

# Enhancing Youth Employability Through Sport

This Evidence Brief summarizes the value of sport to develop employable skills in young people, and strategies to enhance youth employability through sports programming.



EVIDENCE  
BRIEF

## DEFINITIONS OF KEY TERMS

**Employability skills** refer to any assets, skills, and characteristics that enable an individual to find and maintain employment (e.g., communication skills, confidence, time management, personal responsibility, empathy, self-awareness).<sup>1</sup>

Sport contributes to personal growth, positive values, and character development, and is particularly important for youth who face multiple barriers and vulnerabilities.<sup>2</sup> **Sport-based employability programs** can further enhance employment outcomes through targeted workshops and discussions, including highlighting career pathways that may align with youth participants' strengths and interests – both within and beyond sport.<sup>3</sup>

Sport participation can enable youth to develop employability skills and provide reinforcement through ongoing practice and reflection – including those skills identified as **necessary for the future of work**, such as analytical thinking, leadership, resilience, flexibility, agility, motivation, and self-awareness.<sup>4</sup>

## TWO KEY MESSAGES

### 01. There is a need for more diverse and engaging youth employability programs.

Over 77,000 youth aged 15-24 were unemployed in Canada in May 2023;<sup>5</sup> in June of that year, Ontario's youth unemployment rate was 13.8%.<sup>6</sup> Unemployment can have several adverse effects on youth, including lower life satisfaction, increased income precarity or poverty, and decreased physical and mental health.<sup>7</sup> General employability programs have been implemented as a solution to address

youth unemployment, but evaluations of these programs have revealed a lack of engaging and impactful job training.<sup>8</sup> While some programs have been successful in teaching youth practical skills (i.e. building resumes, searching for work, navigating interviews), they often neglect the teaching of *employability* skills.<sup>9</sup>

Sport-based employability programs can increase youth engagement and the development of employability skills by using sport as an appealing and experiential learning environment,<sup>3</sup> and by incorporating workshops and other educational activities. The integration of sport into employment programs has been recognized to enhance the employability of youth. Sport-based employability programs can expand young people's social networks through strengthening relationships with peers, organizations, and potential employers, which can enhance their employment prospects.<sup>10,11</sup> Sport participation can also help youth better understand the expectations and dynamics of the workplace.<sup>11</sup>

*“Generally, in sport, you’re on a team – some people you’ll like, some people you won’t like, and you have to be in that social situation through the highs and the lows and I feel that replicates a workplace.”*

## **02. Investment in sport has economic benefits and can serve to future-proof youth employment outcomes.**

Sport is one of the fastest growing industries in Canada and reveals potential for economic growth.<sup>1</sup> An increasing number of national policies have formally recognized the interconnectedness between sport, employment, and economic development,<sup>1</sup> including the Canadian Sport Policy 2012<sup>12</sup> and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted in 2015 by Canada and 192 other United Nations member states.<sup>13</sup> Sport has facilitated sustainable economic growth by generating funds from advertising, sports media, large scale events, sports tourism, and sports equipment and merchandise.<sup>14</sup>

Sport-based employability programs can serve as an **affordable alternative** to other employment programs, given the flexibility of their settings, and can promote long-term financial sustainability through facilitating the integration of education, health, training, and employment objectives.<sup>15</sup>

### **Sport can provide knowledge and opportunities that improve youth employment outcomes.**

For example, sport-based employability program staff have supported youth to obtain sport and fitness-specific qualifications, as well as discover possible pathways to employment in sport following participation in their programs.<sup>15</sup> The skills and experiences that youth obtain can help them enter the labour market by being hired in roles such as sport coaches, referees, and organizers of tournaments or events.

However, sport can also support the development of employability skills that can be transferred to a variety of contexts, specifically **skills that are increasingly in demand and that young people will need for the future of work** – such as complex problem solving, managing stress and anxiety, communication, and collaboration.<sup>4</sup>

## **SUMMARY OF EVIDENCE: THREE STRATEGIES TO ENHANCE YOUTH EMPLOYABILITY THROUGH SPORT**

### **01. Integrate sport into youth employment programs – or integrate the development of employability skills into sports programs.**

Before the pandemic, sport was among the most popular type of youth programming and remains one of the most frequently-selected programs that young people would like to see available in their communities.<sup>16</sup>

**Sport can be an optimal environment for developing employability skills.** Youth sport participants tend to experience higher levels of **positive developmental outcomes** – such as increased competence, connection and engagement, academic success, health and wellbeing – than other youth.<sup>17</sup> Sport provides youth with experiences of a certain nature and intensity that successfully encourage the development of personal skills and assets.<sup>18</sup> Employment program staff have highlighted how crucial social support and mentorship – both primary features of sport – can be for youth’s development of employability skills, such as communication and self-awareness.<sup>3</sup>

When youth are provided with ongoing opportunities in sport to discuss, practice, and refine personal skills, they are more likely to internalize these skills and apply them to various settings in their lives, such as in the workplace.<sup>19,20</sup> When sport is intentionally structured (e.g., by creating a safe and engaging environment, clearly communicating rules), youth are more likely to develop a variety of life skills,<sup>19,20</sup> including employability skills, that can provide benefit now and in the future.

## **02. Engage diverse youth – and outreach to those who may not traditionally seek out employment programs.**

Sport has been found to attract youth that may otherwise not seek out employment/employability programs. **Sport can be an engaging and relatable environment for youth**, particularly those who have had negative experiences in traditional learning environments or those from hard-to-reach populations, such as socially vulnerable

youth,<sup>8</sup> who are more likely to face social exclusion and barriers to services. Providing youth with access to a social network and a sense of inclusion are crucial steps in encouraging their personal development.<sup>21</sup> Sport participation can encourage social connections among different groups of youth that can enhance their sense of belonging, cultural awareness, and skills development.<sup>22</sup>

Successful employment programs aim to **address specific systemic obstacles** that youth are facing in obtaining employment, such as discrimination, poverty, and inaccessible services.<sup>23</sup> Fostering confidence and motivation in youth is critical in addressing these obstacles,<sup>8</sup> and the mentorship provided to youth through sport can increase youth’s confidence to achieve their goals and connect them to educational and career pathways.<sup>22</sup> Youth participants have shared that completing sport-based employability programs provided them with both the confidence and practical skills to seek out employment opportunities.<sup>15</sup>

Providing youth with employability training in **non-formal, community-based learning environments increases youth engagement and enhances employability.**<sup>24</sup> Perhaps even more importantly, youth have described how sport settings have offered encouragement to learn while participating in employability programs:<sup>15</sup>

*“It’s not a classroom we are in but a room at the football club and it’s less pressure as I have bad memories from school.”*

*“We get to use the Dome where Stoke City play. We see first team players around... it makes me feel great, a real confidence boost.”*

Sport-based organizations have also been able to provide youth with a **wider range of support services** as compared to more general employment-focused training programs.<sup>25</sup> Sport-based employability programs have been able to reconnect many youth that have faced adversity with formal systems of education and training.<sup>25</sup>

### 03. Prioritize teaching and practicing core employability skills.

Sport-based employability programs are most successful in preparing youth for employment when they teach **core employability skills that are relevant now and for the future** – including teamwork – as well as provide guidance on **practical skills** that will prepare youth to enter the labour market, such as support with resume building and techniques for job searching.<sup>15</sup> The integration of sport into youth employment programs can be effective in helping young people **understand what is expected of them when employed**. For example:<sup>3</sup>

- a) Teaching **discipline** and **responsibility** by emphasizing attendance, codes of conduct, and being on time for program sessions/ trainings.
- b) Teaching **teamwork** by encouraging youth to complete group activities and support their teammates.
- c) Teaching **leadership** by encouraging youth to lead activities and appointing team captains.

Youth can sometimes experience difficulties in finding and maintaining employment due to a lack of academic qualifications. Sport-based employability programs can provide **experiential learning environments** that allow youth to earn other valid qualifications that can assist them in finding employment, such as obtaining certifications and practical experience through partnerships with external agencies.<sup>1,26</sup>

---

### HOW DID WE COMPILE THIS EVIDENCE?

We searched YouthREX’s online Knowledge Hub, Google Scholar, and Google using the following key terms: “sport employability program”, “sport for employability”, “sport employability skills”, “sport for development”, “unemployment in youth”, “employment interventions”.

## ENDNOTES

1. Moustakas, L., Raub, V., Moufagued, Y., & Petry, K. (2022). [From sport to work? Exploring potentials in a Moroccan sport-for-employability programme](#). *Youth*, 2(4), 759–771.
2. Bean, C., & Kramers, S. (2017). [Game on: Sport participation as a vehicle for positive development for youth facing barriers](#). Youth Research & Evaluation eXchange.
3. Coalter, F., Theeboom, M., & Truyens, J. (2020). Developing a programme theory for sport and employability programmes for NEETs. *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*, 12(4), 679–697.
4. World Economic Forum. (2023). [Future of jobs report 2023: Insight report](#).
5. Statistics Canada. (2023). [Labour force survey, May 2023](#).
6. Ontario Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training and Skills Development. (2023). [Labour market report, June 2023](#).
7. Commers, T., Theeboom, M., & Coalter, F. (2022). [Exploring the design of a sport for employability program: A case study](#). *Frontiers in Sports and Active Living*, 4, 942479–942479.
8. Warner, M., Robinson, J., Heal, B., Lloyd, J., O’Connell, P., & Rose, L. (2020). A comprehensive sport for development strategy using collaborative partnerships to facilitate employment among youth facing barriers. *Journal of Sport for Development*, 8(15), 10–24.
9. Matsuba, M. K., Elder, G. J., Petrucci, F., & Marleau, T. (2008). Employment training for at-risk youth: A program evaluation focusing on changes in psychological well-being. *Child and Youth Care Forum*, 37(1), 15–26.
10. Theeboom, M., Coalter, F., Truyens, J., et al. (2017). [Study on the contribution of sport to the employability of young people in the context of the Europe 2020 strategy – Final report](#). Publications Office of the European Union.
11. Morgan, H., Bush, A., & Bowles, H. (2022). [Active for employment: Enhancing employability through sport and physical activity participation: Report for the Sport for Development Coalition](#). University of Bath.
12. Parliament of Canada. (2020). [Sport Canada and the public policy framework for participation and excellence in sport](#).
13. United Nations. (2015). [The sustainable development agenda](#).
14. Barbu, M. C. R., Burcea, G. B., Dumitru, R., & Popescu, M. C. (2020). [The contribution of sport to economic and social development](#). *Studia Educatio Artis Gymnasticae*, 1(2020), 27–38.
15. Spaaij, R., Magee, J., & Jeanes, R. (2013). Urban youth, worklessness and sport: A comparison of sports-based employability programmes in Rotterdam and Stoke-on-Trent. *Urban Studies (Edinburgh, Scotland)*, 50(8), 1608–1624.
16. Rogers, K., & Piñeros, M. (2024). [Impacts of COVID-19 on Ontario youth participation in sports programming](#). [Poster presentation]. Youth Sport Summit, Brock University, St. Catharines.
17. Bean, C., & Forneris, T. (2017). Is life skill development a by-product of sport participation? Perceptions of youth sport coaches. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 29(2), 234–250.
18. Pierce, S., Kendellen, K., Camiré, M., & Gould, D. (2018). Strategies for coaching for life skills transfer. *Journal of Sport Psychology in Action*, 9(1), 11–20.

19. Bean, C., Kramers, S., Forneris, T., & Camiré, M. (2018). The Implicit/Explicit Continuum of Life Skills Development and Transfer. *Quest (National Association for Kinesiology in Higher Education)*, 70(4), 456–470.
20. Youth Research & Evaluation eXchange. (2024). [Strategies to promote transferable life skills in youth sport programming.](#)
21. Van der Veken, K., Lauwerier, E., & Willems, S. (2020). [“To mean something to someone”:](#) [Sport-for-development as a lever for social inclusion.](#) *International Journal for Equity in Health*, 19(1), 1–13.
22. Cunningham, R., Bunde-Birouste, A., Rawstorne, P., & Nathan, S. (2020). [Young people’s perceptions of the influence of a sport-for-social-change program on their life trajectories.](#) *Social Inclusion*, 8(3), 162–176.
23. Weiss, J., & Heinz-Fischer, C. (2022). [The more rural the less educated? An analysis of national policy strategies for enhancing young adults’ participation in formal and informal training in European rural areas.](#) *Youth*, 2(3), 405–421.
24. Burnett, C. (2023). [Sport-for-employability as an innovative practice in addressing youth underemployment in sub-Saharan Africa.](#) *Frontiers in Sports and Active Living*, 4, 1001435–1001435.
25. Maguire, S. (2021). [Early leaving and the NEET agenda across the UK.](#) *Journal of Education and Work*, 34(7–8), 826–838.
26. Morgan, H., Bowles, H., & Bush, A. (2023). [The impact of COVID-19 on young people’s employability: The potential of sport-based interventions as non-formal education.](#) *Journal of Education and Work*, 36(7–8), 608–622.