



SUCCESSFUL SPORTS PARENTING

Sport Specialization

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Q: My daughter is in 7th grade and plays soccer and basketball, swims, and runs track. One of our friends has suggested that she just focus only on soccer and not waste her time playing these other sports, as it will help her get the edge and might even lead to a college scholarship. Should she specialize in one sport?

A: Welcome to the world of youth sports in the new millennium. More and more children are specializing in one single sport and training year round in the hopes of gaining a competitive edge. In fact, many people feel that the notion of an all-around athlete is dying.

The question of early sport specialization and year round training is a controversial one. Proponents argue that it improves young athletes' chances of sport success and helps build winning programs. Critics argue that early specialization results in increased stress and burnout, specialization in a sport that might not be best suited for the child, increased injuries, and decreased fun and satisfaction. In addition, early specialization results not from children's desire to specialize but from their parents. These critics also contend that the vast majority of children (over 90%) will never reach the elite levels, so specializing in one sport will rob them of the opportunity to have multiple sport experiences and learn a variety of sport and motor skills.

Unfortunately, definitive research on this question is lacking. However, several national panels of experts from sports medicine and science have convened to discuss the topic. These panels have definitively stated that it is not in the best interest of the child to specialize in a single sport and engage in year round training prior to puberty. Rather multi-sport participation should be encouraged and fostered.

Interestingly, recent research on elite athletes verify this conclusion, as most played multiple sports when they grew up and specialized in one sport later in their teenage years. It was felt that this allowed them to develop multiple skills, find the sport for which they were best suited, and reduced the chance of injury as well as stress induced burnout.

So what does this mean for you and your daughter? I agree with the American Academy of Pediatrics expert panel recommendation that prior to puberty you should encourage your child to participate in multiple sports and not specialize in one. Be careful, however, not to be involved in so many sports that all you do is run from practice to practice and game-to-game. Participating in a number of sports will allow your daughter to develop a number of motor skills, have varied sport experiences, meet kids from varied backgrounds, and try her hand at a number of sports. It will also decrease the likelihood that she will burnout and experience an overuse injury.

When your daughter is in her teens she might think about focusing more attention on one sport or play on at team in one sport for more than one season. However, she still may want to take part in other sports, but perhaps not as intensely or in so many. If she is truly talented, a time to specialize and train year round in one sport will come, but this shouldn't be too early.