



The National Sports Conference has expanded Martin Sheppard

July 2021

[National Sports Convention \(NSC\)](#) has launched for 2021 and has far greater emphasis on physical activity this year. Martin Sheppard, the NSC's co-founder is interviewed and shares some of his thoughts on why the NSC is expanding.

Q. The NSC has changed its name this year, why is that?

Globally governments are aware that sedentary lifestyles are becoming more prevalent and that it is impacting on the health of their nations. Over the past century we have seen the growth of cars, reduction in physical activity associated with work, or travel to work/school and changes in eating habits impacting on people of all ages, including children. In simple terms we are moving less, eating more and eating less healthy options.

There are many complicated reasons why we are more sedentary, from children to older people that can be found in some key environments more than others. The sedentary lifestyle choices are impacting on physical literacy of young people, adults and also older people in a manner that will be detrimental for future generations in terms of health, mobility and participation in community sport. Apart from the economic cost to the globe's health systems, it is setting up a generational problem when it comes to participation in sport, recreation and play. If we keep going at this rate, the fitter will continue to be healthy and the sedentary will fall into a worse scenario that will take generations to correct.

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There have been many informal comparisons that the unfit cohort of school children 40 years ago are now classified as the fit cohort. If we ignore the reduced physical activity levels and the impact on physical literacy it will impact on both the numbers who are able and are interested in being able to participate in the future. In simple terms I am concerned that their skill levels and ability to progress through any sports pathway programs will be significantly reduced. That is why so many governments sports peak bodies around the globe have embraced the opportunity to link physical activity and participation. All levels of sport in Australia should be concerned and should be thinking about developing participation strategies for the next 20 years and based on the emerging data on health, participation and physical literacy and not just continuing to attract more children at a younger age each year to compensate for continued drop in participation numbers. The increased population growth is hiding the actual trends and as an industry sector we need to embrace these challenges and do something about it.

Many sports are still working on how physical activity opportunities can be aligned or embraced within their scope and vision for the future. Physical activity can connect the millions of people that run, swim, and keep fit to participation opportunities. They may not be interested in the traditional pathway provision of sport and the NSC wants to share insights and approaches that can connect physical activity, play, and recreational participation with sport in different ways.

Q. Surely everyone can see this dilemma and are working together to do something?

There is a plethora of global organisations that have produced reports on this from the World Health Organisation, to UNESCO, to the Active Kids Global Alliance, which in 2019 gave Australian Children a ‘D-’ in terms of their physical activity levels. We have seen Sport New Zealand develop a children strategy and many other global peak bodies have embraced this as well. In Australia it seems that Sport Australia is shifting their investment in physical activity and it will be interesting who is expected to pick this responsibility up at the Federal Government level. No doubt this will impact on the government’s own [Sport 2030 Plan](#) that had a clear and bold vision for sport in Australia — *‘to ensure we are the world’s most active and healthy nation, known for our integrity and sporting success’*. We look forward to appreciating Sport Australia’s new bold and clear vision, and hopefully still with a focus on physical activity and the importance of children being active enough.

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There is a clear opportunity for Play Australia to assert its position here and advocate strongly for all levels of government to have a bold and clear strategy for children and their ability to play, recreate and participate in community sport. Sport New Zealand recognise the importance of play as a vital part of children’s physical and cognitive development and this is reflected in their strategy. This holistic approach aims to impact on children’s physical literacy and ability to participate. If we don’t get our children physically active and provide them with the opportunity to play and recreate it will have significant impact on future generations of adults.

Q: How is play, children and young people reflected in this year's [NSC program](#)?

As the NSC is committed to changing conversations for future planning it is critical I believe that we always have a section in the program on children and young people, as I really think we need to understand more today about what has changed in the past 20-30 years so that we can plan for tomorrow and future generations. This year we have sessions such as:

- **Keynote Session: Active Cities Encourage Physical Activity, Play and Recreation for Younger People – Or Do They?**

This Keynote is both sponsored by The Y and facilitated by Melinda Crole (CEO YMCA Australia), who is joined by four young people to express their views and thoughts about what we need to offer in an active city for them to be more active. The session will explore how do we ensure that we are delivering, planning and measuring programs in a community for young people that encourage their participation and belonging. This conversation with young people will explore:

- What makes young people want to participate in physical activity, play and recreation?
- How can your planning and delivery ensure participation – what is our intergenerational approach?
- What outcomes and impacts of the programs/activations are young?

The four young people all have a different lens, including representation from the CALD, LGBTQI+ communities, young person with a disability and a young person from and indigenous background.

- **Keynote Session: The Preventative Health and Wellbeing Agenda for Children, Chaired By Play Australia and leading advocate for improving children's physical literacy, Pierre Comis.**

Physical literacy drives physical activity, which is the backbone of play, recreation and sport for children and young people – and driving a culture of being physically active is a key preventative health strategy to secure their health and wellbeing, setting them up for an active, healthy and fulfilling life. This session explores how collectively we can keep children and youth active, engaged and open to participation pathways.

- **The Power of Play - Developing Physical Literacy and an Enquiring Mind Through Play** - Play is of fundamental importance for survival of a species. This interactive presentation will explore the process and science of play and its significance for healthy development, evolution and social cohesion. **Robyn Monro Miller, President, International Play Association**
- **Understanding a Child's Physical Literacy Using Sport Australia's Physical Literacy in Children Questionnaire** - Early intervention is key. The manner in which coaches, teachers and parents can make informed decisions and use available resources is critical to set children on the path to a lifelong connection to sport and physical activity. Understanding how children view their Physical Literacy is important for developing school and community sport programs, but to do this we need ways of measuring children's Physical Literacy. **Associate Professor Lisa Barnett, Institute for Physical Activity and Nutrition, Deakin University**
- **Local Government Strategy That Integrates Play, Recreation and Sport** - **Scott Mackenzie, Play Lead, Sport New Zealand**

There are many other sessions that have children and their participation included as part of a larger session, reflecting our overall commitment.

Q: We all know you for your involvement in sport and the NSC, but why are you so passionate about play and children?

I came from a pretty poor family where we didn't know if there was going to be enough food for everyone at the end of the week, so we didn't have the money to afford to be able to join sports teams until well into my teens. When we were young though we were very happy to play on the street corners and it was much safer to play then. There weren't the playgrounds we have now and when we fell off a swing you didn't bounce well on the asphalt – you soon learnt not to do that again. Play was a real learner, and it formed an important part of our early upbringing. We invented games, we amended rules to games like cricket, when an older brother (or sister) joined us, we all knew that the wicket was moved back, or if playing football the sides were uneven in numbers to even up the teams skills. It was how it worked... we just did it.

It's a bit like giving back, as I would like to have had the chance when I was their age.

My first jobs were in playschemes when I was 17 and 18 and then I moved into aquatic and leisure centres. After I graduated from University, I found myself in developing programs for all of the community, so we used to look at the demographics around the centres and then work out the most at risk cohorts who, in our humble opinion, could possibly benefit from being part of the centre or community programs we provided. This engagement was based around playgrounds, libraries, schools and sports clubs. It just made sense. The hardest and most challenged parts of the areas I was involved in were where unemployment was high, and always meant that the children were hardest hit, as they couldn't afford to pay for membership at the local football club etc. So at Council we introduced funding programs to help. It's a bit like giving back, as I would like to have had the chance when I was their age.

We need to make sure that Play and the focus on children is on the planning program for every local, state and federal government and not just through after school sports programs. We should have qualified PE teachers in every primary school, physical literacy should be mandated in every school and we shouldn't be accepting political correction as an excuse for letting our children fall into such a sedentary mindset that they will not live as long as their parents. Surely this isn't right. The NSC working with Play Australia, The Victorian Government, Sport Australia, Sport New Zealand, Sport Singapore and nearly 40 other peak bodies, are keen to change these conversations. We hope your members are too and come and let their voices be heard as well.

Martin Sheppard



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Click [here](#) to view the full program.