

Kids And Sports

From Infant To Athlete

Legal Niceties

The Video

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The Program

Summary

Forty million children play organized sports. Viewers of this exciting program see children from toddlers through puberty illustrate just how fun or frustrating playing sports can be.

They watch as physical, social and emotional development follow a sequence that adults can't speed up. They see just how skills in sports progress from birth through puberty. They marvel at the intellectual side of sports, from scorekeeping to game strategizing.

The program explores the dangers of over-scheduling, over-pressuring, and over-training children, and suggests ways to guide your child through a successful and enjoyable experience in youth sports.

Key points:

- Learn what kinds of sports are appropriate for children at different ages.
- Explore the best way to introduce your child to sports.
- Find out about the four kinds of development that impact a child's ability to play and enjoy sports.
- Learn about the dangers of over-scheduling, over-pressuring, and over-training youngsters.
- Find out when it's okay to start specializing a child's training, and how to be realistic about your child's abilities.

Sports And Early Development

Sports are an excellent activity for children of all ages. Playing sports can teach children good exercise habits, help them to socialize, and give them a strong sense of teamwork and fair play. Talented children may go on to academic scholarships and professional careers, and even those that play only for fun will find sports to be a happy and healthy pastime. For these and many more reasons, nearly 40 million children play in youth sports programs. But what sports are right for children? How intensely should they train? Should they focus on one sport, or sample a number of them? Understanding how a child's abilities and interests develop is essential for any parent or coach who wants to guide children to a healthy and happy appreciation of sports.

The First Two Years

In the first two years of life, infants develop quickly. Their spines become stronger as they learn to sit up. They begin to walk, but their posture and sense of balance are still undeveloped. Their vision, which starts out black-and-white and blurry, becomes sharper and more colorful, but peripheral vision and the tracking of moving objects have yet to really develop. Because of these developmental limitations, a child of this age is too young to start an athletic career. Some activities and courses are appropriate, but success in a baby swim class won't win her a spot on the Olympic swim team. Dressing an infant in sports-themed clothes can be cute, but it won't develop skill. It's important that parents not pressure their children into sports activities they're not ready for. A toddler is hardly as tall as a basketball—he isn't ready to shoot baskets. Children may pick up on their parents' disappointment, so putting pressure on children to play above their abilities may actually discourage them from interest in sports. Children need a balance of physical, mental, social, and emotional abilities to understand, play, and enjoy sports, and these abilities can't be rushed. What babies and toddlers need is space to explore the world around them, with no expectations. Children need to simply play in order to develop the movement skills that they will need to enjoy sports when they are older.

Preschoolers

As children become older, they become more coordinated. Walking was difficult when they were one year old, but by preschool they're running. Running involves a complex interaction between sight, thought, and movement. This interaction is learned by practice. A game of tag teaches running, stopping, and touching, so it is an excellent game for preschool children. But they're not ready for other sports. Hitting a moving ball requires tracking a moving object and gauging its speed, and most preschoolers simply don't have the visual skills yet. The vision center in the child's brain is still developing, so hand-eye coordination still has a long way to go. T-ball helps develop these skills, because it lets kids swing at a stationary ball. Other sports can help preschool children develop the basic motor skills they'll need for more advanced athletics: soccer develops quick footwork; swimming builds endurance; tumbling, dance, and gymnastics develop basic movement and balance skills that will be useful for a number of other sports. There are benefits beyond the obvious physical ones, too. A child may enjoy socializing on the soccer field more than actually kicking the ball. Learning how to work in a group is one of the most valuable lessons to be learned from playing sports.

Some parents believe that, if a child shows early interest in a sport, they should begin to specialize early. But early aptitude is difficult to spot. Physical readiness isn't the only factor in a child's ability to learn a sport—mental and emotional readiness are just as important. Youngsters aren't ready to learn about strategy. They understand the basic idea of play, but they aren't likely to grasp all of the rules. Their emotions can be unpredictable, so they aren't ready for games involving scorekeeping. The temperament for competition will develop later. Children are more likely to enjoy a sport if their parents and coaches are realistic about what they can do and understand. They will be more comfortable if they're introduced to a sport before their first lesson or practice. Children love trying new experiences, and their interests can change from day to day. Most experts say that preschool is too young to begin specializing—kids need to sample many different activities instead of focusing on just one. And if the child is going to enjoy those sports, they must be appropriate to his or her age and abilities.

Later Childhood

Early Elementary School: Six To Nine Years

Participation in sports programs—everything from tennis and soccer to martial arts and football—becomes even more common for children in elementary school. Children’s physical and mental abilities continue to develop. As visual skills develop, it becomes easier to track moving objects and aim throws. Children that started on t-ball can now move on to more complex sports like baseball. As coordination improves, running becomes less clumsy, and dance movements begin to look like actual dance. At this stage, children are improving on basic skills.

Mentally, children at this age are better able to understand rules and strategy, but it’s still important to recognize their limitations and not overload them with strategy. Socially, they are gaining a sense of fair play, learning how to cooperate with teammates and be a “good sport.” Sports can bring out a range of emotions in children in elementary school, but once they find the sport that’s a mental, physical, social, and emotional match for them, they’ll have fun and begin to see real improvement in their abilities.

Preteens: 10 To 12 Years

Preteens will choose sports to play based on a number of factors. They may want to be with friends, develop a specific talent, exercise, or simply have fun. In this age range children fine-tune their skills. As their eyes reach full development, their motion tracking, perception of distance, and peripheral vision improve, and they’re better able to process this visual information. Their motions become more automatic, their throws more accurate, their posture and balance become stronger. Because of this continuing development, preteens can handle harder training than younger kids can. But it’s important to remember that they’re still kids, and they still need the emotional support of their parents, regardless of how well they perform.

Adolescence And Beyond

Puberty: 11 to 15 Years

The growth spurts of puberty have a big impact on children and sports. Girls reach puberty between 11 and 13 years, and boys between 13 and 15. Because of this age difference, girls may outperform boys who have not yet had their first growth spurt. There are some difficulties that come with puberty: sudden changes in height and weight can throw off balance and coordination as the child's center of gravity changes. Sports that require a good sense of balance like ice skating, gymnastics, and basketball may become more difficult for children at this age, even if they were excellent performers before puberty. But there are some physical advantages that come with puberty, too. Adolescents are able to use oxygen more efficiently than younger children as their aerobic capacity improves. Working out as little as 15 to 20 minutes three times a week can lead to big improvements in aerobic capacity.

As adolescents' intellectual development increases, they are better able to understand the strategies behind the games they play. Rather than just trying to get the ball to the other end of the field, teenage athletes are able to understand more complex tactics and plays. As the hows and whys become more clear, their play improves. Socialization remains a central aspect of sports at this age. Kids want to be a part of a group, so they're loyal to their teams, and playing well can earn the respect of their peers. Adolescents aren't quite as independent as they'd like to be during puberty, and their self-confidence can be fragile. They still need the support of their parents and coaches in order to remain confident and perform well.

To what extent should a teenager specialize in a sport? Many adolescents still like sampling different sports, and others prefer to focus on a single one. As competition becomes more important, they want to train longer and harder to improve the skills they need to win. They'll spend more time on practice, training, and conditioning. Many will go to summer camps specializing in their sport. By this stage, they've gone through the necessary steps of physical, emotional, mental, and social development, and they're finally ready to focus and train on a single sport. They're ready to concentrate on a single sport if that's what it will take to win.

Problems To Consider

Though every young athlete wants to succeed and do well, it's important to take caution in their training. Many elementary school children can suffer under demanding schedules that can leave them over-scheduled, over-pressured, and over-trained. This can be a big problem for their mental, emotional, and physical ability to play. Having too many activities and practices scheduled can shatter their focus. Emotionally, spending too much time on practice can put a lot of pressure on kids to live up to expectations they may not be able to meet. There are only so many hours in the day, and it's important for parents to consider their child's needs and priorities.

Too much training can lead to physical injuries, as well. Youngsters who specialize too early and train too hard can get over-use injuries like stress fractures and tendonitis. These can be particularly dangerous for children because they can cause damage to growth plates—plates of cartilage at the end of children's bones that allow them to grow longer. An adult who twists an ankle may sprain a ligament, but a child may injure a growth plate, and that injury may last a lifetime. Putting too much stress on kids' bodies can lead to serious injuries before they've even had a chance to mature. (See page 14 for more information on common overuse injuries.)

Children develop according to a set pattern. They love to play all kinds of games, but it's important to make sure that the types of games they're playing and the intensity of their training is appropriate for their age. If sports training fits within these standard developmental milestones, children can have a safe, successful, and fun experience in youth sports.

Review

- In the first year of life, infants develop spine strength and basic vision. They're not ready for sports—it's best for them to simply play with no expectations.
- Preschoolers aren't ready for the complex combination of abilities most sports require. Good games for children of this age are tag, which teaches running and stopping, and t-ball, which allows the child to swing at a stationary target.
- Children in elementary school can gain a lot from the social aspect of team sports, even if they aren't ready to learn about advanced strategy.
- Preteens can handle harder training than younger children, but they still need emotional support from their parents and coaches, regardless of how well they perform.
- Adolescents are better able to handle all aspects of a sport. This is a better age to start thinking about specialization—teens are willing to do the work that it takes to win.
- To train in a sport, a child needs to be not only physically ready, but also mentally, socially, and emotionally. Early aptitude in a sport is difficult to spot, so it's generally not a good idea to start specializing too early.
- Children are more likely to enjoy and be successful at a sport if their parents and coaches are realistic about what they can do at their current stage of development.
- Too much training can place mental and emotional strain on young children that may drive them away from sports they would otherwise enjoy.
- Overtraining children can lead to overuse injuries. These injuries may be more dangerous than they would be in adults because a child's body is still growing. If the growth plates of a child's bones are damaged, the injury may last a lifetime.

Interactive Elements

Questions For Discussion

1. Brainstorm a list of games that might be acceptable for preschool children. What physical, mental, or social skills do they help to develop?

Good games for preschool children include tag (running, stopping, and touching), t-ball (developing visual coordination with a stationary target), catch (tracking a moving object), duck-duck-goose (running, stopping, and socializing), and red light green light (balance, stopping, and socializing).

2. The video suggests that parents that try to introduce their children to advanced sports too soon risk over-pressuring their children and turning them of to games they might otherwise enjoy. Do you agree with this view? How can parents introduce their children to sports without over-pressuring them?

One method is to introduce a child to age-appropriate games that concentrate on a single task—for instance, catch or t-ball—before working up to sports like baseball that require a combination of many skills.

3. Stage a debate on the issue of specialization in a single sport. Is it wrong to train children in a single sport at a young age? What are the advantages and disadvantages of specializing in one sport versus sampling several?
4. The question of specialization is different for teenagers. They're more developed physically, mentally, emotionally, and socially, and so they're better equipped to focus on training in a single sport. Many do this, while others continue to play several. What are the pros and cons of specializing versus sampling in adolescence?
5. Discuss the importance of providing emotional support for young athletes, regardless of how well they perform. What are some of the dangers of putting too much pressure on children to succeed?
6. There are many benefits to team sports. Brainstorm a list of these benefits, categorized according to the four areas described in the video—physical, mental, social, and emotional.

Research Projects

- Prepare a report on steroid use and teens. How do teen athletes get started using steroids? Are their coaches aware of it? Are steroids more dangerous for teens than adults? What are symptoms of steroid use? What diseases are linked to steroid use?
- How has child's play changed? Ask adults if they engaged in free play or organized sports. A resource is **Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder** (Richard Louv, Chapel Hill NC: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2005). Why do kids need "downtime?"
- Children with a heavy sports schedule often miss family meals. How do children who eat family dinner at least twice a week benefit? (See the National Center for Addiction and Substance Abuse's reports on this topic at <http://www.casacolumbia.org>.)

Kids And Sports

Evaluation/Testing

Fill-In-The-Blank

Fill in the blanks with the correct words from the bank at the bottom of the page.

Children aren't born ready to play sports. They need to go through set _____, mental, social, and emotional steps of development first, and these steps can't be rushed. An infant isn't strong or _____ enough to catch a ball. A toddler can wear a baseball cap, but needs to be able to track a _____ object before he can swing at a _____. A better sport for preschoolers is _____, which allows them to swing at a _____ target. Elementary schoolers can learn valuable _____ skills from team sports, which can give them a sense of _____ and fair play. _____ can train harder than younger kids, but they still need _____ support from their parents and coaches. By the time they reach puberty, _____ have developed enough intellectually to understand _____ and can start thinking about training harder in a single sport. If children specialize too early, they can be _____, over-pressured, and over-trained. Too much practice can lead to _____ injuries, which can be particularly dangerous in children. If the _____ plates on the bones are damaged, a simple sprain can turn into a lifelong injury. Parents and coaches need to be _____ about what children can do and introduce them to sports in an age-appropriate way.

Word bank:

teamwork
moving
overuse
t-ball
growth
stationary
realistic
over-scheduled
preteens
physical
adolescents
strategy
social
emotional
baseball
coordinated

Kids And Sports

Fill-In-The-Blank Answer Key

Fill in the blanks with the correct words from the bank at the bottom of the page.

Children aren't born ready to play sports. They need to go through set physical, mental, social, and emotional steps of development first, and these steps can't be rushed. An infant isn't strong or coordinated enough to catch a ball. A toddler can wear a baseball cap, but needs to be able to track a moving object before he can swing at a baseball. A better sport for preschoolers is t-ball, which allows them to swing at a stationary target. Elementary schoolers can learn valuable social skills from team sports, which can give them a sense of teamwork and fair play. Preteens can train harder than younger kids, but they still need emotional support from their parents and coaches. By the time they reach puberty, adolescents have developed enough intellectually to understand strategy and can start thinking about training harder in a single sport. If children specialize too early, they can be over-scheduled, over-pressured, and over-trained. Too much practice can lead to overuse injuries, which can be particularly dangerous in children. If the growth plates on the bones are damaged, a simple sprain can turn into a lifelong injury. Parents and coaches need to be realistic about what children can do and introduce them to sports in an age-appropriate way.

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Multiple Choice Worksheet

Circle the best available answer for each of the following:

- 1) T-ball is good for toddlers because it lets them:
 - a) develop quick footwork
 - b) swing at a stationary ball
 - c) increase their aerobic capacity
 - d) focus on a single sport

- 2) Children going through puberty may have difficulty with sports that require the use of:
 - a) peripheral vision
 - b) aerobic capacity
 - c) complex strategy
 - d) balance and body control

- 3) It's best for very young children (0-2 years) to:
 - a) concentrate on a single sport
 - b) play sports that develop their visual skills
 - c) simply play, with no expectations
 - d) wear sports-themed clothing

- 4) Too much training can cause:
 - a) overuse injuries
 - b) shattered focus
 - c) emotional pressure
 - d) all of the above

- 5) Adolescents want to be independent, but they still need lots of _____ support from their parents and coaches in order to play well.
 - a) emotional
 - b) social
 - c) visual
 - d) financial

- 6) Children in this age group are beginning to understand the basic concepts of strategy, but still have limitations in this area and shouldn't be overloaded.
 - a) preschoolers
 - b) adolescents
 - c) early elementary schoolers
 - d) infants

- 7) In order to _____, a child needs to be able to _____.
 - a) swing at a baseball...track a moving object
 - b) shoot a basket...track a moving object
 - c) play t-ball... run and stop quickly
 - d) swing at a baseball...use peripheral vision

- 8) When should children begin specializing on a single sport?
 - a) elementary school
 - b) preschool
 - c) adolescence
 - d) infancy

- 9) Adolescents have greater _____ than younger children.
 - a) balance and body control
 - b) aerobic capacity
 - c) enjoyment of sports
 - d) all of the above

- 10) On average, girls reach puberty between _____ years, and boys between _____ years.
 - a) 14 and 16...12 and 14
 - b) 13 and 15...11 and 13
 - c) 11 and 13...13 and 15
 - d) 11 and 13...11 and 13

Kids And Sports

Multiple Choice Worksheet Answer Key

Circle the best available answer for each of the following:

- 1) T-ball is good for toddlers because it lets them:
 - a) develop quick footwork
 - b) swing at a stationary ball**
 - c) increase their aerobic capacity
 - d) focus on a single sport

- 2) Children going through puberty may have difficulty with sports that require the use of:
 - a) peripheral vision
 - b) aerobic capacity
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 - a) emotional**
 - b) social
 - c) visual
 - d) financial

- 6) Children in this age group are beginning to understand the basic concepts of strategy, but still have limitations in this area and shouldn't be overloaded.
 - a) preschoolers
 - b) adolescents
 - c) early elementary schoolers**
 - d) infants

- 7) In order to _____, a child needs to be able to _____.
 - a) swing at a baseball...track a moving object**
 - b) shoot a basket...track a moving object
 - c) play t-ball... run and stop quickly
 - d) swing at a baseball...use peripheral vision

- 8) When should children begin specializing on a single sport?
 - a) elementary school
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 - c) adolescence**
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 - a) balance and body control
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- 10) On average, girls reach puberty between _____ years, and boys between _____ years.
 - a) 14 and 16...12 and 14
 - b) 13 and 15...11 and 13
 - c) 11 and 13...13 and 15**
 - d) 11 and 13...11 and 13

Kids And Sports Quiz

Match the words in the first column to the best available answer in the second column.

- | | | |
|-------|---|--------------------------|
| _____ | Sports injuries are particularly dangerous for children because they can damage these. | 1) aerobic capacity |
| _____ | This allows a swimmer to see the person in the next lane. It isn't well-developed in young children. | 2) hand-eye coordination |
| _____ | This increases during puberty. | 3) emotional support |
| _____ | This can be thrown by the growth spurts of puberty, even if it was well-developed before. | 4) growth plates |
| _____ | One of the main benefits of team sports is their development of this skill. | 5) socialization |
| _____ | Because it allows a child to swing at a stationary target, t-ball helps develop this. | 6) strategy |
| _____ | Children begin to understand this area of sports in elementary school, but they need to develop intellectually before they really become skilled at it. | 7) peripheral vision |
| _____ | At every level of development, young athletes need this from their parents. | 8) balance |

Kids And Sports

Quiz Answer Key

Match the words in the first column to the best available answer in the second column.

- | | |
|--------------------------|---|
| 4) growth plates | Sports injuries are particularly dangerous for children because they can damage these. |
| 7) peripheral vision | This allows a swimmer to see the person in the next lane. It isn't well-developed in young children. |
| 1) aerobic capacity | This increases during puberty, so teenagers are better able to process oxygen than younger children. |
| 8) balance | This can be thrown by the growth spurts of puberty, even if it was well-developed before. |
| 5) socialization | One of the main benefits of team sports is their development of this skill. |
| 2) hand-eye coordination | Because it allows a child to swing at a stationary target, t-ball helps develop this. |
| 6) strategy | Children begin to understand this area of sports in elementary school, but they need to develop intellectually before they really become skilled at it. |
| 3) emotional support | At every level of development, young athletes need this from their parents. |

Additional Information

Most Common Overuse Injuries In Young Athletes

- **Shin Splints** - Injury to muscles, tendons or bones in front of the lower leg. Common in players of soccer, cross-country, basketball and volleyball.
- **Bone fracture** - Common in basketball, football, soccer, field hockey or lacrosse.
- **Knee damage** - Common in sports requiring running and weight training.
- **Heel injury** - The Achilles tendon can detach from the heel bone.
- **Elbow overuse** - Common in young pitchers who repeatedly work their arms.

For More Information...

Internet Resources

The Institute for the Study of Youth Sports

<http://ed-web3.educ.msu.edu/ysi/>

Based at the University of Michigan, this organization's website offers resources for parents and coaches on effectively teaching safe play and good sportsmanship. They also offer an online certification program for coaches and developed a "Bill of Rights for Young Athletes."

The National Alliance for Youth Sports

<http://www.nays.org>

NAYS developed the National Standards For Youth Sports, which guide coaches and kids through a safe and positive experience in youth sports. Their website includes articles, program guidelines, and other resources for coaches, parents, and administrators.

The National Youth Sports Safety Foundation

<http://www.nyssf.org/>

The goal of the NYSSF is to decrease the number and severity of injuries in youth sports. Their educational programs are aimed at raising awareness among kids, coaches, and parents about how common injuries can be prevented. Every April since 1993, they have organized National Youth Sports Safety Month.

The Partnership for Youth Development Through Sports

<http://www.yes-for-kids.com>

This organization encourages parents to become leaders in their communities to help local programs better meet children's needs. Their goal is to increase participation in youth sports programs and to expand the opportunities provided by those programs.

Print Resources

Burnett, Darrell J. *It's Just a Game! Youth, Sports & Self Esteem*. San Jose, CA: Authors Choice Press, 2001.

Burnett's guide aims to put youth sports in perspective for parents. By promoting positive feedback and emotional support, Burnett hopes to provide a youth sports environment that builds good self-esteem.

McMahon, Regan. *Revolution in the Bleachers: How Parents Can Take Back Family Life in a World Gone Crazy Over Youth Sports*. New York: Gotham Books, 2007.

McMahon's book explores some of the negative physical and emotional impact of the current culture surrounding youth sports. She offers practical, down-to-earth advice for parents on how to take a reasonable and realistic approach to youth athletics.

Stricker, Paul. *Sports Success Rx! Your Child's Prescription for the Best Experience*. Chicago: American Society of Pediatrics, 2006.

Stricker, a pediatrician specializing in adolescent sports medicine, offers clear, jargon-free explanations of the role that physical, mental, and emotional development play in a child's athletic training.