

SPORT?

Sì, grazie!

II Edition

The importance of
sport and physical
activity for the
healthy growth
of children and teenagers



VEROVOLLEY
DRIVEN BY VALUES



Sport? Sì, grazie!

Dear parents,

This booklet was made with passion to provide you the opportunity to reflect on the importance of sport and physical activity for your sons and daughters. Born from the collaboration of Consorzio Vero Volley, the Psychology Department of Turin University and the Management Engineering Department of Politecnico di Milano, “Sport? Sì, grazie!” is based on the most recent scientific researches on sport and physical activities conceived as an ideal space of growth, support and life skills development for young children and teenagers. In this volume you will find useful information to understand, sustain and motivate your sons in choosing the sport most apt for them and in carrying out this activity through the years, in order to avoid the phenomenon of “drop-out” (or quitting), often taking place with the beginning of secondary school. Parents of all culture and ethnicity are united in the love for their children. We hope that what we suggest and share with you in these pages can become a tangible tool helping all mothers and fathers active in the field.

Alessandra Marzari
Head of Vero Volley

Sport

A definition and some numbers

Speaking about sport, we must provide a precise definition of the word. Sport can be defined as *“any type of physical activity that through active participation (organized or not) has the goal of improving physical and psychological conditions, the development of social relations or the achievement of results at competitions of every type and level”*.

These are some sport-related data referred to Italy in 2019: 4.703.000 registered athletes recognized by Coni (i.e. Italian Olympic Games Committee), a million more than in 2003, 200.000 more than in 2014; 936.018 sport professionals; 63.517 sport clubs, organized in 45 national sport federations.

FEDERAL SPORT IN ITALY

4.703.000 registered athletes

936.018 sport professionals

63.517 sport clubs

45 national federations

327.031 Fipav registered athletes

Official (cardholders) athletes grew by 31,8 % in the decade 2003 - 2013. Over a decade sport clubs grew by 3,6%, and sport professionals by 1.6%.

The FIGC (Federazione Italiana Giuoco Calcio - Italian Soccer Committee) is the first for number of registered athletes (1.056.824), the third is Federazione Italiana Pallavolo (FIPAV - Italian Volleyball Committee) with 327.031 registered members.

SPORT SOCIETIES

7.067.672 registered athletes

480.000 sport professionals

15 sport-promotion bodies



90% of cardholders athletes are under 30, the vast majority are women. Over 50% are under 15 years old. The percentage of registered athletes on the Italian population is 9,6%. Lombardy is the region with the highest number of athletes and sport clubs.

In 2017 over 20 millions people - 34,4% on the population of individuals aged 3 or more - declared to play one or more sport regularly (24,4%) or occasionally (9,8%). Among adult men, 29,5% plays sport regularly, 11,7% occasionally. For women, percentages are lower, respectively 19,6% and 8,1%. Regular sport practice recently increased for both genres and for all ages: from 15,9% in 1995 to 22,4% in 2010 and 24,5% in 2015.

Sport is played mostly by teenagers aged 11-14 anni (70,3%, of the total - 61% continuously and 9,3% occasionally), a trend that tends to decrease with age.

Nowadays sport represents an essential social value. It is a phenomenon whose impact in daily life should not be underestimated, as the **European Union** has recently pointed out.



Sport and the Development age

The first connection with sport takes place in what is known as the “development age” (3 -18 years). At this life stage, each individual reaches significant goals, learns and changes physically and cognitively. A child has an active role in his environment: from his early days he is able to re-elaborate the information he acquires from the external reality.

In the last twenty years scientific researches have shown how the process of learning and acquiring new skills can also take place in adult life. Development and growth are lifelong processes, characterized by the individual active and intentional role in the construction of his/her interactions with the world.

This booklet aims to focus attention on the benefits of sport and physical activity in the **development age**. This does not imply we are overlooking the importance of these benefits in all life stages.

Rather, our goal is to show how some stages in life are particularly relevant for the acquisition of new knowledge, since in these stages several changes related to actual experience are faster and more likely to occur.

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The positive outcomes of sport activities

Physical activity is key for individual health, particularly in the development age between childhood and adolescence (3-18 years). In this timespan, physical activity is essential for the physical, psychological and social well-being of the growing individual.

From a social point of view, sport can be defined as **“a relational model and a symbolic field of action”** in which boys and girls have the opportunity to experiment and “take risks”. If the feeling of danger generates fear, risk generates a sense of adventure, strategy and courage. Playing a game or a sport competition, being (or thinking to be) able to play, means to enter the experience of a competitive, funny and challenging match, characterized by the positive tension of reaching a goal.

In this sense, it is necessary to overcome the duality victory/defeat and to re-evaluate the concept of competition (from the latin cum-petere: move forward together, converge).

It is a common sharing, an agreement between subjects competing in a challenge based on well-defined rules.

Competition should be considered as a very important educational resource. As recent scientific research has shown, such a condition leads to many physical and psychological benefits, in fields such as:

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Obesity

Italy is one of European countries with the highest overweight rate in school-age individuals. **20,4% of children are overweight and 9,4% are obese**, including the seriously obese (2,4% of total population). Recent studies have shown that an hour of physical activity a day reduces considerably the risk of obesity. For example, a 11 years old should exercise at least 6 hours per week in order to have zero risk of being overweight at 14.

Sleep quality

Recent scientific studies show that **playing sport regularly enables the individual to fall asleep easily, to have a longer resting phase and a lower awakening frequency.**

Perception of self and personal efficacy

Self-efficacy, or personal efficacy, is the feeling of “being able to”, having the technical skills necessary to undertake a specific task that might be perceived as difficult. This ability **enables the child to develop physical skills, abilities and strength, improving self-confidence.**

Feelings

When playing sports, the competition challenge, combined with the sense of belonging to a group of peers, gives the child the opportunity to learn and manage emotions. This is an **essential help for children and teenagers dealing with daily life's challenges.** In the world of sport, an “emotional intelligent” athlete is able not only to discover how personal feelings can affect his or her performance, but also to identify dysfunctional thoughts and emotions, transforming them at his or her own advantage.



Social skills

Physical activity and sports enhance the ability of develop positive social bonds, overcome conflicts, adapt to different circumstances, develop satisfactory interpersonal relationships and respect the rules. In sport, a rule is what enable the teenager to “manage” with confidence the game and to replay it regularly and with satisfaction.

The sport team is a system of social relations among a group of peers. Therefore sport rules and sport environments teach teenagers to live inside a positive and normative context - a reality they will soon meet in society. Since specific cultural values enable the comprehension of the world and guide our social behaviour, the sport club must always declare and share its values, in order to protect athletes from risky behaviours.

The spirit of initiative

The spirit of initiative is linked to the ability of focus attention and efforts towards a specific goal, often seen as a challenge. The sport experience gives the opportunity to train this essential skill in a context chosen by the athlete himself or herself. Motivation, relationship with the environment and a well-define temporal span are three conditions - amongst others - which provide a huge support in the development of initiative skills.



Sports, young people and “significant adults”

The parents

Knowing how to adapt the educational style to different development stages and to different circumstance means to have the ability to take time to support children and teenagers in their activity. In relation to sport, this leads to a successful interaction with the sport club.

Family is the first development context for children and teenagers. Later on, other important educational agencies - such as school and sports - enter into the picture.

For teenagers, the choice of a sport to play is rather personal. With regard to children, parents are usually those who choose the best contexts for their sons' growth, although children's desires should always be respected and supported, even in this regard.

Studies on the relation between educational style and well-being have shown the positive effect of an authoritative parental guide in fields such as social skills, school and sport, and its protective role against risky behaviours.

While parents might have strong beliefs about how to manage successfully different situations - in daily life as in the field of sport - it is important to consider what in literature are defined as “Educational styles”. Two different dimensions are central in this regard: on one hand, firmness or strictness (i.e. how parents control and overlook their sons' behaviour), on the other, responsibility and support (i.e. how parents show affection, acceptance and engagement).



From these different dimensions of parental control and support, four different educational styles are born:

- **Authoritative: characterized by high support and high control**
- **Commanding: characterized by low support and high control**
- **Supportive characterized by high support and low control**
- **Permissive: characterized by low support and low control**

The relationship between educational style and children development changes with time, even in relation to sport. An authoritative style is protective for pre-adolescent (who still need an external regulation to guide their behaviour), while a supportive style is more apt for 18-19 years old (whom have already taken upon themselves the regulation of behaviour at home and in society, so they refer to their parents mainly for their ability to listen, provide support and dialogic exchange).

Parental ability to support and control according to the different age and individual characteristics of their sons and daughters leads to what is called “flexible protection”, an educational approach usually recognized as more positive for young people’s development.

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In relation to sport, this leads to a successful interaction with the sport club.

The positive connection between parents and sport clubs is essential to provide the best possible experience to young athletes. Therefore, it’s important that sport clubs and sport organizations involve parents in learning processes about the different elements shaping the world of sport activities for young athletes, such as

- **Sports course in which their children will be involved**
- **Awareness about the role model parents represent for their sons and the example they need to set for them**
- **Knowledge of goals and needs appropriate to young athletes’ different ages**

In order to guarantee an ideal interaction with parents, sport clubs can act simultaneously on communication (through social media and whatsapp groups) and parents involvement in their activities (through questionnaires and focus groups). They should also provide family customer (appointing a professional figure such as the Responsible of athletes and parents) and increase the sense of belonging (through dedicated events, discussion groups, etc.).





The Coach

The coach is a key role model, a guide providing support to young people, helping them to face the biggest challenges in sport and in their personal growth. The relationship between coach and athletes is necessary vertical (as with a teacher). The coach must be perceived as an active and knowledgeable team member, with whom to share rules based on mutual respect and esteem.

His behaviour - in which athletes, particularly teenagers, can identify - must be inspired by the sport club's values, in order to positively affect technical performance and motivation. In this sense, the coach will be not a simple promoter, but rather a sounding board for the athlete and the team members. Pupils will have the feeling of shaping their own growth and will be likely to value and preserve their relationship with the coach.

Sport coaches must enable the participants to focus on the stimulating features of learning, such as working together as a team rather than merely playing to win.

How can a coach develop a positive relationship with his/her athletes?

- **Providing positive feedbacks**
- **Showing a democratic behaviour, enhancing sport performance through training and involving the group in the redefinition of rules**
- **Providing proper instructions on abilities, skills and technical strategies**
- **Clarifying team roles**
- **Organizing the athletes' activities properly**
- **Supporting social connections among athletes**
- **Using verbal and nonverbal communication adapted to different ages**

This set of behaviours, known as the coach's "educational style", will increase the satisfaction provided by the physical activity and, as a consequence, will prevent the athlete from dropping out.

Additionally, it will positively influence teenagers' perception of personal strength.

Sport coaches (or tutors of other organized activities) must enable the participants to focus on the stimulating features of learning, such as working together as a team rather than merely playing to win. Coaches must be thoroughly trained, in order to transmit satisfactorily their technical and educational skills. Such a training must be nurtured daily, through a constant and top-quality upgrading. This is one of the social **responsibility** of the sport club.





The sport club

In the light of what previously said, it's easy to understand how sport clubs have a huge social responsibility. They are a privileged space where growing boys and girls can learn the positive outcomes of physical activity. Every sport club must define and clarify its **mission** and **values** in which parents, athletes and managers can clearly identify. These values should be clearly communicated and will form the basis for the coaches' educational style.

As an example, we can consider the mission of Consorzio Vero Volley (www.verovolley.com) and an abstract of its **educational programme**:

Mission

"To guide all athletes and everyone whom is interested in the concept of a "real", future-oriented sport, a sport that can be reached through challenging and sustainable goals, original practices and strong ethical values".

Educational Programme:


"The gym becomes the space for the transmission of values helping young people to grow respectful of others. It's a space where one learns to respect rules and to care, to be loyalty and fair in relationship; a space where one can feel at ease with others in every situation related to sport, where one can test his or her physical skills. A space where athletes can work together towards a goal, nurturing a healthy competition."

The sport club must verify that its mission and values are understood and shared by its associates, monitoring their satisfaction through questionnaires, talks and focus groups. It has to be open and welcoming towards their requests, since it is only through perfect alignment of the mission, values and activities it promotes that the club will appear as trustworthy to its stakeholders.

A good sport club must take care of coaches and managers' training and professional updating through specific technical, psychological and educational courses. It is only through an appropriate training of its collaborators that the sport club can promote an healthy and safe sport environment.

This is an essential approach in order to avoid abuse in the sport world. In this regard, we suggest coaches, managers and parents to read the booklet series "*Change the game*", designed to raise awareness about sexual abuse in sport.

On the website www.changethegame.it it is possible to find and download many PDF guides on the topic.



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The educational network

As we have previously seen, children and teenagers are accompanied in their educational path by different adults whom represent for them important role models.

Thanks to these relevant adults - with whom they establish intense relationships - young athletes have the opportunity to grow and learn the skills necessary to face the challenges of growing up.

These diverse educational and formative relationships are essential to help and support interpersonal relationships.

A good interaction between the family and the sport club is important to develop a healthy and effective synergy between these different role models and educational contexts.

Such an educational network - focused on the psychological and social wellbeing of children and teenagers - is based on two essential premises. All actors involved should share principles and educational goals and assume responsibility, each in his or her own specific role.

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Nutrition

Introduction

It is well known that physical activity is beneficial for health at every age. It reduces the risk of developing pathologies such as cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, neoplasm and obesity, it strengthens the musculoskeletal apparatus and increases the psycho-physical well-being.

The earlier an individual begins to perform physical activity, the greater the advantages for his health, even in his adult life. Performing physical activity regularly at a young age increases the probability that such an activity will become a habit. Therefore an active child will become an active adult.

Data about childhood obesity are troubling: it is believed that 9% of school-age children are obese and that 20% are overweight. Childhood obesity can lead to serious consequences in health, increasing the risk of obesity in adult life and the probability of developing pathological diseases.

Sport activity is essential for children and adolescents. The World Health Organization recommends to children and adolescents (between 5 and 17 years old) to perform at least 60 minutes of moderate to intense aerobic activity every day.

Physical activity at a young age enhances the psycho-physical well-being, strengthens the muscles and the bones. It helps to develop a strong cardiovascular apparatus, enhances coordination and motor skills and enables to keep an ideal weight.

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bility of developing pathological diseases.

While a sedentary lifestyle can lead to overweight and obesity, physical activity combined with healthy nutrition enables a balanced development of the organism and the maintenance of an appropriate weight, both in the development age and in adult life.

Children and adolescents playing sport do not need a special diet but rather a balanced diet, following advices for a healthy nutrition.

Finally it is important to consider that providing food, nourishing, and cooking are essential when taking care and providing for the primary needs of boys and girls. It is very important to always keep this in mind.



Energy Balance

The first and most important feature of a proper diet is to provide the body with the right amount of energy, essential to enable the organism to work properly. In young boys and girls, energy is what enables the development of new organs and tissues (i.e. of growth).

To understand what's the right amount of energy, we need to talk about the concept of "energy balance". Energy balance is the difference between supplied and consumed nutrition energy.

It is balanced when supplied and consumed food are on equal terms, positive when the supplied food is more than what is consumed, and viceversa.

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An energy surplus is necessary in specific situations, such as growth, pregnancy and breastfeeding. However, if the energy balance is constantly positive, it can lead to the development of overweight and/or obesity. If it is negative, it can lead to malnutrition. If the energy is mainly supplied through nutrition (i.e. food and drinks), consumed energy is originated from different sources:



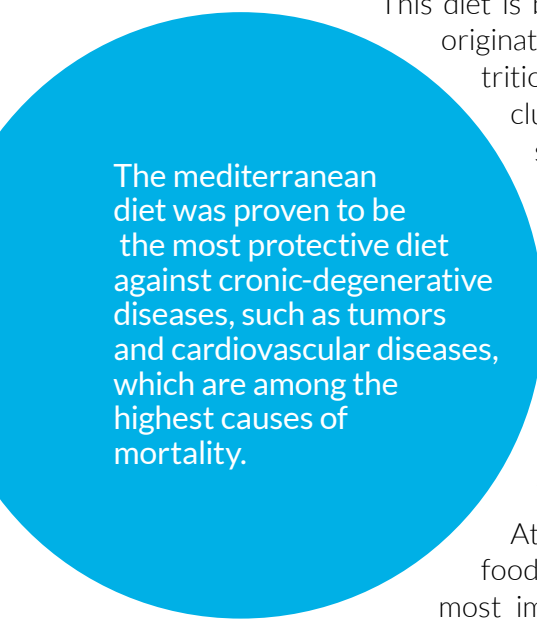
- **Basal metabolism**, i.e. energy consumption that enables our organism to work correctly in rest condition. It varies according to age, sex, weight, height and body composition. It is usually the most relevant portion of consumed energy
- **Physical activity**. This includes voluntary, planned and structured physical activity (for example: walking, biking, swimming, playing volleyball, etc.) and spontaneous physical activity (i.e. all the movements we perform on a daily basis). Physical activity represents the most variable part of consumed energy
- **Nutrition Thermogenesis**. It is the energy we consume after the meals, related to the digestion, absorption and the food nourishings' metabolism.
- **Smaller thermogenetic features**. In this case consumed energy can increase due to specific stimuli, such as stress, extreme low or high temperatures, drugs or coffee assumption



The food pyramid

The “**mediterranean diet**” was proven to be the most protective diet against cronic-degenerative diseases, such as tumors and cardiovascular diseases, which are among the highest causes of mortality.

This diet is based on an agricultural rural model originated in the meditereanean basin. Its nutritional, social and behaviour features include conviviality, an active lifestyle and seasonality.



The mediterranean diet was proven to be the most protective diet against cronic-degenerative diseases, such as tumors and cardiovascular diseases, which are among the highest causes of mortality.

The mediterranean diet is well represented by the food pyramid, a graphic model showing the quality and frequency of food that should be eaten on the short (day) and long (week) run. The pyramid can be taken as a reference for individuals of all ages and sexes, as well as for athletes and sedentary people.

At the basis of the pyramid there is food that should be eaten daily. The most important is water, a super-food necessary to provide water-salt balance (essential for metabolic reaction) to the organism. It is usually recommended to drink two liters of water a day, but this figure might increase with a higher level of physical activity - i.e. a higher loss in liquids due to perspiration.

Cereals, fruits and vegetables are on the first step of the pyramid, and must be assumed at all main meals. Cereals are fundamental for their



complex carbohydrate, nutrients providing energy and a strong sense of satiation. 45 to 60% of all energy we assume daily should come from cereals.

Fruit is rich in carbohydrate from the family of simple sugar (fructose). The consumption of fruits - essential for their vitamins and mineral salts - should be of 2-3 portions a day. Vegetables, on the other hand, should be strongly present in the daily diet, since they are rich in vitamins, minerals, fibers and water.

Climbing the pyramid, we find milk, dairy products and fat dressings, food that should be eaten daily but in smaller quantity compared to the previous groups.

On one hand milk and dairy products provide highly nutrient proteins and highly bioavailable calcium (lower fat dairy products such as semi-skimmed milk and light yogurt are preferable). On the other hand cheeses should be considered effectively as second courses.

Olive oil is the healthiest fat dressing, due to its antioxidants and high monounsaturated fat. It should provide the main source of lipid in a balanced diet.

Margarine, hydrogenated fat, butter and animal fat are at the top of the pyramid, because their saturated fat acid are harmful for the health of the cardiovascular system.

On a higher step of the pyramid we find second courses, mainly protein-based food. These class of nutrients - contrary to common view - should provide only a small part (15%) of daily energy. For adult population the recommended daily assumption is 1 gram per kilogram of body weight.

In this food group, the frequency of consumption varies: fish – thanks to essential omega fat acid – and legumes – cholesterol free and rich in

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fibre – can be eaten more than twice a week. Meat, especially red meat, should be eaten only twice a week, due to its high saturated fat.

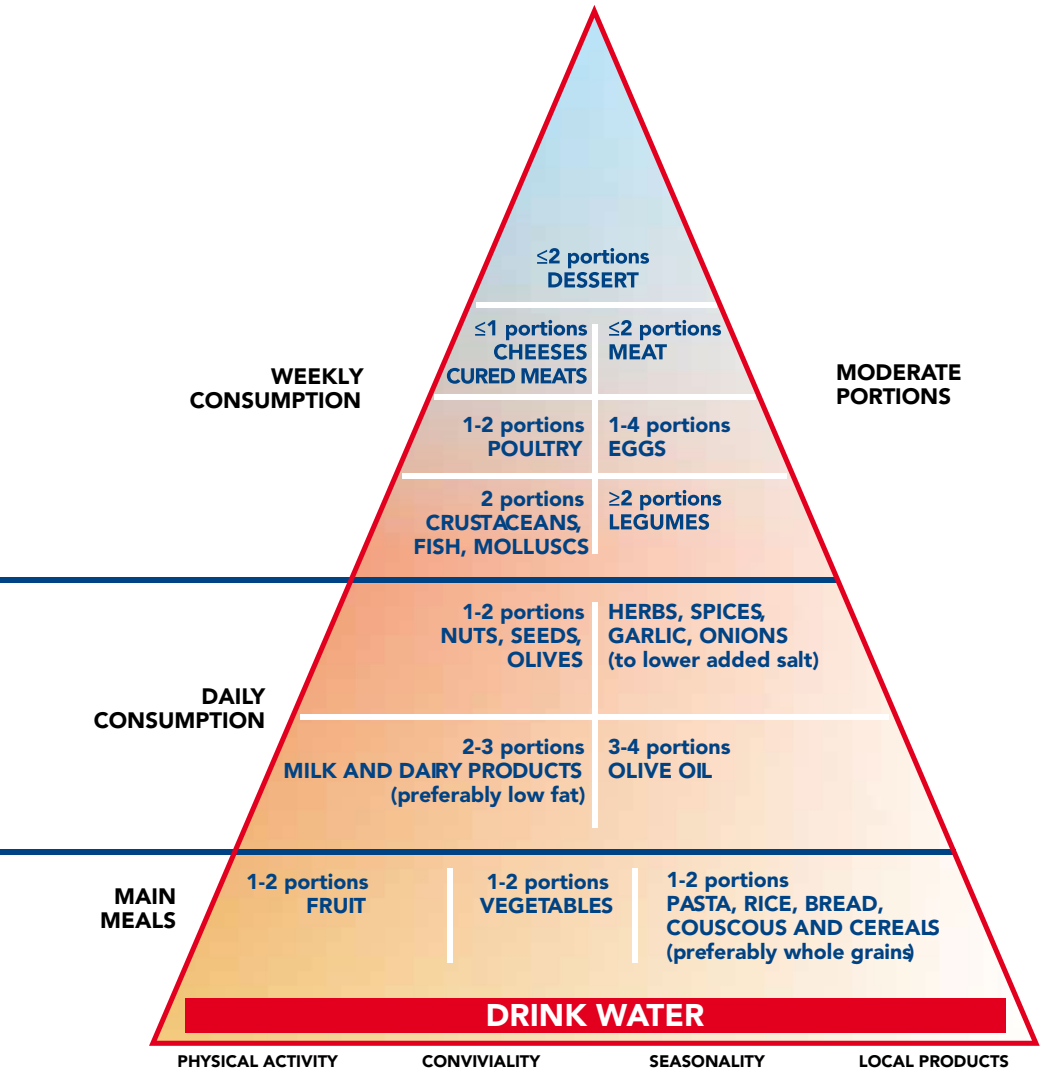
Cured meat and cheeses are at the top level among second courses: they have high-level of sodium, cholesterol and energy, and should be eaten moderately (once a week).

At the top of the pyramid, we find the already mentioned fats and confectionery, rich in simple and lipid (mainly saturated) sugars. They are highly caloric and should be eaten 1-2 times a week.





FOOD PYRAMID



The young athlete's nutrition

The young athlete's nutrition must be complete, balanced and appropriate for the nutritional needs of a growing individual.

Compared to an adult man of the same body weight, a teenager needs higher energy and proteins, for the synthesis of new tissues. A growing individual has to increase the intake of vitamins and mineral salts, such as calcium and phosphorus, necessary for an appropriate bone development (with the highest intake demand between 11 and 17 years).

The athlete's ideal day should begin with a high-energy breakfast (at least 20% of the total daily food consumption) providing proteins and carbohydrate, essential nutrients after the night fast.

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Breakfast should be highly nutrient to avoid the depletion of hepatic glycogen's supply and avoid to being the day with an empty "reservoir" of energy. It's ok to eat milk and yogurt (preferably light) as well as cereals, toasts, biscuits, accompanied by a fruit or a juice.

The most important meals of the day should provide all the necessary nutrients. Launch should always include complex carbohydrates (cereals and derivatives: pasta, rice, bread) which provides a good quantity of slow-releasing energy useful for sport activities.

The first course should be combined with a vegetable sauce or a protein source, to increase the feeling of satiety. Dinner should include second



courses - necessary to provide a muscle-level protein-based turnover – and carbohydrates that will reactivate the supply of glycogen muscle consumed during training.

Both meals should include a source of lipids, providing energy especially with brief, low-density training.

One hour before training, the athlete should eat an afternoon snack made of complex carbohydrates.

If training takes place in the early afternoon, it would be advisable to eat a snack made of carbohydrates and proteins (such as yogurt, cured meats and light cheeses) after physical activity, in order to reactivate the energy supply and prevent the athletes feeling too hungry at dinner.

Snacks and elaborate food, or fat rich food, should be avoided before physical activity. Fried food, sweets and confectionery require a complex digestion and therefore will interfere with the young athlete's performance.

It is important for boys and girls to be well nurtured, especially during competition, so that they can have enough energy and nutrients in order to face both physical and mental challenges.

On the website of www.verovolley.com, in the page **Sport? Si, grazie!** you can find some tables with practical examples of diets for young athletes.

Conclusions

During the development age, sport offers the athlete the opportunity **to costantly interact with adults whom are at the same time behavioural model and role model for the challanges of growing up.**


The relationships taking place within the organized context of sport are important drivers for young individuals, generating wellbeing and protection from harmful behaviours.

Sport and physical activity enhance what in english are called “life skills”. For this reason it is important to develop and maintain a high level of desire to play sport, through motivation and the firm decision

to keep on practicing. It is necessary for children to approach sport in an healthy and informed way, from a very early age. Working on the motivational processes connected to the sport activity will prevent athletes from dropping out.

The most recent scientific researches identify enterprising spirit and social skills as key qualities for a positive development within western society. These skills should be developed through adolescents’ daily experiences, starting from their passions and their successes.

Perceiving a sense of constant learning and improvement when playing sport, an adolescent will feel pleasure and satisfaction.



It's important to point out the role of sport and physical activity to guide children and adolescents towards an healthy lifestyle through learning skills and abilities essential to their wellbeing.



Thanks to this feeling, he/she can maintain a high level of motivation and self-perception.

As the World Health Organization has recently suggested, a successful health education can be achieved - and become an actual means of prevention - if the different local realities working with minors (school, health institutions, sport clubs, leisure activity clubs) actively collaborate through the acknowledgement of their specific features and languages, for the wellbeing of our children.



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