized the fun-determinants by pile sorting each of the 81 statements. Meaning, stakeholders placed fun-determinants that were similar to one another in a pile and gave each pile a name that collectively summarized the statements they grouped together. Lastly, stakeholders rated the importance of each of the 81 fun-determinants.

The FUN MAPS are the final visual result of combining the finest qualitative research methods (i.e., brainstorming) and quantitative research methods (i.e., sorting and rating) with sophisticated analytics. The placement of the 81 fun-determinants as data points on the FUN MAPS is the combined result of how the determinants were sorted by all stakeholders. That is, two data points that appear closer to one another on the FUN MAPS were sorted together more often. This means that stakehold-



ers largely conceptualized these two fun-determinants as more similar to one another than different. Points further apart from one another represent fun-determinants that were perceived to be dissimilar and thus conceptually more distinctive. Multivariate analysis connected the 81 fun-determinant points, thereby creating boundaries and partitioning the determinants into 11 distinct fun factors, illustrative of stakeholders' combined sorting data. The importance rating data was also aggregated for each fun-determinant and fun factor and displayed as three-dimensional layers on the FUN MAPS. This means that the number of layers displayed for each factor directly corresponds to how important it was rated. Therefore, factors of high importance will be displayed with a greater number of layers. See Figure 1 for an excerpt of the *Positive Coaching* fun factor from the FUN MAPS.



The Significance of the FUN MAPS

It is commonly known that attrition from youth sport is high – as high as 70% by the age of 13. Recent trends also indicate that more and more kids are dropping out of team sports. Both alarming and staggering, these statistics are largely attributable to negative sport experiences. In fact, the number one reason kids cite for dropping out of youth sport is because it is “no longer fun” and the primary reason they continue to play is because it “is fun”.

The FUN MAPS are the first environmental scan of fun in youth sport today and thus may be helpful in maximizing participation retention and reducing youth sport attrition. The FUN MAPS display the entire topography of fun in easy-to-understand visual images of knowledge that provide national or-



ganizations, league administrators, coaches, parents and others with precise directions and guidance for fostering the *most* fun sport experiences for children and adolescents.

Learn More about the FUN MAPS

The FUN MAPS are the scientific blueprints for an entire theory of fun known as the fun integration theory. To learn more and to see the FUN MAPS in their entirety, you can refer to the original scientific paper, "*The fun integration theory: Towards sustaining child and adolescent sport participation*" available via:

- **Human Kinetics in the Journal of Physical Activity & Health**: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1123/jpah.2013-0180>
- **PubMed**: <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/24770788>

Follow-up questions and correspondence can be directed to the Principal Investigator and lead author of the paper: Dr. Amanda J. Visek at avisek@gwu.edu. You can also follow all of the fun surrounding the FUN MAPS and join the fun conversation on Twitter [@ajvisek](https://twitter.com/ajvisek) [#funmaps](https://twitter.com/ajvisek).

References

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