

Letter

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Editors' Comment

In addition to the obvious physical health benefits for children and adolescents who participate in sports, the payoff in mental health benefits, in both the long and short term, is enormous. Research has shown that participation in sports can contribute to psychological well-being by reducing symptoms of anxiety and depression and enhancing self-esteem. Sports constitute a social milieu that can promote a spirit of social interaction, cooperation, and friendship. Sports can provide children and adolescents with opportunities to develop their ability to exercise judgment, think critically, and solve problems. Sports can build self-discipline, trust, respect for others, leadership and coping skills – all of which form the foundation of character-building and solid self-esteem. Despite these benefits, many kids are dropping out of sports.

In this issue of the NYU Child Study Center Letter, we outline the research-based advantages of sports participation for both girls and boys, describe the myths and pitfalls that can lead to practices detrimental to kids, and offer suggestions for positive parent involvement.

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Kids and Sports

Introduction

Kids' sports are big news: more than 30 million children and adolescents in the United States participate in group or individual sports. Newspapers, television programs and other media bombard us with information and advice. Stories about kids and their heroic sports accomplishments are sure to move us -- a child overcomes the odds to win a race, hits a winning home run, or performs some other feat to achieve a seemingly unattainable goal. The messages in the media, however, are often contradictory—sports are healthy; sports are stressful - sports promote cooperation, sports breed unhealthy competition and burnout. In order to make some sense of conflicting information and to help adults provide kids with healthy sports experiences, let's look at the research. We'll ask questions, debunk some myths, point out some pitfalls and provide tips for parents. The first question -

Do Sports Matter?

The answer is an emphatic yes. What's so good about sports?

Research shows that, in addition to being a source of just plain fun, sports promote healthy development in many areas with positive effects that last into adulthood.

Sports help physical development – kids who do sports

- build muscle and bones

- improve reflexes, attention, focus, and thinking
- reduce the likelihood of obesity
- reduce symptoms of stress and depression^{1,2,3}

Sports help cognitive and academic development – kids who do sports

- get better grades –often in the semester that they play sports
- manage time better
- improve their ability to think while their bodies are engaged.
- make quick decisions, problem-solve and think strategically
- incorporate different kinds of information simultaneously – watch opponents, keep track of teammates, check environmental conditions, listen to coaching instructions
- adolescents who do sports have higher education and occupational outcomes and are more likely to finish high school and college (lower and middle income adolescent athletes)⁴

Sports help psychological development – kids who do sports

- have higher self-esteem
- have less anxiety and depression, are less likely to consider suicide, engage in less risky behaviors, such as sex and drugs
- as adults, they feel better about their physical and social selves^{5,6}

Sports help social development –

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(games and teams are miniature social systems) Kids who do sports

- develop leadership and team-building skills
- enhance their knowledge of social rules and roles
- experience supportive relationships with adults
- form relationships with peers
- have the opportunity to experience interacting with children of other backgrounds and cultures ^{7,8,9}

Sports help character development – kids who do sports

- learn to define goals, determine the steps necessary to achieve them
- derive pleasure from accomplishment and deal with the letdown of defeat
- pursue excellence by setting increasingly higher standards
- persevere in the face of disappointment, refocus and work hard
- cope with frustration and learn to profit from challenge
- encounter and enact moral values (i.e., resolve the conflict between the norms of fair play and the desire to win)
- contribute to their communities ^{10,11}

Sports activity as prevention

According to the United Nations Report on Sport, Recreation and Play, physical inactivity was estimated to cause 1.9 million deaths worldwide annually in 2000. It was estimated to cause about 10-16 percent of cases each of breast cancer, colon cancer and diabetes; about 22 percent of ischaemic heart disease. In the USA, inactivity contributed to an estimated \$75 billion in medical costs in 2000 alone. ¹²

Additional benefits for girls

A nationwide survey of adolescents in the United States revealed that compared to female non-athletes, female athletes

- were less than half as likely to get pregnant (5% and 11%, respectively)
- had their first intercourse later in

adolescence – Female non-athletes were about twice as likely as athletes to experience their first intercourse between the ages of 10 to 13 (15% and 8% respectively)

- had fewer sex partners - 37% of the non-athlete females said they had two or more partners during their lifetime, compared to 29% of athletes
- Retrospective data from successful women indicates that women who participated in sports stated that they learned how to be authoritative, work on teams, set individual and team goals, and to be mentally tough ^{13,14}

Exploding Some Myths

Myth: Kids have to start early to become proficient

Fact: Kids are getting involved in sports earlier than ever – some begin a competitive sport by the age of 3 or 4. But starting early doesn't guarantee success. Contrary to popular belief, most professional athletes did not start at a very young age. Kids should start when they're developmentally ready and show interest. If a child is not physically ready, injuries may result. Depending on the demands of the specific sport, the child must have acquired the necessary muscular strength and coordination. For example: a six-year-old child who has learned to ice-skate has not yet developed the more complex coordination necessary to progress to pair skating. Follow-up research with children who learned to swim in infancy also casts doubt on the-earlier-the-better theory. It shows that many of them became fearful of the water when they were older and developed the cognitive ability to realize that water might be dangerous. ¹⁵

Myth: Ability, or lack of ability, at a young age predicts ability later.

Fact: Children of the same chronological age vary in their physical and psychological growth. Physical ability and competence change as a child grows. Don't prematurely discourage a kid's interest and motivation. Because he's a slow runner or is not well coordinated at 10 doesn't necessarily mean that he'll be slow and uncoordinated at 15. The slow starter can be a late winner. Often spurts in growth bring enhancement in strength and coordination, so children should be encouraged to try different sports that utilize different parts of their bodies. A sport originally found difficult may prove to be pleasurable at a later time.

Myth: *Lack of coordination in parents will be inherited by children*

Fact: Genetics is only part of the story. Interest, opportunity, encouragement and practice are essential ingredients in helping a child enjoy sports. There are so many different sports to choose from that there's always something that clicks.

Tips For Parents

Introduce your child to a sport appropriate for her age and interests and adjust your expectations as she grows. The interests of the child, the attitude of family members, and the demands of the sport all interact to affect the child's experience.

Establish realistic goals that your child can live up to. You will find that children work harder if they think success is possible. For all children, emphasize the fun aspect of sports.

For the young child, don't focus on rules, keeping score or competition. A beginning sport should get the child using her body and moving - running, kicking, throwing, catching - and equipment should be easy to handle (i.e. a

beanbag or smaller size ball). Even with young children, simple skill-building can be encouraged. For example, although a young child isn't ready to learn control of a ball, he can be taught basic underlying skills such as keeping track of the direction of the ball, kicking the ball to a certain spot, etc.

For school age children, focus on developing skills as well as developing a love of the sport. Children of this age enjoy games with rules, and they are concerned about how they are judged by others. Teamwork helps them practice cooperation, mutual understanding, and logical thinking. They can learn about taking turns with their teammates, sharing, respecting their peers and respecting rules. Encourage your child to try a number of sports and not to think of specializing or playing competitively until middle school. Early specialization and too much play may result in injuries due to overuse of certain parts of the body. Ideally, the best sports program for kids, starting at about 10, would be one individual sport and one team sport per academic year.

For adolescents, who typically are searching for their own identity and experimenting with new behaviors and possibilities, organized sports and physical activity provide opportunities for self-expression, and the development of skills in communication, negotiation and leadership. Sports can provide adolescents with healthy opportunities to bond with adults and with one another, reinforcing a sense of belonging.

Organized team participation isn't for all children

Pickup games and just playing for the fun of it should be encouraged. Children who don't want to participate in team sports have many other options. They can be encouraged to learn sports such as bowling, golf, swimming, tennis,

gymnastics, fencing and martial arts. Since only a limited number of kids qualify for high school sports teams, others should be encouraged to play in less structured situations. In this way they can maintain interest in the sport and continue to be physically active as they mature.

Find a good sports program

Check out programs available in school, your city's parks and recreation department, religious organizations, civic clubs, children's clubs. For team sports, find out about the league, its leaders and coaches. If you can, get involved and volunteer to teach or coach. Become informed about the coach's style and sports philosophy, then determine if it is suitable for your child. Having a positive relationship with a coach is very special, and coaches can instill a sentence of competence when a child masters new skills.

Most coaches have children's best interests at heart, but some coaches have not been specifically trained and may have unrealistic expectations for children, giving higher priority to winning than to the enjoyment of playing with others. Coaches who don't understand how to motivate children may inhibit a child's desire to play. Look for coaches who:

- provide a high rate of positive relative to negative comments
- give specific comments about the child's performance, not the child as a person
- give praise most often to factors within a child's control (effort, hard work, determination)
- are honest and straightforward and avoid false flattery.¹⁶

Be sure your child's sports program and equipment are safe and age-appropriate

Sports participation has resulted in more and newer types of injuries. The U. S. Consumer Product Safety

Commission reports that 4 million children receive treatment in hospital emergency rooms each year because of sports. The Commission estimates that another 8 million children are treated by family physicians for these injuries. The likelihood of sports injuries increases with age, and sports are the most frequent cause of injury for both male and female adolescents. Most injuries occur in practices rather than in games, and organized sports have a 20% re-injury rate that is attributed to inadequate rehabilitation and returning to play too soon.¹⁷

Assessing a school's sports performance

If your child is involved in a school sports program, make sure the program has administrative support in regard to training, facilities, funding, and encouragement of athletic opportunities for girls. The athletic rights of girls have been strengthened by Title IX, enacted in 1972, which states that local school districts can no longer discriminate against girls' teams and must provide fields, locker rooms and equipment that equal those already provided for the boys' teams. However, inequities persist. Nearly one out of every two high school boys plays sports, while only one in three high school girls plays sports. In many towns and cities the parks and recreation departments are serving more boys than girls. Very few high schools and universities are providing participation opportunities for female athletes in proportion to the number of women in the general student body.

Support your child's efforts

Even a child with natural talent will need to work hard and show dedication. Positive parental support such as encouragement to practice and coaching will help a child succeed. Realize that every child makes mistakes, and don't compare him to other kids. Encourage your

child to give the best effort possible, to be responsible and to respect teammates, coaches and opponents. Listen to your child and if her interest wanes, investigate the reasons (e.g. social problem) before allowing her to drop the activity. To gauge whether your child is benefiting from sports participation, ask her the following questions:

1. What did you work on today?
2. Did you enjoy yourself?
3. Do you think you are playing better?
4. What one thing would you like to achieve over the next few weeks of the season?
5. If you were coaching your team, what would you do differently?¹⁸

Praise trumps punishment

Find something to praise; children will work harder to please than to avoid punishment. Few kids are good at all sports, so praise the effort and what she does well and provide opportunities for her to succeed. Guard against over praise, however, since too much praise loses its meaning. Take your cue from the child about post-game discussions. Many children don't want to talk about the game immediately afterwards. When the child is ready, listen and don't criticize. Sometimes parents make kids uncomfortable with their own need for post-game analysis. Emphasize the high points on both teams and limit criticism (even helpful hints) to two comments. Use phrasing such as "I wonder if it would work better if....."

Cooperate with coaches

- Kids should be at all games and at practice on time and ready.
- Make sure child has appropriate equipment.
- Be supportive and don't talk negatively about other players.
- Support the rules and regulations and understand that referees are only human and make mistakes.
- Don't use attendance at games as punishment.

- Be tolerant of losses and pleased with wins, but remember that coping with winning and losing is part of learning the lessons of life.

Remember - Girls and boys are different

The biological growth patterns of boys and girls are different. In adolescence, boys often feel differently than girls about their physical development. Boys are likely to feel proud of their developing muscles, but many girls feel embarrassed about an increase in fat, particularly in the breast and hip areas. Encouraging a girl to participate in sports is likely to increase her sense of pride, rather than embarrassment, in her body.

Girls have different attitudes towards sports than boys. Boys tend to be more skills-oriented; girls tend to be more people-oriented. Girls' priorities in choosing teammates are different from boys. Girls are likely to want favorite friends on the team. Boys, on the other hand, rank teammates more by ability and performance.

Girls have different reactions to comparisons than boys. Girls are concerned with hurting feelings, and they don't want to be compared to other girls on the team. Rather than making comparisons (*you didn't run as fast as Lucy*) it would be helpful for parents to point out the strengths of other girls. (*Lucy really pushes off to a fast start when she runs*).

Girls should also be encouraged to discuss the needs of the team in relation to the needs of the individual.

The elite athlete

Playing on competitive and travel teams is often a goal for young athletes and their parents. If handled well, this can be a very good experience. If handled badly, it can have negative effects on a child's self-esteem and sow the seeds of a child's rejection of sports. A good experience is one in which

- where skills and teamwork are emphasized
- positive coaching methods are used and respect for referees and opponents is encouraged
- children's bodies are not overused, and the season has a reasonable number of games
- parents' participation is carefully monitored.

Some of the current travel team schedules rival the professionals in number of games. A heavy schedule can interfere with a child's social development, it can cause overuse injuries, and it usually means that the child doesn't have time for other activities. Narrowing children's experiences at a young age can mean that they are missing out on sampling other sports as well. In addition, families can become overly focused on the sports season. Playing to win is not necessarily negative, but an over-emphasis on winning can lead to coaching practices that diminish enjoyment. When elite players are left on the bench for the majority of a game, they are not getting the experience that will make them into better players. When winning is the only goal, players' well-being will be sacrificed. Many players never forget this sense of injustice and feelings of disappointment.

Some Common Pitfalls

Kids can become overly involved and neglect other parts of their lives

For some kids, sports time commitments have become so demanding that time for unstructured play has been cut in half, family dinners have declined by 33% and family vacations by 28%.¹⁹

Alex, 15, is on the high school hockey team during the school year, goes to hockey camp in the summer, and also plays soccer. He has to practice after school every day for a few hours and is trying to make the travel team. He often doesn't get

home until 6 or 7 PM, which leaves only a limited time for homework and family time.

Jessica, 14, plays soccer, attends gymnastics classes in school and walks several miles daily. She limits her friendships to girls in her gymnastics class and turns down other invitations. Jessica would benefit from expanding her interests and talents in other areas. To balance their experiences, children should be encouraged, when possible, to develop friendships in addition to sports friendships.

Children differ in their love of competition

Know your child's personal style. Children vary in how they cope with success and failure; some can handle disappointment without perceiving it as a blow to their self-esteem; others think their worth depends on winning.

Matt, who loves to play tennis, becomes anxious before a match and depressed if he doesn't win. Matt could benefit from being helped to choose when to participate in competitive matches and setting appropriate skill and stress management goals. In this way each match will feel valuable.

Luisa, on the other hand, welcomes the stimulation of competition; she is able to accept a loss and likes to analyze her performance to determine how to improve.

Kids values can become skewed

The need to win at all costs may become so strong that it will outweigh values such as honesty, fairness, fun and playing well. Although many professional athletes provide positive role models for young people, vulnerable youngsters may admire those athletes who gain publicity due to aggressive acts, drug abuse and other negative behaviors.

Parents can become overly involved

Some parents get so caught up in their children's sports that they get into arguments, sometimes violent, when attending their kid's sports event. There are parents who object, even to the point of using expletives, to umpires' calls; some insist that their child stay in the game even when he or she is injured or does not feel well. (*you can't let a little fever sideline you – you've got to act like a man*). There are parents who let their children know, either explicitly or by inference, that parental love and approval depend on the child's performance. (*I loved you when you hit that homer. –Everyone in our family makes the tennis team*). There are parents, overly focused on winning, who encourage unfair tactics (*shove the kid that gets in your way; push when the referee's not looking; I'll give you five dollars for every yellow card you get*).

Guard against other possible negative effects

Although numerous studies attest to the positive benefits of sports participation, parents should also be aware of some negative trends. As noted in the United Nations Report on Sport, Recreation and Play, "Sport can also lead to elitism and exclusion, excessive alcohol consumption and drug abuse. It can lead to excessive competitiveness and nationalism that can further divide communities and nations. There is always the potential for doping, cheating, corruption, and violence. The benefits, however, far outweigh its potential negative consequences."²⁰

Recent Trends

These pitfalls – the stresses of competition, overinvolvement, over-practice -- are some of the factors contributing to a surprising statistic.

Kids are dropping out. Although they're supposed to be having fun

and learning to value cooperation, discipline and perseverance, many kids don't see it that way. "I'm always being watched" said 11-year-old Jeff. "Sometimes I think I'll never measure up" said 13-year-old Christy. "Sports are just for the really talented kids who want to put up with pressure" is a common refrain for the high school set. Children drop out of sports at alarming rates. After age 10, sports participation drops by 30% for each year of age. The dropout rate from youth sports such as hockey, football, baseball, soccer, has been estimated at 70%. According to a report from the National Alliance for Sports, kids quit playing league sports by age 13, when winning becomes more important than having fun.²¹ And parents are also dropping out – the demands of taking kids to practice, keeping track of schedules, and changing vacation plans can be burdensome.

But remember: The benefits of sports are far more numerous than the negatives, so it's up to parents, schools and others involved with kids to make sports a successful and pleasurable experience.

Conclusion

Participation in sports, whether as an individual or as a member of a team, plays an important role in the social, emotional and physical development of children and adolescents. Successful sports experiences provide benefits -- gains in social and interpersonal competence, fitness, health-mindedness, and psychological well-being -- that have been shown to last throughout life. As expressed by William Damon of the Stanford Center on Adolescence, "The future of any society depends on the character and competence of its young. In order to develop their competence young people need guidance to provide them with direction and a sense of purpose. They need relationships that embody and communicate high standards.

They need to experience activities that are challenging, inspiring, and educative.²²

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