

Allowing Youth Sports to be Child's Play

Why Do Kids Play Sports?

The picture of youth sports today is far different from that of the early 20th century. Physical activity in the form of "free play" was a more common daily occurrence for most children then. This unstructured and spontaneous form of activity improved motor skills while developing creativity and encouraging interaction with others.

Today, the child-organized games in the neighborhood that many of us remember have given way to adult-organized youth sports. The experience that a young athlete has with a sport can be positive or negative depending on the focus of the league and goals set by parents and coaches.

Studies have been conducted to determine why children play sports, why parents enroll their children in organized sports, and why people choose to coach. The most common reasons that children initially choose to play sports are to have fun, learn new skills, and make new friends. Parents, often times, look for sports to challenge their child, engage them in competition, and set winning as the goal. Large discrepancies between a child and parent's interest in sports can have negative psychological effects on the child, or lead to physical injury.

Coaches also have a significant impact on the youth sports experience, whether positive or negative. People who volunteer to coach should enjoy and relate well to children, know the sport and teach it well, and keep child-focused goals. This will create a positive experience for the children. On the other hand, those people who coach to prove themselves, for power, or to experience success through the success of their team can create a negative experience with lasting effects on children.

Psychological Stress

The value of sports and the physical, psychological, and emotional benefits to children are undisputed. When the expectations of adults become excessive and they overcontrol young athletes, the pressure to win is overemphasized, and all the benefits of sports are negated.

Experts have identified two factors responsible for determining whether youth sports are enjoyable or anxiety-filled for young participants. The first is the quality of adult supervision and coaching. The second is the amount of pressure parents place on their children to perform. When parental pressure becomes too great, young athletes may

experience headaches, muscle pains, stomach aches, sleep disturbances, fatigue, or depression.

Physical Stress/Injury

It has been documented that physical activity is necessary for normal growth in children. However, when the activity level becomes too intense, or excessive, in too short a time period, tissue breakdown and injury occur. These overuse types of injuries were frequently seen in adult recreational athletes in the past. Overuse injuries such as stress fractures, tendinitis, bursitis, apophysitis, and osteochondral injuries of the joint surface were rarely seen when children spent more time engaging in free play. The changing picture of youth sports to intense, repetitive and specialized training at much younger ages is probably the single biggest factor contributing to the dramatic increase in the incidence of overuse injuries in young athletes.

Solutions/Recommendations

Most children experience a natural desire to be active beginning in the preschool years. It is a means by which they can develop basic motor skills, and gain confidence by mastering these skills, while having fun with their friends. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that team sports should be avoided until age 6, encouraging free play until then.

There is currently no consensus on the appropriate age for sport specialization. The literature reveals that some believe specialization may begin as early as age 10, while others advocate for puberty as the minimum age for focusing on one sport. All agree, however, that too much, too soon, at too great of an intensity leads to injury.

Participation in sports should be a positive experience for kids. There are many characteristics developed in children who play sports such as confidence, self-esteem, leadership, respect, independence, assertiveness, and conflict resolution, to name a few. Parents and coaches need to be positive role models who support the efforts of these young athletes and keep the "competition" in perspective.

Consult your primary care physician for more serious injuries that do not respond to basic first aid. As an added resource, the staff at Nationwide Children's Sports Medicine is available to diagnose and treat sports-related injuries for youth or adolescent athletes. Services are now available in four locations, to make an appointment, call 614-355-6000.