
SPORTS PARTICIPATION FOR CHILDREN: A GUIDE FOR PARENTS

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Although school physical education programs are universal experiences for most school-age children, they comprise a mere 20% of the typical pupil's physical activity. It is estimated that approximately 45 million of these children, ages 6–18, also participate in at least one other school or community-based athletic program.

The number of sports participants seems to increase exponentially as the age of boys' and girls' first forays into organized sports keeps falling. Tee-ball and Tiny Tots programs, for example, lure children onto fields and courts at ever younger ages. Girls' programs have become more widespread since the adoption of Title IX in 1972. This legislation guarantees equal opportunity for women in education, including sports.

About 2.5 million coaches, mostly volunteer, spend an average of 80 hours per season with these children. As the competitive nature of these teams increases, so do the number of weekly practice sessions and games, making coaches almost as prominent a figure in children's lives as their classroom teachers. Becoming familiar with their children's athletic programs, therefore, can be almost as important for parents as familiarizing themselves with their school's curriculum and teaching staff.

Since there is no national agency or certifying board to coordinate sports programs for children, there exists a great variation in the manner in which sponsoring agencies organize these teams. Thus, opportunities abound for parents to become active participants in their children's sports programs.

Ensuring Benefits From Sports

Benefits to children. According to the experts, organized sports can enhance a child's skill development, physical fitness and health-mindedness, and self-esteem. Other benefits include learning group cooperation, teamwork, and social friendship-making skills. Experts also report that children who engage in sports earn higher grades, behave better both in and out of the classroom, and have greater school attendance.

Some skeptics may criticize children's sports programs and say that sports cause stress and burnout. But it is not sports participation alone that is either a benefit or a detriment to positive child development. Rather, it is the context in which this participation occurs that is important, and it is up to parents to understand this context.

Key factors. Important factors to consider include the nature of the competition, the personality of the child, and the organizational/managerial style of the coach. Parents' understanding of each of these factors will enable them to make informed decisions about their child's participation in the sport and to ensure that the experience is a positive one.

Competition

Younger children. The intensity of the competitive experience varies as the child's age and skill level increases. Younger children with entry-level skills, generally those under the age of 8, are best suited for those teams that emphasize instruction over competition. No scores are kept during games, there are no league standings, and there is ongoing instruction and feedback. For these games parents usually volunteer to act as referees.

Early competition. Most community recreation leagues consider children to be ready for a more competitive experience after a year or two at the instructional level, but the exact age of this transition will vary by league. Here, children will be assigned to teams, regardless of individual skill levels, and thus avoiding the fear of rejection, of being cut. There is also a mandated minimum playing time.

Advanced competition. Finally, the more determined, more skilled players move on to the most competitive level, that of the “traveling” or “all star” teams. These teams place great emphasis on winning and choose only the best players from the tryout pool. Only the most skilled players will see substantial playing time. Children who tend to shy away from high intensity competitive situations are not well-suited for this type of team.

Characteristics of the Child

Children naturally seek out competition as they mature, since competition lets them know where they stand in relation to others. For them, sports become a social process by which they make these comparisons.

Children, not unlike adults, vary in the way they cope with success and failure. Those who cope well take success in stride and manage disappointment and failure without too much harm to their self-confidence. Others tend to personalize failure and take longer to recover from disappointment.

Understanding children’s coping abilities is important, not only in assisting parents in matching their children with the right team and coach but also in helping them with monitoring their own expectations of their child’s performance. Expectations that exceed a child’s performance potential can exert inordinate pressure on children with poorer coping skills, leading to a loss of self-confidence.

Characteristics of the Coach

It is not unreasonable for parents to know as much about their child’s coach as they do of their child’s teacher considering the influence that coaches have. Parents should expect that their child’s coach knows the sport well enough to be able to teach it during practices. The practices should be well structured and organized. Good coaches should never belittle a player. Good coaches should not lose control of their emotions in front of their players and should communicate regularly and appropriately with both children and parents.

Using performance feedback in the appropriate manner is the difference between motivating and discouraging a child. The manner in which a child’s coach provides this feedback is as important as is the manner in which a teacher grades classroom work. Look for coaches who:

- Provide a high rate of positive relative to negative comments
- Give specific comments about the child’s performance, not the child as a person
- Give praise more often to factors within children’s control (effort, hard work, determination) rather than to those beyond their control (winning)

- Are honest and straightforward and avoid false flattery; feedback viewed as insincere actually lowers self-esteem and makes the coach less credible in the child’s eyes

Suggestions for Parents

Choose a sport that matches your child’s interest and personality. Does your child show an interest in a particular sport? Is your child outgoing and social and well-suited to a team sport, or is your child quiet and shy and better off with solitary pursuits (swimming, running, bowling)? Does your child crave structure and organization, or does your child prefer to set his or her own pace or routine?

Choose a team that matches your child’s skill level. Check with the sponsoring agency to find out if the team is instructional or competitive. Will players be assigned to teams with other players of similar ability? Is there a playing time requirement?

Check the level of commitment expected. How long is the season? How many hours of practice are there per week? Keep in mind that children should be free to pursue different sports experiences. Coaches should not expect young children to specialize in one sport. In a survey of 63 of the world’s greatest athletes, all but 5 claimed that they did not specialize in their sport until they were 16 years old.

Make sure that your child maintains a balance. Do not allow sports to be everything. Encourage other interests.

Make sure your child’s skill level is appropriate. Work privately with your child if he or she feels self-conscious about skill level. Helping your child acquire these skills will lead to increases in self-confidence and to greater effort in the future.

Praise effort, not outcome (winning). Avoid comparing one child’s performance to another child’s. Rather, praise the development of your child’s own skill level over time.

Listen to your child. If your child’s interest in a sport wanes, allow him or her to give up the sport at the end of the season. However, investigate the reasons for this change. Sometimes at the root of this decision are social problems among team members and not a lack of interest in the sport. If this is so, talk to the coach about it.

Monitor your child’s stress levels during the season. One study found that coaches could predict with only 10% accuracy the level of stress in their players, so it may be up to parents to keep an eye on it.

Know the chain of command of the league. If the concerns that are raised with the coach fall on deaf ears, then it may be time to call another organization official to discuss the matter further.

Inquire about the league's training expectations of its coaches. There are several coaches' training and certification programs available to recreation departments. Although not mandated, it would be helpful to find out if a child's coach has received such training. The components of training typically range from basic first aid to child psychology.

Monitor your own expectations of your child's athletic performance. If losing bothers you more than it does your child, then it may be time for you to pick up a hobby.

Summary

A child can benefit from organized sports in many different ways. However, more important than just participation in the sport is the context in which the sport is conducted.

The structure of the competition, the type of child, and the type of coaching style are all significant factors that can affect the sports experience. If the match among these three factors is not a good one, then benefits may be minimal. However, if the match is right, then sports can enhance physical and psychological health. Understanding and appreciating these factors is an important task for parents.

Resources

Bigelow, B., Moroney, T., & Hall, L. (2001). *Just let the kids play: How to stop other adults from ruining your child's fun and success in youth sports*. Deerfield Beach, FL: Health Communications. ISBN: 1558749276.

Micheli, L. (1990). *Sportwise: An essential guide for young athletes, parents and coaches*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin. ASIN: 0395564085.

Wolff, R. (2000). *Coaching kids for dummies*. Foster City, CA: IDG Books. ISBN: 0764551973.

Websites

National Alliance for Youth Sports—www.nays.org
Center for Sports Parenting—www.sportsparenting.org
North American Youth Sports Institute—www.naysi.com

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The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) offers a wide variety of free or low cost online resources to parents, teachers, and others working with children and youth through the NASP website www.nasponline.org

and the NASP Center for Children & Families website www.naspcenter.org. Or use the direct links below to access information that can help you improve outcomes for the children and youth in your care.

About School Psychology—Downloadable brochures, FAQs, and facts about training, practice, and career choices for the profession.
www.nasponline.org/about_nasp/spsych.html

Crisis Resources—Handouts, fact sheets, and links regarding crisis prevention/intervention, coping with trauma, suicide prevention, and school safety.
www.nasponline.org/crisisresources

Culturally Competent Practice—Materials and resources promoting culturally competent assessment and intervention, minority recruitment, and issues related to cultural diversity and tolerance.
www.nasponline.org/culturalcompetence

En Español—Parent handouts and materials translated into Spanish. www.naspcenter.org/espanol/

IDEA Information—Information, resources, and advocacy tools regarding IDEA policy and practical implementation.
www.nasponline.org/advocacy/IDEAinformation.html

Information for Educators—Handouts, articles, and other resources on a variety of topics.
www.naspcenter.org/teachers/teachers.html

Information for Parents—Handouts and other resources a variety of topics.
www.naspcenter.org/parents/parents.html

Links to State Associations—Easy access to state association websites.
www.nasponline.org/information/links_state_orgs.html

NASP Books & Publications Store—Review tables of contents and chapters of NASP bestsellers.
www.nasponline.org/bestsellers
Order online. www.nasponline.org/store

Position Papers—Official NASP policy positions on key issues.
www.nasponline.org/information/position_paper.html

Success in School/Skills for Life—Parent handouts that can be posted on your school's website.
www.naspcenter.org/resourcekit

