

Youth athletics: Finding the right sport

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If you're a parent, you spend lots of time making sure your kids will have a long and healthy life. Giving them a head start on a lifetime of physical fitness may be one of the best ways to accomplish this goal and protect them from childhood obesity, a growing health problem in the United States.

The long list of physical activity benefits — even for toddlers and children who have just started school — begins with improved fitness, coordination, weight control and a reduced risk of health problems such as heart disease later in life. As kids grow older, participation in team sports can also help them improve skills, self-esteem and academic performance. The bonus is learning concepts such as discipline and fairness.

To get your child started on the road to an active life, it can help to know how to choose the type of play, games, exercise and organized sports that are right for him or her.

What are age-appropriate activities?

With kids of all ages, it's important to select activities that they find fun and rewarding. You may have been the star of your football team, but your child may prefer dancing, and that's just fine.

Children don't need organized athletics to develop athletic skills or to get physical activity. "A healthy lifestyle doesn't have to include sports," says Edward Laskowski, M.D., co-director of the Sports Medicine Clinic at Mayo Clinic, Rochester, Minn. "It's more important that your child is involved in some sort of physical activity, whether it's hiking and biking with the family or playing pickup baseball or basketball with the neighborhood kids."

Every child develops at a different rate. It's best to work within your child's maturity and skill level.

Ages 2 to 3

Very young kids are beginning to master many basic movements — running, catching, jumping — and they're too young for most types of structured exercise. Try:

- Free, supervised but unstructured playtime with other children
- Running and walking, in a yard or playground
- Swinging on a yard or playground set
- Supervised water play
- Toddler gymnastics classes led by professionals
- Tumbling

Ages 4 to 6

- Dancing
- Games such as hopscotch or tag
- Jumping rope
- Playing catch with a lightweight ball
- Riding a tricycle or a bike with training wheels

Once your child reaches the age of 6, his or her motor skills improve and he or she should be able to make better decisions about safety. Your child may also be ready for team sports.

Ages 7 to 10

- Baseball
- Gymnastics
- Soccer

Swimming
Tennis

Age 10 and up

Biking
Aerobics and strength training that stresses proper weight training technique, as carefully supervised by a sports medicine professional
Hiking
Organized team sports
Rowing
Running and track and field events
Softball

Should my child exercise every day?

Children should spend at least one hour a day engaged in physical activity or a specific form of exercise. For older children participating in fitness classes and strength training, limit those workouts to no more than 30 minutes, three days a week, with a day of rest in between.

What are the benefits of organized sports?

In addition to physical benefits, playing in teams or pairs teaches children about:

Accepting feedback
Commitment
Discipline
Fairness
Following directions
Interacting with others
Respect
Responsibility
Taking turns

But when it comes to organized sports, make sure your child really wants to play. Never force a child to participate or join a team. Also consider your child's schedule. Children who are already signed up for music lessons and the school play may feel overwhelmed if athletics are added to the mix.

Am I ready to let my child take part in sports?

Consider your own reactions. How well will you accept your child's victories and defeats? Ask yourself whether you're ready to turn your child over to a coach for several hours each week. Allowing your child to participate in sports is an exercise in letting go.

Of course, you may also volunteer to get involved in coaching or mentoring your child's sports teams. It can be rewarding and enlightening to watch your own child and other children develop.

How can I help my child find the sport that's best for him or her?

If you decide to pursue sports for your child, consider how sports differ, including the:

Amount of equipment needed and its cost
Amount of physical contact
Emphasis on individual skill
Emphasis on team performance
Size of the team

Opportunity for each child to participate

Your community might offer a wide range of intramural sports. If so, allow your child to sample several activities. Younger children may benefit from exploring several options before settling on one or two.

"The more that children can try different sports and activities and find something they're good at doing, the more they'll enjoy the activity," says Dr. Laskowski.

Try team sports such as softball and soccer, as well as individual sports such as tennis, running and golf. Observe as you go. Is your child comfortable with the physical nature of a contact sport? Does he or she have the hand-eye coordination to compete in certain sports that use a ball?

Once your child indicates an interest in a sport, consider whether that sport is a good match given your child's height, weight, strength and coordination. Is the sport also a good psychological match? Some children accept coaching well and willingly attend several practices and a game each week. Others are more independent and feel more comfortable with an individual training routine.

What should I look for in a sports organization?

To gauge whether your child is in good hands, consider these points.

Quality of coaching

Look first for an emphasis on safety. Does the coach require that players follow the rules and use the proper safety equipment? Is the fitness trainer working with your child certified and sensitive to the fact that your child is not fully physically mature? Observe instructions. Children should be taught proper movement and body positioning to avoid injuries.

Also consider a coach's attitude toward the game. If a coach consistently yells at an umpire or the children or lets only the most skilled players into the game, your child may become discouraged. Get to know the coach and, if possible, talk to the coach's former team members about their experiences.

Once children get to be 11 or 12 years old, they may be ready for a greater emphasis on competition and winning. "But a win-at-all-costs attitude drives many children away from sports — for good," says Dr. Laskowski.

Team assignments

Are the children in your child's sport grouped into teams simply by age, which can increase risk of injury? Or are they grouped according to physical maturity and skill? Do they take time to warm up and cool down before and after each practice or event? How the organization assigns teams and emphasizes warm-ups and cool-downs may serve as an indication of the organization's interest in injury prevention.

How can I support my child?

Overall, be positive and encouraging. Emphasize effort and improvement over winning or personal performance.

Attend events and practices as your schedule allows, and act as a good model of sportsmanship yourself. Above all, keep your child's sport in perspective.

If your child decides to quit a sport or specific activity, look for signs of stress that seem tied to sports or overtraining. Your child can take up the same or another sport later, or build fitness through other activities, such as martial arts or dance.

Whether your child runs track, plays frisbee or soccer, keep your eye on your long-term goal — encouraging your child to be a fit, healthy and happy adult. Serve as an active role model at all levels of your child's development. Once your child sees that you enjoy physical activity, he or she will be much more likely to want to participate too. Help your child see that fitness fun can be a way of life, and he or she will come out a winner every time.

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