

## About Balance is Better

Quality sport experiences have the power to improve young people's wellbeing in many ways. We want all young people to benefit from the added value a positive sport experience can provide to their life. The Balance is Better Philosophy is Sport New Zealand's approach to leading the changes needed to enable the New Zealand sport system to provide that positive experience for all our tamariki and rangatahi.

### What?

Balance is Better is an evidence-based philosophy to support quality sport experiences for all young people, regardless of ability, needs and motivations. It is about young people staying involved in sport for life and realising their potential at the right time.

### Who?

The Balance is Better philosophy has been developed by the NZ sport system (e.g. sport organisations, leaders and administrators, schools, clubs, coaches, parents and volunteers) to support the culture change needed to provide quality sport opportunities for tamariki (5-11) and rangatahi (12-18). Sport NZ's current focus is on rangatahi, given the decline we are seeing in teenage participation.

### Why?

The key rationale for the Balance is Better philosophy includes:

- Declining youth and adults sport participation in Aotearoa New Zealand (1);
- Research on young people, including inactive young people, consistently shows that they would like to be more physically active (this includes sport) (2), yet;
- Research on and insights from young people strongly indicating that the sport system is not doing a good job at catering for their needs (2), and;
- A significant body of research internationally and within Aotearoa over the past 20 years clearly indicating that sport experiences and systems for young people are not enabling lifelong participation or athletes to reach their potential at that right time (3, 4, 5).

## The Balance is Better principles

### Safe, fair and inclusive sport



All New Zealanders have the right to participate in sport in an inclusive, fair and safe environment.

### Encourage variety



All young people should be supported to participate in a range of activities and play multiple sports.

### Skill development opportunities for all



All young people should be offered participation and skill development opportunities.

### Collective attitudinal change



Sport leaders, coaches, administrators, parents, and caregivers involved in youth sport must collectively lead attitudinal change.

### Working together



Aotearoa's sport sector must work collaboratively to encourage the widest possible change for the wellbeing and sport participation of young New Zealanders.

### Quality experiences, regardless of ability or motivation



All young people should receive a quality sport experience, irrespective of the level at which they are involved.

### Bold and courageous leadership



Bold and courageous leadership at national, regional and local levels is required to design and deliver quality youth sport participation and development opportunities.

### Talent ID occurs later



Talent Identification should occur later in young people's development; reviewing the role and nature of national and regional representative selections and tournaments is an important step in ensuring elite sport attitudes and practices are introduced at developmentally appropriate times.

### Balance getting better with doing too much



Adults need to proactively monitor and manage the workload (intensity and volume) of motivated young people to mitigate the risks of overtraining and overloading.

## Key evidence and research underpinning Balance is Better

1.

### Declining youth and adults sport participation in Aotearoa New Zealand

- a. Active NZ, Sport New Zealand's nationwide survey, has demonstrated decline in youth sport participation since 2017.
- b. 16-year Adult Participation Trends Report 1998-2014 (Trends Report) showed that weekly adult participation in sport dropped 7.7% (from 73.3 percent to 65.6 percent). This was most pronounced in younger adult's participation (18-24 year olds fell 13.9%, from 79.4% to 65.5%; and 25-34 year olds fell 10.4%, from 75.3% to 64.9%).
- c. National census data collected by School Sport NZ indicated that there has been a decline in rates of students with a meaningful involvement with a school sport programme from 56% to 51%.

2.

### Research on and insights from young people strongly indicating that the sport system is not doing a good job at catering for their needs

- a. Analysis of 2017 and 2018 Active NZ Survey data sets showed that 66% of young people who do not meet recommended physical activity guideline levels and 61% of young people who do meet recommended physical activity guideline levels, want to do more physical activity (including sport).
- b. Voice of the participant data shows indicates young people aged 13 to 18 years old would like to see improved player development offerings at clubs.
- c. Voice of the rangatahi data shows general dissatisfaction by young people with all aspects of school sport experience, especially among girls.
- d. Secondary school age review (2020), outlined the following significant issues that impact the quality of young people's experiences:
  - i. Self-confidence, self-esteem and body image
  - ii. Overemphasis on competition and winning
  - iii. Early specialisation
  - iv. Poor player management – overuse injuries, pressure to succeed, selection/ deselection
  - v. Lack of ability/skills/physical competence
  - vi. Peer pressure
  - vii. Parental pressure and influence
  - viii. Competing demands on time and interest – study, friends, family, sport, work
  - ix. Club vs school competing demands
  - x. Sport structures and offerings not responding to youth expectations/lifestyle

3.

### Reviews conducted into the New Zealand sport system, outlining the need for change

- a. Secondary school age review (2020), outlined key issues and constraints in the sport and education system that inhibit participation in sport being sustained, or non-participants re-entering into sport.
- b. Sport New Zealand's Talent plan (2015), outline core issues and myths undermining good talent id and development practice in New Zealand. In order to rectify this, the plan proposed that Sport NZ, Sport NZ's partners, coaches, teachers and parents need to align around the core beliefs of athlete's needs come first, working together for collective impact, effective pathways, continuous learning, quality coaching.

4.

### New Zealand research perspectives from the past 20 years on sport participant and athlete development experiences and systems

- a. A study (Hodge et al., 2012) on NZ international athletes found most played a range of different sports as a teenager with some not taking up the sport they excel in until their teenage years.
- b. Walters et al. (2011) outlined how adult behaviors affect children's enjoyment of sport – with a focus on winning and competition – appearing to serve the needs of adults more than the needs of children.
- c. Some young people have become overrepresented in reports of acute and chronic injury due to excessive training and competition loads in sport.
  - i. McGowan, Whatman & Walters (2020), found that children participating in sport in excess of currently recommended sport participation volumes had increased odds of reporting a history of gradual onset injury.
  - ii. ACC statistics (2019) show a 60% surge since 2008 in sports-related injuries to children aged 10 to 14 – double the increase of any other age group.
- d. There is growing evidence that coaches and young people are not managing sport injuries by with the young person's long-term wellbeing at the forefront of decision-making.
  - i. Whatman, Walters, & Schluter (2018) study found 87% of New Zealand secondary school athletes surveyed, reported hiding an injury to continue playing. Approximately 50% of players and coaches has witnessed other players put under pressure to play when injured.

# 5.

## **International research perspectives from the past 20 years on sport participant and athlete development experiences and systems**

- a. Crane & Temple (2015) and Balish et al. (2014) conducted systematic evidence reviews and identified the following key factors were strongly evidenced as being correlated with youth sport attrition (drop-out)
  - i. Lack of enjoyment
  - ii. Perceptions of competence
  - iii. Social pressures
  - iv. Competing priorities
  - v. Physical factors (e.g., injury, maturation.)
- b. Several systemic reviews have been conducted on early specialisation and early diversification/sampling (Carder et al., 2020; DiSanti & Erickson, 2019; Baily et al, 2010; Hecimovich, 2004) and found that early specialisation increased physiological (injury) and psycho-social burnout, drop-out) risk factors. Early diversification/sampling also supported long term talent and participant development outcomes.
- c. A summary of evidenced-based policy guidance on participant development, athlete development and talent development programmes (Till & Baker, 2020; Côté & Hancock, 2016; LaPrade et al., 2016; Côté et al, 2009; Vaeyens, 2008)), including the IOC's consensus statement on youth athletic development (Bergeron et al., 2015), positions the following:
  - i. Talent is a complex and largely misunderstood phenomenon lacking robust research evidence, and given concerns that it is potentially unhealthy, talent identification and selection at younger ages is not recommended.
  - ii. Diversification and variability of athletic exposure between and within sports should be encouraged and promoted.
  - iii. Competition formats and settings should be age and skill appropriate, while allowing for sufficient rest and recovery time between multiple same-day contests.
  - iv. Quality coaches should support participant and athlete development by providing a challenging and enjoyable sporting climate that focuses on each athlete's personal assets and mastery orientation.
  - v. Coaching practice should evidence-informed and be aligned with the context, age, stage and motivation of the young person.