

# **Sports Participation for Children: A Parent's Guide**

## **Background**

It is estimated that from 30 to 45 million children ages six through 18 participate in at least one school or community-based athletic program, although school physical education programs account for only 20% of the typical student's physical activity. These numbers seem 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 them onto fields and courts throughout the country at increasingly younger and younger ages. Girls' programs also have contributed significantly to the athletic rank and file. Once seemingly the entitlement of males only, the adoption of Title X in 1972 guaranteeing equal opportunity for women in education, including sports, began the process that assured girls that the world of athletics would be open to them. In order to supervise, teach and manage these aspiring athletes, approximately 2.5 million coaches, mostly volunteer, spend an average of 80 hours per season with them. As the competitive nature of these teams increases, so do the weekly practice hours, making the child's coach almost as prominent a figure in his/her life as the classroom teacher. It would behoove parents, therefore, to become familiar with their children's athletic program, just as they familiarize themselves with their school's program via PTO meetings and Back To School nights. Without a national agency (Little League notwithstanding) to coordinate sports programs for children, there exists a great variation in the manner in which sponsoring agencies organize these teams, thus leaving plenty of opportunity for parents to be involved.

## **Insuring Benefits from Sports**

According to the experts, there are few, if any, areas of a child's development that cannot benefit from organized sports. Goals of agencies that sponsor youth sports programs include the development of social and interpersonal skills, health, fitness and psychological well-being. The more evident benefits involve individual skill development, greater physical fitness and health-mindedness, and higher self-esteem. Less obvious benefits include the development of group cooperation, teamwork and social friendship-making skills. Some skeptics may criticize children's sports programs as causing stress, burnout, psychological trauma and lowered self-esteem, suggesting that participation in sports is hazardous to a child's physical and emotional health. However, sports participation is neither good nor bad, neither a curse nor a cure. Rather, it is dependent upon the context in which it occurs, and it is up to parents to understand this context.

Important factors to consider regarding children's participation in organized sports include the way in which the competitive situation is structured, the personality and family dynamics 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 insure that the experience is a positive one.

## **The Team**

Teams that are considered instructional in nature are designed for young children (below age eight or so, although this age may vary from league to league) with entry-level athletic skills. These leagues provide many accommodations for the younger player: no scores kept during "games", no league standings and ongoing instruction and feedback during games, with parents usually serving as volunteer referees.

Once past this age, children are eligible to participate in their own community's recreation leagues. These programs simply assign all children to teams, regardless of their individual skill levels, avoiding the fear of rejection, of "being cut". Recreation leagues also mandate minimum playing times for their players.

Climbing the sports ladder brings one to the next step, the most competitive one. Known as "traveling" or "all-star" teams, they place a great emphasis on winning and choose only the best players from the tryout pool. Only the most skillful players of these teams see substantial playing time, with the rest spending much of their time on "the bench."

Children who tend to shy away from high intensity competitive situations are not well-suited for this type of team.

## **The Child**

In their need to know where they stand in comparison to others, children will naturally seek out competition as they mature. For them, sports becomes a social process within which they make these comparisons. Nevertheless, knowing one's child is important in order to make sure that there is a comfortable fit with the team and the coach.

Children are not unlike adults who vary in the way they cope with success and failure. Those who cope well take success in stride, but they also manage disappointment and failure without undue harm to their self-confidence. Others tend to personalize failure and take longer to recover from new disappointments, like being "cut" from a team or losing a game. Understanding your child's coping abilities is important, not only to assist in matching him or her with the right type of team and coach, but also to help you monitor your expectations for your 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.

## **The Coach**

The qualities that make a person a good teacher are those that make a person a good coach. Considering the influence that a coach can have on his or her players, it is not unreasonable to suggest that parents ask around about a child's coach as much as they ask around about their child's new teacher. Parents should expect their child's coach to know the sport well enough to be able to teach it during practices that are organized and structured. A good coach also would never belittle a player, nor should a coach lose control of his or her emotions in front of young athletes. She or he also communicates regularly and appropriately with both children and parents.

Using feedback in the appropriate manner is the difference between motivating or discouraging a child. Getting to know 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 child's performance, not the child as a person

- Give praise most often to factors within a child's control (effort, hard work, determination) rather than those beyond his or her 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**

- 1. Choose a sport that matches your child's interest and personality.** Does she show an interest in a particular one? Is he outgoing and social and well-suited to a team sport? or quiet and shy and better off with solitary pursuits (swimming, running) ? Does she crave structure and organization, or does she prefer to set her own pace, her own routines?
- 2. Choose a team that matches your child's skill level.** Check with the sponsoring agency: is the team instructional? Competitive? Will players be assigned to teams with other players of similar ability? Is there a playing time requirement?
- 3. Check the level of commitment expected.** How long a season? How many hours of practice 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 five claimed that they didn't specialize in their ultimate sport until they were 16 years of age.
- 4. Make sure your child maintains a balance in his or her life.** Do not allow sports to be everything. Encourage other interests: music, scouting, etc.
- 5. If your child is self-conscious about her skill level,** take her aside and work with her privately. Acquiring these skills will lead to increases in self-confidence and greater effort in the future.
- 6. Praise effort, not outcome (winning).** Avoid comparing one child's performance to another. Rather, compare him to the development of his own individual skill level over time.
- 7. Listen to your child.** If her interest in a sport wanes, allow her to give it up 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, not a lack of interest in the sport. If this is so, talk to the coach about it.
- 8. Monitor your child's stress level 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.
- 9. Know the "chain of command" of the league.** If the concerns that you raise with the coach fall on deaf ears, find out whom you can call to discuss the matter further.
- 10. Monitor your own expectations of your child's athletic performance.** If losing bothers you more than it does her, it may be time to pick up a hobby.

### **Summary**

Organized sports can benefit a child in many different areas. However, more important than just the participation in the sport is the "context" of the sport. The type of team, the type of child and the type of coaching style are all significant factors that can impact 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.