

**It's All for the Kids: Gender, Families, and Youth Sports**

Michael A. Messner

Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009. References, illustrations. xix, 260 pp. \$21.95 paper. ISBN: 9780520257108

This detail-rich exploration into the organization and gendered trends of youth-sport coaching in Southern California provides a timely discussion of issues critical to many communities. *It's All for the Kids* is not an exposé of problem parents or the benefits of sport participation. However, if you are a parent, coach, or advocate of youth sports, this book provides insights into the involvement patterns of coaches for the American Youth Soccer Organization (AYSO) and Little League Baseball/Softball (LLB/S). As a parent involved in South Pasadena youth sports, author Michael A. Messner combines personal observations with participant interviews, then adds elements of sociological and gender theory to provide an insider's perspective on how parents and coaches view their own and others' behavior.

A scholar of sociology and gender studies, Messner begins his preface by questioning his own observations about his family's involvement in AYSO and Little League Baseball. He has spent much of his professional career writing about sport and gender issues, and he was observant of the occurrences going on around him. His many books include *Taking the Field: Women, Men, and Sports* (2002) and *Out of Play: Critical Essays on Gender and Sport* (2007), and most of his publications have a common thread of gender identity and the influence of sport in that construction.

Chapter 1 of *It's All for the Kids* begins

with a presentation of longitudinal data about the percentage of male and female volunteer coaches in South Pasadena. It shows, over a ten-year span, a severe underrepresentation of female coaches in both leagues. Intending to explore the creation of this sex segregation and to discover what might change it, Messner sketches the general trends of youth sports in the United States. He then follows with an explanation of the organization of both AYSO and LLB/S. Through vivid imagery, Messner gives specific examples of the gendered divisions of labor and how spaces are gendered to illustrate differences in male and female coaching styles.

Chapters 3 and 4 are essentially mirror images examining first female, then male coaches. Both chapters explore the "myth of choice" for parents involved in coaching. I use "myth" because parents are situated in a firmly established pattern of social expectation and behavior which guides them into certain positions; their involvement, thus, is not really a true choice. For each gender, Messner creates different groupings of coaching behaviors and expectations. He separates women by the length of their tenure as coaches and the ages of the children they coached, while the men are identified by their individual coaching behaviors in their interactions with the kids. This seems unbalanced because it almost implies that the women do not adjust their coaching behavior to suit the ages of the children they coach. Nonetheless, it aligns with the assumption that women coaches do not need "sport knowledge" but only "kid knowledge," which all mothers are assumed to have in spades. Chapter 4 explores the male perspective on coaching and how male

coaches are constrained by expectations of behavior. Their fear of scrutiny and their worries that their behaviors might be seen as inappropriate is an interesting contrast to the descriptions in chapter 3 about the scrutiny female coaches face. While it is clear that all coaches are being watched, male and female coaches experience this critique in very different ways and have vastly different responses to these controlling elements.

Chapter 5 explores the conjecture about how coaches treat their athletes and why they do so. Coaches seem to struggle with how to justify their treatment of young athletes. Some tend toward what Messner calls “hard essentialism,” others toward “soft essentialism.” The hard essentialism coaches perceived boys and girls to have naturally occurring categorical differences. These are basically unchanging, and coaches believe their behavior must align with these gender differences. Using research by sociologist Emily Kane as a foundation, Messner explores soft essentialism, where gender-specific traits are not always hard wired and unchanging. Based on environmental influences and on expectations (including those of coaches and parents), behaviors can be shaped to contradict the typical gender roles. Strict gender conformity to what is commonly considered essential to being a girl or a boy is not required, hence the term “soft.”

The final chapter explores more of the demographics, family specifics, and community environment of South Pasadena. As stated throughout, Messner feels the youth-sport culture is shaped more by social expectations and organizational design than by individual choices. He believes, therefore, the relatively afflu-

ent, profession-oriented community has direct links to the youth-sport movement in this area. While touting the importance of diversity, South Pasadena youth-sport coaches nevertheless still use language of “us” versus “them” and still recognize those who are on the outside. Messner highlights these contradictions between coaches’ behavior and their words, but he also shows how the individuals operating within this system often fail to realize that their behaviors do not match their ideology.

Throughout the text, interviews provide detailed accounts and examples of the coaches’ experiences and observations. Many youth coaches who read this book may well feel as if these vignettes were taken from their own experiences. However, Messner does not really advance beyond a description of current practices into ways the culture may be changed. Although he has some suggestions for increasing the number of female coaches and improving their experiences, he does not make a comprehensive case. I suspect that, as with all observations localized in a single area, it will be difficult to translate the findings here to other geographic locations. South Pasadena is a unique place with specific income levels, racial diversity, and family units. Because other communities contain different variables, the analysis would likely change.

Messner keeps up his usual great work in this book. His ability to articulate the often oppositional rhetoric of what we call for and what we do allows him to be not just objective but also insightful, a trick difficult to pull off as an insider. *It’s All for the Kids* fills a void in the literature by integrating theory and first-person com-

mentary to explore the gendered creation of youth-sports culture. Messner's is a necessary and critical perspective, one that needs further exploration.

—Emily Dane, *St. John Fisher College, Rochester, NY*

**From Children to Red Hatters:  
Diverse Images and Issues of Play**

*David Kushner, ed.*

Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2009. Illustrations, notes, charts, index. xii, 197 pp. \$32.00 paper. ISBN: 9780761842910

*From Children to Red Hatters: Diverse Images and Issues of Play*, edited by David Kushner, shows that play scholars are as inventive and wide ranging in their ideas as are children and adults at play. What topic other than play could inspire such disparate areas of study as the interactions between a monkey named E.T. and some young sheep, the origins of play among atomic particles, or the dress-up play of elderly women? The diversity in this book makes a fascinating read but poses a challenge to a reviewer. The book defies synthesis. Like play itself, variability is the defining feature of this volume.

Some chapters focus on the centuries-old, perhaps unattainable, goal of defining play. Gwen Gordon, in chapter 1, conceptualizes play as a crossing of boundaries from an orderly and too-restrictive cosmos to one that is free and spontaneous. Her work is rich with metaphors: “trickster chaos stirs things up, disturbing the status quo and revitalizing play” (p. 12).

Her ideas are dense and challenging. Whether the chapter illuminates or muddles our understanding of play is beside the point; this work presents fascinating ideas. In chapter 2, Thomas S. Henricks provides a more organized, readable accounting of play. He categorizes play theories according to their orientation toward time: some treat play as preparation for the future, others as a revisiting of the past. He devotes most attention to theories of play that are grounded in the present. Such perspectives hold that play is stepping sideways, rather than forward or back—a distraction from the here and now. A powerful idea in the chapter is that views of play are shaped by a particular theorist's beliefs, research interests, and even culture.

Among the chapters focusing on defining play, Michael M. Patte's nicely constructed ethnography, presented in chapter 7, is unique in considering the definitions of players themselves—fifth-grade children. His young subjects' perspectives are refreshingly clear in contrast to the complexity of previous chapters. To these young philosophers, play is, fundamentally, fun. Work is what is not fun. It is no surprise that these students proclaim recess their favorite school activity.

Other chapters focus on play within social contexts. Peggy O'Neill-Wagner's peculiar and engaging chapter 3 chronicles the play of a rhesus monkey, E.T., growing up in a pasture with sheep. E.T. was observed, “climbing, bouncing, rolling and even somersaulting down [the sheep's] woolly coats” (p. 45). Such striking observations suggest that play is not only wired into the genetic makeup of all species, but, at its evolutionary root, it is