

“The Savvy Patient”
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“The Savvy Patient” – Scripps Experts Offer Insights to Help Guide Consumers

Tips to Avoid Youth Sports Injuries & Burnout

By Paul Stricker, M.D.

Youth sports is gaining stride, with 44 million kids in the United States now playing at least one organized activity, according to the National Council of Youth Sports.

Playing sports brings many benefits, such as improved fitness and better social skills. But pressure to succeed at a young age has mounted in recent years, setting the stage for more physical overuse injuries. Injuries such as stress fractures in children were unheard of years ago, but now have become more common.

Pushing kids too hard can also overwhelm the mind. Sports specialization at young ages has penetrated down to the baby crib. Focusing a child’s effort on a single sport full-time with the hope of gaining a competitive edge can lead to emotional stress or burnout.

Even good intentions (such as securing an athletic scholarship) can cause harm if they encourage inappropriate activities for a child, produce unrealistic expectations, and are not coupled with important knowledge of development. Sports should be what kids do – not who they are.

Common pitfalls can often be averted if parents and coaches take the time to understand how kids develop their athletic abilities. Children build sports skills in a progressive sequence of stages that simply can’t be dramatically sped up, and each stage should be patiently and fully developed before moving on to the next.

When parents and coaches understand how sports skills develop, they provide the best opportunity to maximize the child’s athletic performance, while minimizing pressure.

To help kids effectively gain sports skills, parents and coaches need to understand four core developmental processes – physical, visual, chemical, and emotional. To start, here’s a sampling of physical sports skill milestones that are important to keep in mind:

- **Ages 2 to 5:** Most kids can't yet effectively throw and catch (due to immature visual development); basic skills like running and hopping are acquired through unstructured play.
- **Ages 6 to 9:** The brain communicates better with the body's nerves and muscles – as a result, a basic toss may progress to a more accurate throw, balance is improved, and running becomes more natural.
- **Preadolescence (age 10 to puberty):** Control of body motions becomes more automatic; eye-to-brain pathways mature, allowing for better visual judgment of speed and location, and memory abilities allow mastering of more complex plays.
- **Puberty (usually ages 11-13 for girls; 13-15 for boys):** Due to rapid physical growth, there may be a temporary decline in balance skills and body control, as the body's center of gravity changes, and arm/leg lengths increase.
- **Mid to late teens:** More aerobic gains are achievable with training; strength gains occur more easily, but heavy weights should be avoided until the skeleton fully matures.

To improve the youth sports experience and increase fun, parents and coaches should remember the “four Ps.” Participation (all kids need to exercise); Practicality (don't define success strictly by wins; also recognize personal improvement); Protection (resist the urge to train too hard, too soon) and Performance (re-define “success” as personal improvement instead of winning). Competition can be healthy if approached with knowledge, patience and support.

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