



# Let Them Play: Why Trans Youth Need Sports Too

By Jessica Jaymes Purdy | 9 October 2026



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For many young people, sports are about much more than competition and winning. They are places where they make friends, develop confidence, learn to work as part of a team, and discover what their bodies can do. Athletics also provide structure and routine, opportunities for physical activity, and a sense of connection to something larger than oneself. For many students, the team becomes an important part of their school community and their identity.

These benefits matter for transgender and gender-diverse youth just as they do for everyone else. Yet transgender young people

increasingly face barriers to participating in school athletics in ways that align with their gender identity. These restrictions are often discussed in terms of competitive fairness or physical safety, but those conversations frequently leave out another important question.

*What does exclusion mean for the young people who are being excluded?*

If we want to understand the impact of policies and practices surrounding transgender participation in athletics, we have to look beyond the question of who wins a race or who is on the team roster. We also have to consider what sports contribute to a young person's development, what transgender youth experience when they are welcomed into those spaces, and what can be lost when they are told that their participation is conditional on being treated differently from their peers or are excluded all together.

## Sports are part of healthy development

Youth athletics are sometimes discussed primarily as a matter of competition, but organized sports serve a much broader developmental purpose. Regular physical activity supports cardiovascular health, strength, coordination, and healthy physical development. Participation in sports also creates opportunities for young people to develop persistence, communication, cooperation, goal-setting, and the ability to navigate both success and disappointment. These experiences can contribute to emotional well-being as well, giving young people opportunities to build confidence, develop supportive relationships, experience a sense of belonging, and manage stress. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention identifies physical activity as providing physical, mental, and social benefits for young people, including supporting mental health and social connection.



Research on youth sports participation supports this broader understanding. A 2026 systematic review of 189 studies<sup>1</sup> examining sport participation among children and adolescents found consistent associations between participation and better mental-health outcomes, including higher self-esteem and life satisfaction and fewer symptoms of depression and anxiety. The review also identified social benefits such as greater belonging, prosocial behavior, and interpersonal skills, with team sports showing particularly consistent benefits. The researchers noted that the quality and design of sports programs matter, but the overall evidence supports organized sport as an important setting for healthy youth development.

This does not mean that sports are a treatment for mental illness or that participation guarantees positive outcomes. Young people can have difficult experiences in sports, and poorly structured or hostile athletic environments can create their own harms. The point is simpler: participation in sports can contribute meaningfully to a young person's physical, psychological, and social development. Transgender youth should have access to those opportunities on the same basis as other young people.

## **Transgender youth already encounter barriers to participation**

The reality is that transgender and gender-diverse young people already participate in sports at lower rates than many of their peers. Research from The Trevor Project<sup>2</sup> has identified concerns about harassment, discrimination, gendered facilities, and policies that prevent transgender and nonbinary youth from participating on teams consistent with their gender identity. These barriers can make athletic participation feel inaccessible even before a young person ever steps onto the field or court.

A 2024 peer-reviewed study<sup>3</sup> examining the experiences of transgender high school girls illustrates why those barriers matter. Among 294 transgender girls included in the study, those who participated in sports described benefits including physical health, mental health, enjoyment, social connection, and gender affirmation. Among those who did not participate, researchers identified barriers including gendered teams and spaces, bullying and harassment, social discomfort, worsened gender dysphoria, and lack of access or resources.

The results of this study are important because they challenge a common assumption about transgender youth and athletics. When a transgender student is not participating in sports, it is easy to conclude that they simply are not interested in athletics. Research suggests that the reality can be considerably more complicated. Some young people want to participate but encounter social, institutional, or practical barriers that make participation difficult or unsafe.

In that context, exclusionary policies reinforce barriers that transgender youth are already experiencing. A student who is uncertain about joining a team may reasonably wonder whether

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<sup>1</sup> Wade, L., Eime, R., Pankowiak, A. et al. The impact of sports participation on psychological health and social outcomes in children and adolescents: a systematic review and update to the "Mental Health through Sport" conceptual model. *Syst Rev* 15, 121 (2026). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s13643-026-03104-1>

<sup>2</sup> The Trevor Project & Glisten. School Experiences and Outcomes Among Transgender, Nonbinary, and Gender-Expansive Young People. (2026). <https://doi.org/10.70226/UUCU7651>

<sup>3</sup> DeChants, J. P., Green, A. E., Price, M. N., & Davis, C. K. "I Get Treated Poorly in Regular School—Why Add To It?": Transgender Girls' Experiences Choosing to Play or Not Play Sports. *Transgender Health*, 9(1), 61–67 (2024). <https://doi.org/10.1089/trgh.2022.0066>



they will be accepted by their teammates, whether they will be able to use the appropriate facilities, whether their coach will support them, and whether adults in their community will launch a campaign to force the athletic program to exclude them, outing them to an entire community and opening them to harassment and bullying from a far wider and aggressive portion of the community they call home.

## Belonging matters during adolescence

Adolescence is a period in which young people are developing a stronger sense of identity, independence, and connection to their peers. Belonging is never a superficial concern, but especially during this stage of life, it is one of great importance to the sense of self and safety. Young people are learning where they fit, who they can trust, what they are capable of, and how they want to be understood by the people around them.

For transgender youth, that developmental process frequently involves an additional layer of scrutiny. Their identities may be questioned or ridiculed by peers, family members, educators, institutions, and the broader public. Ordinary experiences that many other young people take for granted such as using a locker room, choosing a uniform, being addressed by the correct name, or participating in an activity with peers of the same gender can become sources of anxiety and stress.

That is why inclusion in sports carries significance well beyond the activity itself for trans youth. Being recognized by a coach, developing friendships with teammates, participating in team traditions, traveling to competitions, and celebrating successes together are all ordinary experiences of belonging. For a transgender student, being able to participate without having their gender identity turned into a debate or public spectacle can provide an opportunity to experience school life in a way that is not defined by exclusion.

Research is beginning to document these relationships more specifically. A 2025 study<sup>4</sup> of more than 10,000 transgender and gender-diverse adolescents found that participation on sports teams was associated with a lower prevalence of elevated depressive and anxiety symptoms. The researchers also found that bias-based bullying was associated with greater mental health risks.

Research published in 2026<sup>5</sup> provides additional evidence: in a cohort of 1,087 transgender and gender-diverse adolescents receiving gender-affirming hormone assessments, participation in physical activity or sports was associated with fewer depressive, anxiety, stress, and other internalizing problems and with higher scores on measures of positive psychological characteristics. This growing body of evidence clearly shows that participation in physical activity

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<sup>4</sup> Kaja, S. M., Gower, A. L., Parchem, B., Adler, S. J., McGuire, J. K., Rider, G. N., & Eisenberg, M. E. Sports Team Participation, Bias-Based Bullying, and Mental Health Among Transgender and Gender Diverse Adolescents. *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport*, 96(3), 590–598 (2025). <https://doi.org/10.1080/02701367.2025.2465702>

<sup>5</sup> Williams, C. R., Feld, A., McGregor, K., & Boskey, E. R. Let Them Play: Physical Activities and Sports Are Associated With Better Psychosocial Functioning for Transgender and Gender-Diverse Youth. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 78(5), 715–721 (2026). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2025.12.266>



and sports can be an important part of the lives of transgender and gender-diverse young people.

## **Exclusion has consequences**

When we talk about excluding transgender youth from athletics, it is easy for many adults to focus exclusively on the intended purpose of the restriction. A policy may be described as an effort to preserve competitive fairness or protect other athletes. Those concerns can be legitimate subjects for discussion, but even when they aren't being weaponized, they are not the only interests at stake.

The young person being excluded is who will most acutely experience the impact of that policy.

For a transgender student, being told that they cannot participate on a team consistent with their gender can communicate that their identity is shameful, deviant, or illegitimate. They may then feel as if they are being treated as second-class. They may be welcome in the classroom, at lunch, in student clubs, and among their friends, but treated differently when they want to participate in athletics.

Research on transgender and gender-diverse students has documented the broader effects of discriminatory school environments. The Trevor Project's 2025 national survey<sup>6</sup> found that 56% of transgender, nonbinary, and gender-expansive students reported that their school had at least one discriminatory policy or practice, while nearly one-third reported being unable to play on a sports team aligned with their gender. Students who experienced discriminatory policies or negative school events also reported missing more school because of concerns about their safety.

These findings demonstrate why exclusion should not be treated as an inconsequential administrative decision. For young people who are already navigating stigma or discrimination, removing another opportunity for participation and belonging can add to an existing burden.

There is also a broader social consequence. Young people pay attention to how the adults around them talk about people like them. When transgender participation becomes the subject of repeated public debate, transgender youth can internalize the harmful rhetoric and a message that they are unwelcome, do not belong, and are undeserving even when a particular policy does not directly affect them.

## **We can care about fairness without making trans kids the problem**

Concerns about fairness in athletics should not be dismissed out of hand. Sports involve competition, and physical differences can affect athletic performance. Different sports also place different demands on athletes, and questions about eligibility can become more complicated as the level of competition increases.

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<sup>6</sup> Nath, R., Matthews, D.D., Hobaica, S., DeChants, J.P., Eden, T.M., Taylor, A.B., & Suffredini, K. (2026). 2025 U.S. National Survey on the Mental Health of LGBTQ+ Young People. West Hollywood, California: The Trevor Project. <https://doi.org/10.70226/EKGT3197>



Athletic performance is shaped by far more than any single physical characteristic. Age, height, weight, strength, speed, skill, training, physical development, experience, and genetics all influence how an athlete performs. So do factors that are not always visible when we compare athletes on the field: family income, access to quality coaching, specialized equipment, private lessons, summer camps, travel teams, and well-resourced training facilities. A young person whose family can afford years of additional instruction and high-quality equipment may have opportunities to develop skills that another young person with equal potential never receives. We generally recognize these disparities as part of the broader landscape of youth sports, even as we look for ways to make participation more accessible.

Medication offers another example of why the relationship between athletic performance and fairness is not always simple. Research<sup>7</sup> suggests that some ADHD medications can improve certain measures of performance, although the evidence varies and does not establish a uniform effect across sports or individuals. Some competitive sports organizations regulate stimulant medications, with provisions that can allow athletes to compete when they have a legitimate medical need and meet the applicable requirements. The point this example illustrates is that a possible performance effect does not, by itself, settle the question of whether someone should be allowed to participate. Fairness, health, individual circumstances, and the purpose of the competition all matter.

These considerations are especially important in youth athletics. For the overwhelming majority of children and teenagers, the purpose of joining a team is not to produce an elite athlete. It is to participate in an activity they enjoy, spend time with friends, stay active, learn new skills, navigate success and disappointment, and become part of their school or community. Youth sports also provide opportunities for physical development, confidence, social connection, and belonging. Those benefits matter even when a young person is not the fastest runner, strongest player, or most decorated athlete on the team.

Just as acknowledging the realities of physical differences in young cisgender athletes does not create barriers to participation based on size, muscle mass, or ability within the existing structures for competition, nor should it for transgender athletes who may have different developmental histories or be at different stages in their transition. Policies should not default to the exclusion of transgender youth based solely on their identity, but rather, should address the nuances and complexities of participation based on the sport, the individual, and the context of participation.

That context matters when we consider how to approach transgender participation. The question doesn't have to be, "should we allow trans youth to participate?" It can instead be, "How do we create athletic environments that are safe, fair, and welcoming to all of the young people who want to participate?"

Those are very different starting points. And we can absolutely create safe and fair athletic policies that allow trans youth to play.

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<sup>7</sup> Berezhanskaya, J., Cade, W., Best, T. M., Paultre, K., & Kienstra, C. ADHD Prescription Medications and Their Effect on Athletic Performance: A Systematic Review and Meta-analysis. *Sports Medicine - Open*, 8, 5 (2022).  
<https://doi.org/10.1186/s40798-021-00374-y>



## **Inclusion does not mean ignoring safety**

Supporting transgender participation does not require us to pretend that safety and competitive fairness are irrelevant. Coaches have responsibilities to every athlete. Schools have responsibilities to every student. Athletic programs need appropriate rules, supervision, equipment, training, and procedures for addressing injuries and misconduct.

The question is how those responsibilities are implemented.

Safety should be based on actual safety considerations rather than assumptions about an entire category of students. Competitive rules should be based on evidence and the characteristics of the particular sport rather than the presumption that every transgender athlete creates disproportionate risk.

This is not unique to transgender participation. Youth sports already use a variety of approaches to address differences among athletes, including age classifications, weight classifications, skill divisions, equipment requirements, rules governing physical contact, and sport-specific eligibility requirements.

## **What inclusion can look like**

Supporting transgender youth in athletics does not require every parent, coach, teammate, or school administrator to become an expert on gender identity. It begins with ordinary practices of respect.

Coaches can learn and use students' names and pronouns, establish clear expectations for respectful behavior, and respond consistently to bullying and harassment. Schools can establish practical procedures for uniforms, facilities, records, communication, and team participation. Parents can recognize that their child's teammate is a young person deserving of dignity, regardless of how complicated the surrounding public debate may feel. Teammates can treat a transgender student as what they are in that setting: a teammate.

These actions are not extraordinary accommodations. They are the basics for creating an environment in which young people can concentrate on the activity rather than constantly having to defend their right to be there.

For many transgender students, that may be one of the most meaningful forms of support a school can provide. It allows them to experience the ordinary parts of adolescence that are so easy to take for granted when they are available to us: being on a team, forming friendships with teammates, working toward a shared goal, being recognized for effort and ability, and knowing that there is a place for them after the final bell rings.

## **Let them play**

There is a temptation for those who are not transgender or parents of transgender youth to think about transgender participation in athletics primarily as a debate about policy. But behind every anti-trans policy is a young person who must live through the fallout.



It might be a child who has just discovered a love of soccer. It might be a teenager who has spent years training for track. It might be a student who is not particularly competitive but loves being part of the team. It might be someone who has finally found a group of friends who make them feel comfortable at school.

For that young person, participation is not an abstract question about culture or politics. It is their life.

The evidence tells us that sports can provide meaningful physical, psychological, and social benefits for young people. Research involving transgender and gender-diverse youth suggests that participation can be associated with better mental-health outcomes and that discrimination and exclusion can create additional barriers and harms.

Every child deserves the opportunity to discover what they can do when someone gives them the chance to play.