

PARENT LETTER

The Best Sports for Your Child

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Children across the country are back in school now and it's time to plan their extra-curricular activities. Few children come home from school today and then run outside to play pickup games with their local buddies. Instead, kids today tend to run to the computer or play video games by themselves. This trend, coupled with the lack of recess and daily physical education at school, contributes to childhood obesity, lethargy, lessened muscle tone and child/parent tension. Organized sports activities are more critical than ever for children of all ages, but figuring out which sports are best for your child is not always simple.

Think about what kids used to learn in pickup sports. They learned the skills of a sport by watching other kids and then trying to imitate them. They learned the value of cooperation and competition and saw the rules of the game in action, then worked to figure them out. They played hard and had fun. They came home tired and happy and ready for homework and family time.

How can we give our children the benefits of these fun sports activities that will develop their bodies, their intellectual and social skills, and their love of movement? What can we do to set them on a lifetime path of physical and emotional health? The answer is simple: we can mix and match organized sports experiences for them throughout the school year and the summer. So let's think about how to plan for our children.

Ages and Stages

Different ages mean different abilities to understand rules and absorb information, different levels of motor skill development, and different abilities in listening and attention skills.

Children under the age of six cannot fully understand cause and effect relationships and don't fully grasp rules. As children become older, their cognitive development allows them to realize how the rules relate to play and strategy. By adolescence, children are more able to translate play into a game using rules.

Games and practices should be handled in a way that is appropriate for the child's developmental stage. If children are pushed before they are ready, they often turn off and resist the

activity. Overzealous parents can have the same effect. Make sure that the adults around the child are trained and positive. We want kids to love their time in sports activities and not push these activities away.

If your child is under six, make sure that practices and games are easy going with a lot of direction and support from the coach. It's important to remember that some children seem to pick up sports right away and others take some time. Kids differ in natural coordination and how easily they pick up new motor skills.

The physical side of sports training is really about skill learning and skill building. Kids love to feel competent and learning new athletic skills is one of the best ways to build self-esteem. As parents, find out which skills are being taught so that you can talk about them with your children and applaud their developing proficiencies. They will be happy that you noticed but make sure not to nag about them, just notice and smile.

Hopefully the coach will push them along!

Kids range from impulsively running around knocking into people, to preferring talking instead of playing, to listening and playing hard, to wanting to be quiet and watching, to being left alone. Although different, all of these styles are normal.

Sports Styles

To determine your child's style, ask yourself these questions: Can your child sit quietly, listen to instructions, and then carry them out? Does your child do better when there are fewer children and distractions? Does your child do better with a coach who likes kids to work things out or one who gives firmer instructions?

Some children let others go in front and other children push to be in front. Some kids are happy to just be anywhere. When you have a more cautious child, it is important to be very supportive of their activities, but don't let them quit before they have learned to find a comfort level. These kids often do very well in individual sports where they can improve at their own speed.

If you have a more assertive child, make sure that you discuss with him or her that teamwork requires that everyone gets a chance to be first. Sports people say, there is no "I" in the word team! Assertive kids often have a lot of energy and can become passionate athletes.

If you have a chatty child, encourage him or her to be a leader and listen to the coach. Point out that it takes much longer for a team to progress when kids talk among themselves instead of listening, watching, and practicing. These kids can become great leaders when they use their interpersonal skills to advance their team.

Types of Sports

Sports can be categorized in different ways. Some sports are done individually and others are done in a team setting. Some individual sports can be done in a group so it functions as a team (such as a tennis or golf) but the sport is still considered an individual sport. It is good for children to participate in at least one team sport and one individual sport each year.

Look at the list below and look into the options available in your community. It is wonderful for children to be exposed to many different kinds of sports. This is often the only time in their lives that they can have this opportunity. Kids, who focus on only one or two sports early on, often give up playing when they are teenagers. Also, any muscle memory that is established in childhood can be used later in life. So a child who learns some golf or tennis will have an easier time picking it up as an adult.

TEAM	INDIVIDUAL ON A TEAM	INDIVIDUAL IN A GROUP	INDIVIDUAL CAN DO/COMPLETE ALONE
Soccer	Swimming	Karate	Ice Skating
Baseball	Track & Field	Taekwondo	Golf
Softball	Fencing	Ballet	Tennis
Basketball	Golf	Dance	Squash
Volleyball	Tennis	Cheerleading	Sailing
Lacrosse	Sailing		Skiing
Ice Hockey	Skiing		Snowboarding
Field Hockey	Snowboarding		Fencing
	Gymnastics		Horseback Riding
	Horseback Riding		Yoga
	Squash		

How to Evaluate a Sports Program

- Research the programs/find out who is sponsoring them
- Ask other parents for their opinion about the program
- Call the organizers and ask who they are affiliated with/ most programs belong to national, state, or local leagues
- Ask how they choose their coaches and what kind of training the coaches get. Even parent coaches can learn effective techniques

- Ask how the children are selected for teams. If it is easier for you, ask for a team that is close to your home or work so that transportation is simpler
- After you sign up, go to the first practice with your child. It is good to take or pick your child up so that you are aware of what they are learning and how they are doing
- If you have concerns, talk to the team parent, the coach, or the administrator.

Values and Sports

Experts believe that sports are a great way to help children learn about the value of fair play, goal setting, teamwork, and trusting authority. Sports can teach both positive and negative values. Be sure your teenage athletes know that you don't believe in some of the negatives such as steroid use or bullying. Parental input is extremely important to children. Make sure to mention to your children that you see how they learn and progress. When parents do not over praise ("You are the best player ever") but just notice ("You really focused on that pitcher and got the hit"), then kids learn to trust their judgment and will listen when the parents talk.

Helping Your Child Get Ready to Play

A smooth transition from home to game helps children play their best. When they arrive nervous and frazzled, it takes longer to play well and get their head into the game.

Here are some pre-game tips that work for children of all ages:

1. Organize necessary equipment the night before so that there is no scrambling before the game
2. Know who the opponent is if possible
3. Chat about your child's strengths as a player
4. Get enough sleep
5. Eat healthy and drink plenty of water
6. Have a positive attitude
7. Develop goals and strategies for the game
8. Listen to inspiring music

Tips for parents:

1. Don't remind children of how good you were as a child, it adds to the pressure
2. Don't remind children of past mistakes because they will focus on them instead of on playing well
3. Smile and wish them a good game

Sports, whether individual or team, help children's physical and emotional development and can be a source of satisfaction throughout life.

For more information, visit AboutOurKids.org.