

A Balanced Approach to Youth Sports

Keeping Sports and Athletics Fun, Healthy, and Positive for Kids

Mar 10, 2010 [Melissa Gaskill](#)

Youth sports programs like Little League and Pop Warner Football were founded so every kid could play and have fun. Today's leagues seem to have lost those principles.

Little League and Pop Warner Football, the original youth sports leagues, abided by the principles of letting every child have a chance to play. Sports were, they taught, fun. Today's youth leagues look more like miniature professional ones, though. Scott Lancaster, senior director of National Football League Youth Football Development, notes that too often, winning is more important than the kids having fun, more than the kids themselves.

Most Youngsters Drop Out of Sports

In *Why Johnny Hates Sports* (Square One Publishers, 2002), Fred Engh reports that 70 percent of all youngsters drop out of organized sports by age 13 because of unpleasant experiences. Sports, and team sports in particular, have a lot to teach children, but only when they're ready. Pushing children into team sports before they are developmentally ready can backfire. Training in a sport year-round won't make a child develop or mature any faster. It might, however, make that child drop out of sports altogether – not a good scenario at a time when childhood obesity is an epidemic.

Benefits of Youth Sports

Too much competition sucks the fun out of sports. An undue emphasis on winning and losing takes away from the benefits sports can offer – teamwork, self-improvement, good sportsmanship, and cooperation, all valuable life skills. Respect for team mates and opponents, even compassion for the team on the losing end of a match, are also valuable skills. Most parents, if they think about it, would want their children, and their children's future coworkers, neighbors and spouses, to have those skills.

Physical Problems From Youth Sports

In addition to the emotional and psychological consequences of overzealous attitudes, there are potential physical ones. Stress fractures, growth plate disorders, cracked kneecaps, frayed heel tendons, and back problems were previously seen only in adults. Now injuries like these are reaching epidemic proportions in young teens, according to the American Academy of

Pediatrics, as more kids play one sport year-round and focus on single skills like kicking or throwing.

Their still-growing bodies simply can't take it. Some parents justify pushing their kids for the goal of scholarships, but a kid with over-use injuries probably won't be able to play. Besides, the real odds of an athletic scholarship are incredibly thin, certainly not high enough to plan a child's life around.

Organized Youth Sports versus Free Play

According to The [American Academy of Pediatrics](#), "when demands and expectations of the sport exceed the maturation or readiness of the participant, the benefits of participation are offset. The shift from child-oriented goals to adult-oriented goals can further negate positive aspects of organized sports. To optimize the safety and benefits of organized sports for children and preadolescents, and to preserve this valuable opportunity for young people to increase their physical activity levels," the AAP recommends that "organized sports programs for preadolescents complement, not replace, regular physical activity of free play, child-organized games, recreational sports, and school physical education programs.

The AAP also notes that "inappropriate or overzealous parental or adult influences can have negative effects," including goals and outcome measures that are not child-oriented, such as tournaments, all-star teams, and most valuable player awards. "Despite good intentions," the AAP statement goes on, "increased involvement of adults does not necessarily enhance the child athlete's enjoyment."

Early specialization doesn't necessarily create a better athlete, either. Much skill depends on age and development, not practice. Former NBA player Bob Bigelow, who wrote a book *Just Let the Kids Play* (HCI, 2001), didn't even play basketball until high school. Michael Jordan didn't make his high school basketball team the first time around. A lot of kids never discover their talent, or passion, Bigelow said in an interview, because they're told at age 10 they aren't good enough. In reality, he said, it's hard to predict physical ability until after puberty

Importance of Other Childhood Activities

There's also growing evidence, cited in *Last Child in the Woods* (Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2008) by Richard Louv, that children benefit from more unstructured time, time spent coming up with activities on their own, no grown-ups involved. They need experience working out the particulars of a game, and settling conflicts with their peers, all on their own. Children also greatly benefit from spending [time in nature](#), according to Louv. When all their free time is scheduled with practices, matches, and work-outs, that valuable free, outdoor time can be hard to find.

Parents should consider waiting until children are at least in third grade before starting organized youth sports. The Positive Coaching Alliance suggest that children be encouraged to play a variety of sports until at least high school, on teams and with coaches that emphasize having fun, letting every child play, self-improvement, and teamwork.

The copyright of the article **A Balanced Approach to Youth Sports** in [Kids Activities](#) is owned by [Melissa Gaskill](#). Permission to republish **A Balanced Approach to Youth Sports** in print or online must be granted by the author in writing.

Read more at Suite101: [A Balanced Approach to Youth Sports: Keeping Sports and Athletics Fun, Healthy, and Positive for Kids](http://kids-outdoor-activities.suite101.com/article.cfm/a-balanced-approach-to-youth-sports#ixzz0nZNeqhEk) <http://kids-outdoor-activities.suite101.com/article.cfm/a-balanced-approach-to-youth-sports#ixzz0nZNeqhEk>