

A black and white photograph of a young boy in a baseball uniform. He is wearing a cap with a large letter 'A' on it, a white jersey with 'ASPEN' and 'RECREATION' on the back, and white pants. He is holding a baseball glove in his left hand. The background is a plain, light color.

ASPEN YOUTH SPORTS

YOUTH SPORTS

PARTICIPATION TRENDS

2025

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Introduction

This report outlines the 2026 goals for Aspen Youth Sports Programming developed through parental feedback and current youth sports research to improve current programming. The purpose is to provide clarity on the direction Aspen Youth Sports are headed.

There were two big trends observed in 2025 to be addressed in 2026. First, a need to homogenize youth sports currently offered across teams, coaches, sports, and leagues to prioritize multi-sport participation and create a cohesive experience for all players. All these issues will be addressed together to Elevate Youth Sports Programming. Second, there is declining participation in girls' sports across the board, a need for girl specific sports, and a decline in boys' participation in soccer. These issues will be addressed to Increase Participation in Youth Sports.



Elevate Youth Sports Programming

Aspen Youth Sports offers many successful and popular sports programs, but there is a need to create a cohesive experience for all players and to enhance our players' experience in youth sports. With any potential changes we may make, the goal is to increase access and engagement through local opportunities to play close to home, focus on the developmental needs of players, and encourage sports sampling. Across the nation, the biggest challenges to running youth sport programming are the lack of volunteer coaches, shortages in facility spaces, and hardship in recruiting officials¹, and Aspen Youth Sports are facing those same three issues. Therefore, Aspen Youth Sports will focus on the following aspects to address these challenges: Roaring Fork Youth Leagues & In-House Leagues, Development of Athletes Through Coaches, and Restructuring Age Divisions.

Roaring Fork Youth Leagues & In-House Leagues

This objective focuses on solidifying and expanding the Roaring Fork Leagues as well as our own In-House Leagues. The Roaring Fork Leagues are sports leagues that the recreation departments at Glenwood Springs, Carbondale, Basalt, Snowmass, and Aspen all collectively participate in. The In-House Leagues are leagues that only include Aspen teams and are managed by Aspen Youth Sports.

Intervalley Leagues & In-House Leagues Operations

There are currently two sports programs (baseball and basketball) that are run through an intervalley league. These leagues provide athletes with adequate competition against teams around the valley. For soccer and flag football, there was a lack of competition for certain age divisions in soccer (specifically the 3rd/4th Grade and 5th/6th Grade Divisions) and for the whole of the flag football league in Fall of 2025. Feedback from families included: "I was surprised that we played the same team every week, but I know that's just enrollment. I believe one team had mostly girls and we had to scramble all of the kids every game to make it more even and fair. My son was bummed that he didn't play with his team on that final game."

By expanding flag football and soccer into an intervalley league through partnerships with other recreation departments in the valley, we will be able to provide families and youth with competitive games while still staying true to recreation sports. With these intervalley leagues, rules will need to be solidified and agreed upon by all participating agencies. Rules for flag football and soccer will be adopted from the recommended rules from RCX Sports (NFL Flag and MLS Go).

Concurrently to expanding competition pool for our youth sports, using RCX Sports will help our youth sports feel more official by providing our teams with professional sports-branded jerseys and creation of marking materials. Sports that we will use RCX Sports for are flag football, basketball, and

¹ National Recreation and Parks Association, "Youth Sports in Parks and Recreation"

soccer. Other recreation departments we partner with (Glenwood Springs and Snowmass) also use RCX Sports for their jerseys and this creates a cohesiveness amongst the entire leagues.

Officiating and Referees

After the Fall 2025 season there was significant feedback from families about officials. The family survey that was sent out at the end of the season included the question: "What is your satisfaction with the League/Program on the following: Officiating". Girls' Basketball came in with the highest feedback score with an average rating of 4.25 out of 5, and Baseball was given a score of 3.91 out of 5 in the category of officiating. Baseball and basketball are currently the only two youth sports that we have consistently staffed umpires/officials. The average rating for Soccer was 3.81 and this sport has historically been officiated by coaches. For flag football, the average rating was the lowest at 3.14. Families were dissatisfied with the officials for games, especially coming from the Glenwood Springs league the 2024 season which had officials for all games. Specific feedback from families about the lack of officials included:

- "The games did not have designated refs and as opposed to the Glenwood league where a designated ref with digital score boards would monitor the games. Parent coaches would argue over plays during the league games adding to the chaos." (Flag Football)
- "It would be helpful to have two trained officials at each game rather than just parents stepping in to help as needed. It would cut down on the amount of complaints of unfairness among the kids." (Flag Football)
- "Coaches officiated, but there was no clear structure to games." (Soccer)

To address concerns brought up by families, Aspen Youth Sports is making every effort to ensure flag football will have an official at each game. We have started recruiting staff officials such as asking high school students to refer to younger games (for which they will earn volunteer credit hours) and opening job applications for community members to apply to. There are also incentives to get parents/coaches to learn how to referee and provide a pathway to becoming an official with the City of Aspen.

Youth Sports Policy

During the Fall 2025 season, the Player Code of Conduct, Parent Code of Conduct, and Coach's Code of Conduct were all updated based on Department of Early Childhood recommendations from the Safer Youth Sports Bill passed by the Colorado legislature. Along with this updated Code of Conduct, there needs to be a Youth Sports Policy. In this Youth Sports Policy, Aspen Youth Sports will establish an inclusion policy for our youth sports that ensures all who want to play will have equal access to our youth sports programs.

Development of Athletes Through Coaching

Each child who participates in Aspen Youth Sports should have similar experiences and be given the same opportunities for learning through playing. This comes from how our coaches coach. It is

important that coaches understand developmentally appropriate lessons and expectations for their age division, execute proper stages for learning sports, and can teach youth in a positive and respectful manner.

Support of Coaches

Coaches are all volunteer positions and come with many backgrounds of how they approach working with kids. In a survey sent out to families, the question was asked “What is your satisfaction with the Recreation Administration team on the following: Support of Coaches”. The overall rating from parents was 4.04 for baseball, 4.06 for soccer, 4.00 for flag football, and 4.88 for girls’ basketball. Although neither of these are bad scores by any means, there was significant written feedback regarding coaches, especially from soccer families during the Fall 2025 season. This feedback from families included:

- “I did observe some of the other teams/coaches struggling to keep it fun for the children. Perhaps the organization can provide examples of fun drills for the kids to keep them engaged.” (Soccer)
- “I think there needs to be clear guidelines for coaches-- what types of behavior should be allowed/what needs to be supported in the moment and how/what needs an immediate intervention (there was no reason some children should have been allowed to continue to play while showing the kind of behaviors that were happening).” (Soccer)
- “More structure needed for coaches. There was not an emphasis on the positions or rules of the game.” (Soccer)
- “More coaching support is necessary. Coach had the parents play the kids half the time instead of practicing/drills, probably because he was overwhelmed.” (Soccer)
- “The admin did not support the coaches well. The organization seemed quite poor and volunteer coaches were not approached early enough to fill a full number of teams so there were only two teams.” (Baseball)





In a survey sent to all coaches, there was a question about what the Recreation Administration team could be doing to better support them, and this question provided some interesting insights into what types of support coaches are looking for. Coaches are most interested in information on how to effectively manage a team of kids and having the Youth Sports Coordinator attend practices to provide feedback on how to improve practices. Practice plans and coaching resources were also something that coaches believe would better support them.

To better support our coaches, we will host a Pre-Season Coaches Meeting at the beginning of each sports season. The goal of this meeting is to provide potential and current volunteer coaches with the skills and knowledge that will provide them with the confidence to coach kids. During this meeting, we will review: Mandatory Reporting, how to coach kids, and other safety precautions. Throughout the season, the Youth Sports Coordinator will attend practices, watching what is going well and where coaches can improve and provide feedback to coaches. Feedback will also be provided to coaches through weekly emails in which the Youth Sports Coordinator highlights teams and coaches who are having effective practices or systems that others can learn from. Resources will also be sent out with relevant articles, videos, and documents to help support managing players.

Aspen Youth Sports will offer optional coaching development training for all coaches. Research from the Aspen Institute has shown that 93% of coaches who receive trainings are “more confident in their ability to support youth, and their athletes report more joy, stronger relationships and higher likelihood to continue playing.”² These coach development training courses will be optional, and the majority will be offered through online modules. There will be some that are offered as in-person training (such as First Aid). These training courses will include safety trainings (such as concussion protocols and ACL injury prevention) as well as in youth mental and behavioral health, bullying, and group management. To encourage coaches to take these training courses and further their education, coaches will earn a day pass to the Aspen Rec Center for every 30-minutes they spend on an online training.

² Project Play, “State of Play 2025”

Additionally, there is a lack of training coaches that focus on the unique needs of girl athletes³, and it is important that Aspen Youth Sports is ensuring there is this training for both our male and female coaches. There will be training provided that will focus on coaching young girls that coaches can opt to take. These courses will either be free or be paid for by the Department of Recreation.

Recruiting Female Coaches

As Aspen Youth Sports adds more gender specific sports (see Increasing Participation in Youth Sports), there also needs to be special attention to recruiting more female coaches. There is a major discrepancy between the number of female coaches and male coaches; female coaches only make up about 25% of coaches nationally⁴ and in Aspen Youth Sports female coaches make up about 31.5% of all coaches. In our only current girls' only league (basketball), there were 3 male coaches and 4 female coaches. Soccer had the highest number of female coaches across all sports with 12 female coaches to 8 male coaches.

To address the need for recruiting more female coaches, we will draw on bringing high school players into our programming to support as assistant coaches (see more details under Create a Girls' Softball League) and focus on how to better support our female coaches and encourage more participation from them.

Restructuring Age Divisions

In recreation sports, our overarching goal is to introduce young people to new sports, provide them with a safe space to explore and learn through exercise, and encourage a healthy relationship with sports and exercise. Young people should try a variety of sports and have unrestricted access to sports that they wish to play. Our goal is to limit specialization in sport until the age of 13. Multi-sport participation can increase a child's ability to transfer motor and psychological skills to other sports, prevent over-use injuries, and develop better pattern recognition and decision-making⁵. To achieve this, Aspen Youth Sports will focus on how to encourage more multi-sport participation throughout our programming. Especially at the Kinder and 1st/2nd Grade Divisions, Aspen Youth Sports wants to create opportunities for players to participate in multiple sports in one season (i.e. in the fall playing both flag football and soccer) and will work with families to ensure practice times and games do not overlap.

It is important that when structuring these age divisions, young people can build on their skills as they age through our programs and find transferable skills between all sports they participate in. All our programs fall within "Stage 1: Discover, Learn & Play" and starting at the age of 10 include "Stage 2: Develop & Challenge". These stages serve as a guide for coaches and administration staff on child development

³ National Recreation and Park Association, "Youth Sports in Parks and Recreation"

⁴ National Recreation and Park Association, "Youth Sports in Parks and Recreation"

⁵ What does the science say about athletic development in children?

and competitive expectations in youth sports.⁶ The first stage primarily focuses on developing motor skills that transfer between sports, socializing with others on a team, and having fun. Once a child reaches the age of 10, it becomes more developmentally appropriate to increase the level of competition and practices while emphasizing more skills development. In addition, Stage 2 come with specific considerations for female athletes to prevent dropping out of sports.⁷

Below is the following structure of our age divisions based on youth sports research. These changes take into consideration the appropriate time spent on practices and competitions. Coaches will also be trained in these stages during the initial coaches' meetings and what they should be focusing on during their practices and games.

Age Division	Practices per Week	Number of Games	Weeks per season
Kinder	1	1 game	5 weeks
1st/2nd Grade	2	3 games	5 weeks
3rd/4th Grade	2	6 games	8 weeks
5th/6th Grade	2	6 games	8 weeks

The restructuring of age divisions will also change the pricing breakdown for these sports. Those prices will be updated in May 2026 when the entire Recreation Department updates prices for 2027. With the changes in prices, we also want to ensure that we provide equitable access to all our constituents. Nationally, there is a widening gap in participation between kids with household incomes below \$25,000 and kids with household incomes of over \$100,000. This gap has expanded from 13.6% in 2012 to 20.2% in 2025.⁸ In Fall 2026, Aspen Youth Sports will pilot a scholarship program for soccer. Funds for these scholarships will come from MLS Go Play Fund. Once we run this scholarship program through soccer, we will do a further analysis of how Aspen Youth Sports can provide more scholarship opportunities to our community members in other sports.

In addition, Aspen Youth Sports aims to provide safe progression from flag football to tackle football through partnering with Mountain West Football. Tackle football will not be offered until 5th/6th Grade through Mountain West Football, and instead, young people can play flag football through Aspen Youth Sports. At the end of the fall season for 3rd/4th Grade Division, families will be provided with information about concussion and other safety protocols that come with tackle football to decide. Flag football will still be offered through Aspen Youth Sports in the 5th/6th Grade Division.

To encourage multi-sport participation, flag football will only be offered as a fall sport. The spring of 2026 will be the last time flag football is offered as a spring sport. This decision was made to encourage

⁶ American Development Model: Growing Sport Excellence in America

⁷ National Recreation and Park Association, "Youth Sports in Parks and Recreation"

⁸ Project Play, "State of Play 2025"

youth to participate in multiple sports throughout the year and not fall into sports specialization before the age of 13.

Increase Participation in Youth Sports

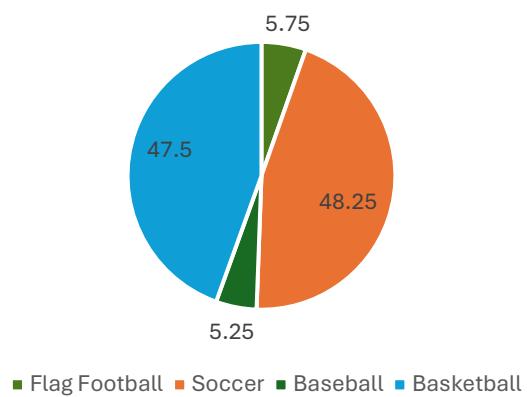
Girls' Participation in Aspen Youth Sports

Over the past 4 years, the most popular sports in Aspen Youth Sports for girls' have been basketball and soccer, both with an average of just under 50 participants. In 2025, our basketball program included girls from 3rd to 6th grade and had numerous positive reviews from families. Basketball has had an increase in participation between 2023 and 2025 of 22%, most likely due to the addition of the girls' only season to

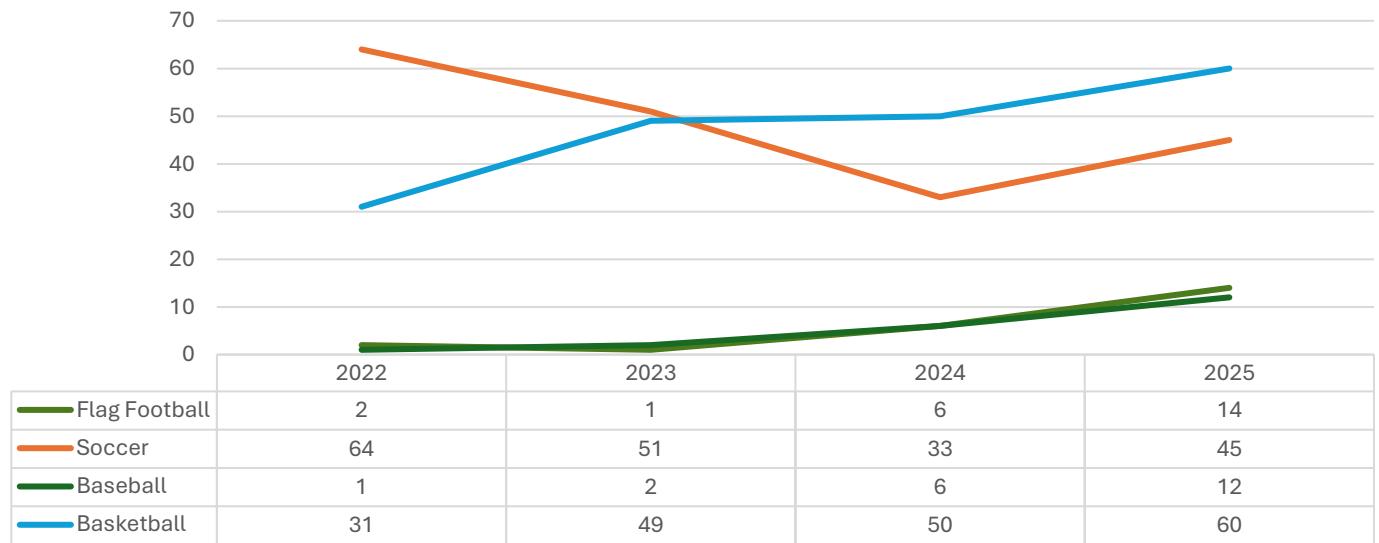
the Roaring Fork Youth Basketball League. Although soccer is still one of the most popular sports for girls in Aspen Youth Sports, there was a dramatic decrease in girls in the sport after 2022, and participation numbers have not recovered from that since. Flag Football and Baseball have both seen significant increases in numbers of girl participants over the past two years.

Across the Roaring Fork Valley, only 15% of girls reported they get 60 minutes of daily physical activity and girls (60%) play organized sports less frequently than boys (68%).⁹ Girls cited the reasons they did not participate in

Girls' Participation by Sport,
4 Year Averages



Girls Participation in Sports





sports at the same rate as boys was because of worries about body image and because they don't see themselves as athletes.

Across the country, there is a trend of discontinuing coed teams and replacing them with gender-specific teams. This space provides girls with more emotional support and provides space for young girls to feel more comfortable trying a new sport or continuing their participation in a sport. Aspen Youth Sports has opportunities to expand some sports into gender-specific teams starting in 3rd grade and above. Girls who are not yet in 3rd grade, but would like to

“play up” are allowed to do so after discussing this with the Youth Sports Coordinator.

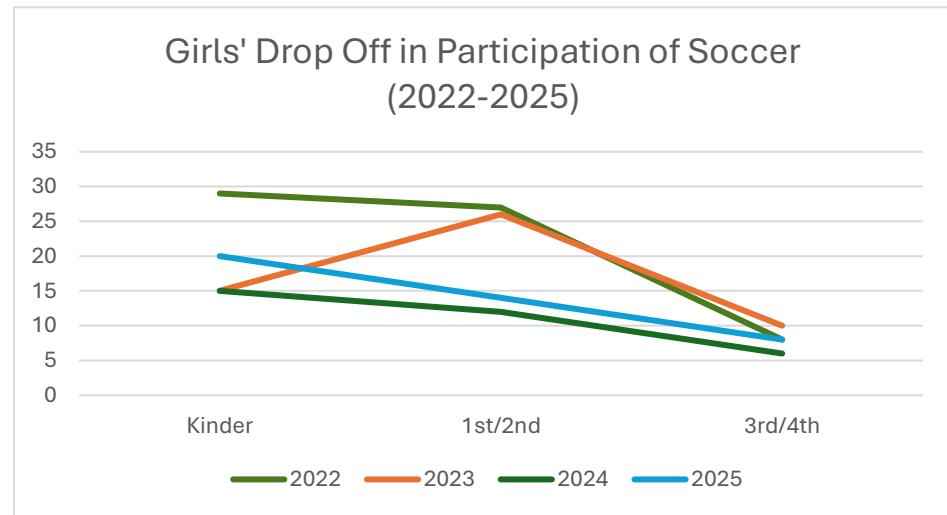
Adding girls’ only leagues will also come with the problem of finding female coaches for these teams. According to NRPA Youth Sports Report, “the most frequently noted barrier faced by girls participating in youth sports is the lack of women role models in leadership and coach positions (71%).”¹⁰

Families who participate in youth sports were surveyed to gain a better understanding of community needs for girls’ sports. They were asked what sports their daughters were already participating in, and the most popular sports for girls in the valley are lacrosse and skiing. Families were also asked what sports their daughters would be interested in participating in. There is a clear demand for volleyball followed by softball.

Recovering Girls’ Participation in Soccer

In 2022, Aspen Youth Sports saw the highest participation of girls in soccer with 64 total participants; since then, we have not seen as high of numbers for girls’ participation in soccer and there was a significant drop in 2024 when there were only 33 total participants.

We might be seeing this decrease due to a few reasons. First, soccer is not as popular and not trending now and girls are more interested in playing basketball. Second, similarly to the boys’ drop-off rates, when girls get into the 3rd/4th grade divisions they are



¹⁰ National Recreation and Park Association, “Youth Sports in Parks and Recreation”

starting to specialize more in their sport and join more competitive leagues. As we continue to offer not only 3rd/4th grade divisions but 5th/6th grade divisions in soccer as well, we may see these numbers come back up. Finally, it may be due to girls wanting to be on teams that are girls only like our basketball program (girls' only leagues). Although the numbers are not currently high enough to start an entire girls' in-house league, there are numbers to support a girls' soccer team for the 3rd/4th division. Finding competition for these teams will be the same challenge that we face with other in-house leagues (such as Flag Football) in that there is not substantial competition for the teams. Soccer will be one of the sports that will be shifted to gender specific leagues.

Females in Flag

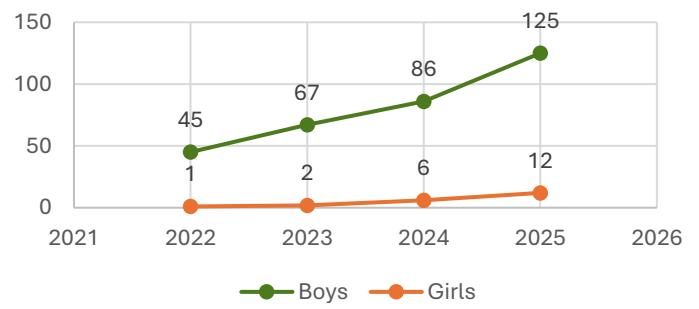
Flag Football is a growing sport nationwide and there is a lot of momentum behind this sport. Not only is flag football one the highest growing sports in the United States (a growth of 14% over the past 5 years), but girls' only leagues in flag football are growing as well. High School girls' flag football teams are being introduced in 28 states¹¹, and the sport is debuting in the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics.

To keep up with this national trend and interest from community members, the Spring and Fall of 2026, Aspen Youth Sports will open registration for a girls' only flag football team. This will be a travelling league in which teams compete against teams from Glenwood Springs. This will be the second sport that will be shifted to gender specific leagues.

Create a Girls' Softball League

In Aspen Youth Sports, there has been an increase in girls' participation on co-ed baseball teams; this summer reaching the highest numbers of participation with 12 girls (across all age divisions). To provide more girls' only sports, in 2026, Aspen Youth Sports will start a girls' only softball team. We have decided to include this sport as one of the girls' only we hope to offer because nationally, softball is the most popular girls' only sport offered with 65% of recreation agencies offering softball.¹²

Baseball Comparsion by Year;
 Boys vs. Girls



During the summer of 2026, Aspen Youth Sports will offer a girls' only softball team for 3rd/4th and 5th/6th grade divisions. In the summer of 2025, there were 8 girls who participated in Kinder and 1st/2nd grade divisions, and we will continue to encourage co-ed baseball at these age levels. The goal is to use Aspen Youth Sports to be a funnel of progression to the High School Softball team (like how other youth sports

¹¹ Project Play, "State of Play 2025"

¹² National Recreation and Park Association, "Youth Sports in Parks and Recreation"

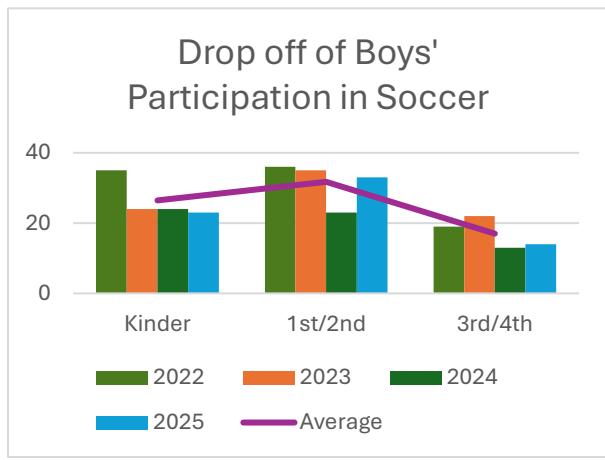
lead directly into middle school and high school sports). The challenge will be in gaining enough support and excitement around softball that results in registration. To generate interest in softball, there will be clinics directed and young girls to try new sports.

Girls' Summer Sports Series

To generate excitement and interest in the three sports in focus to starting a girls' only league, Aspen Youth Sports will offer clinic days on which young girls can come out and try one of these new sports throughout the Summer of 2026. In addition to starting girls' only leagues from existing sports Aspen Youth Sports offer, there are other sports that young girls in the community would be interested in participating in (such as volleyball).

The Girls' Summer Sports Series will be multi-day drop-in clinics; each month will focus on a different sport. This will provide young girls with new experiences in sports, but will also give Aspen Youth Sports valuable feedback about what types of sports girls and families are interested in. This program will be offered to girls from 3rd to 8th throughout the summer. Each sport will be offered as a drop-in lesson, and girls can attend some or all the sports offered.

Increasing Boys' Soccer Participation



Throughout the country, boys' participation in youth sports has declined in all sports. Boys are dropping out of sports at higher rates because of competitive leagues that cut players based on ability and a lack of recreation sports to fall back on.¹³ The drop in boys' participation in Aspen Youth Sports occurs between 2nd and 3rd grade in soccer.

However, once boys are in recreation at older age levels, they are more likely to continue their participation, and this was demonstrated through the male retention rates between 3rd/4th graders to 5th/6th graders in soccer. For the past four years, between 1st/2nd grade and 3rd/4th grade leagues there was about a 60% decrease in participation. In 2025 with the addition of the 5th/6th grade league the decrease in participation was only a 24% decrease. This trend is one that Aspen Youth Sports will continue monitoring, while also providing opportunities for young boys to continue playing recreational sports.



¹³ Project Play, "State of Play 2024"

Conclusion

Public Awareness Campaign

Aspen Youth Sports wants to ensure that constituents know that their feedback after programming is being taken into consideration and is used to make a better experience for their young players; therefore, we will develop public awareness campaigns to include all the topics discussed. Specific campaigns will address the efforts to close the gender gap in sports and in coaching, increase the number of umpires and referees who work for Aspen Youth Sports, and advertise benefits of coaching with Aspen Youth Sports.

Future Work

The issues addressed through this report are specific to 2025 and are based on current research and feedback from patrons. Aspen Youth Sports will continue End of Season surveys as the main way we understand what our families and community members are looking for from youth sports programming. During family surveys, families will be asked specific questions about their sons and daughters and their experiences in sports. Coaches' surveys will continue to be conducted to understand what is working and not working in terms of supporting our volunteer coaches. Finally, players will also be surveyed about how they think they grew over the season, their impressions of their coaches, and what sports they want to play more of.

During 2026, Aspen Youth Sports will also conduct an equity assessment to identify gaps in our programming (such as financial or transportation obstacles). There may be more issues that are in blind spots because of a lack of participation from certain groups.

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