

Why Most Kids Quit Sports

by Carleton Kendrick Ed.M., LCSW

Twenty million kids register each year for youth hockey, football, baseball, soccer, and other competitive sports. The National Alliance for Sports reports that 70 percent of these kids quit playing these league sports by age 13 -- and never play them again.

According to Michael Pfahl, executive director of the National Youth Sports Coaches Association, "The number one reason (why they quit) is that it stopped being fun." With figures like these, it's time we rethink how we present youth sports to kids.

With that in mind, here are some key points to remember about your kids playing sports.

Preschool

Focus on the element of play in any sports activity you introduce to very young kids. Make it fun! Don't burden them or concern them with competition, keeping score, and rules. Get them running, kicking, throwing, catching ... and laughing. Use equipment that suits their bodies and coordination levels (toss a beanbag instead of a ball). Adapt games according to their abilities. Always offer encouraging words for all their efforts.

Elementary school

Sports psychology expert Rick Wolff, author of *Good Sports*, stresses that parents of kids ages 5-12 need not be concerned with their child's excellence at such refined sports skills as corner kicks and drag bunts. "Those are unimportant," Wolf advises. "The key here is having your child develop a sense of passion for the sport."

Parents and coaches need to be aware of what kids can accomplish at their differing developmental levels -- physically, intellectually, emotionally, and socially. Don't make unrealistic expectations concerning your child's sports performance -- be it in the area of muscle coordination, dedication, or attention span. Many kids lose their passion for youth sports during these years because they feel they can't live up to their parents' and coaches' expectations.

Middle school

Kids start dropping out in big numbers at this stage. Playing sports loses its enjoyment for them and "fun" takes a back seat to winning. Pick-up games and just "playing for fun" should be encouraged. The key at this vulnerable stage is to keep them playing the sports they enjoy -- if not on school or youth teams, then informally with friends. Not being on a team does not mean they have failed as athletes. It just means that they have to find other pleasurable ways to continue enjoying their sports.

High school

By this stage, it's usually the successful high-school athletes who play both school sports and outside competitive-league sports. There are just so many positions to be filled on competitive teams. But what about kids who still love to play sports but can't because of their demanding academic, social, and work lives? Parents need to remind these kids of the fun they had playing these games and help them to find time to play them with family members and friends. Helping your kids stay connected to the sports they love now can encourage them to remain physically active throughout their lives.