

Childhood Sports Participation: Ready, Willing, and Able?

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Many of the benefits of sports participation accrue because most sports involve physical activity, which is defined as any body movement that results in energy expenditure. Physical fitness is the ability to perform physical activity and is a set of physiologic traits that are related to health, skills, or both.

Sports are PLAYED – a word that implies that amusement or recreation is a component of the activity. This is crucial for parents to remember. Play involves behavior that is free, spontaneous, and expressive, in contrast to sports, which are often thought of as competitive and organized. However, the benefits of sports participation may not necessarily be realized through competition. Sports participation encompasses both team and individual activities, including activities such as bicycling and martial arts, which can be lifelong physical activities but which often are not thought of as sports.

From early infancy, children engage in PLAY, which helps them learn about objects and events. Between the ages of 2 and 7 years, children spend most of their waking hours in play. The experiment with various kinds of social interactions through cooperation, sharing, or competition. They also engage in make-believe play, where they simulate the use of skills that they are unable to perform in the real world, such as cooking or driving a car.

By age 6, most children understand rules, and if a particular activity has no rules they will create them. Children also by this age exert pressure on their peers to follow the rules. This process teaches children that social systems depend on adherence to rules. A child's interest in rules is compatible with the introduction of organized sports.

Because no single sport tests all motor skills, a variety of sport activities should be offered. Children should begin sports at a relatively young age (6 and older) so that they will learn to understand that their physical, cognitive, musical, and artistic talents differ from those of their peers.

Reasons Children Want To Play Sports:

- To have fun
- To improve their skills
- To learn new skills
- To be with their friends
- To make new friends
- To succeed or win
- To become physically fit
- To test their abilities against other children
- For the excitement of the game or competition

Benefits of Sports Participation

- Maturation of self-concept and self-esteem
- Allows children to experiment with their own physical skills and to experience personal growth
- Learning the importance of setting goals and making plans to achieve those goals
- Learning how to handle success with grace and failure with dignity
- Learning core values such as discipline, respect, responsibility, fairness, and trustworthiness
- Learning about teamwork, relationships, and leadership
- Improvement in academic performance
- Reduction in anxiety, depression, school dropout rates, misconduct, teen pregnancy, and involvement in risky behaviors such as smoking and substance abuse
- Development of motor skills
- Improvement in bone mass and strength, important for later in life
- Reduction in overweight and obesity
- Cardiovascular fitness that is key to reducing coronary artery disease, hypertension, and type 2 diabetes later in adolescence and adulthood
- Improved awareness of proper nutrition
- Increased exercise-related behaviors and attitudes that may establish a pattern that may persist through life

Certain skills should not be taught before a child is developmentally ready. Parents must understand that children who are pushed to do too much, too soon, may become frustrated, which may lower their self-esteem. For example, the ability to track the velocity of a ball is rarely developed before age 8, so T-ball is a good way for a 6-year-old child to learn to hit a ball with a bat. Asking a 5-year-old to hit a thrown ball will not accelerate his or her development, and does not offer any long-term advantage to the young athlete.

At what age is a child ready to begin participation in organized sports? Too many children today begin sports participation too young, before they are physically, emotionally, socially, and cognitively ready.

Children ages 2 to 5 years are usually unable to master the basic fundamental skills that are the focus of children's sports activities. Balance is poor because these children are just starting to integrate visual, vestibular, and proprioceptive cues. Children younger than 6 to 7 years are also often farsighted, and their imprecise eye movements limit their ability to track and judge the speed of moving objects. Children at this age have short attention spans, and are usually unable to understand coordinated play. They learn best instead by exploration, experimentation, and by mimicking others. Bottom line, toddlers and pre-schoolers who participate in organized sports programs do NOT gain any long-term advantage for future sports performance.

Age 6 to 7 years is a good time to begin organized sports participation, as these children are beginning to master transitional skills, which are fundamental skills that are performed in various combinations and with variations, such as throwing for distance or accuracy. These skills are required for participation

in organized sports activities. Rapid improvement in running occurs at this age. Vision is almost mature. Rule following becomes desired. Posture and balance become more automatic. Reaction times improve. The ability to follow instructions is stronger.

And, by the way, before puberty there are no appreciable differences between boys and girls in endurance, strength, height, or body mass, therefore boys and girls can compete equally together!

Bill Of Rights For The Young Athlete

- The right to participate in sports and physical activities that are fun, and sustainable over a lifetime
- The right to participate at a level commensurate with each child's developmental level
- The right to have qualified adult leadership, and parents and coaches who emphasize personal involvement, variety, success, and fun rather than competition, regimentation, and winning.
- The right to participate in safe and healthy environments
- The right to share in the leadership and decision making of their sports participation
- The right to play as a child and not as an adult
- The right to proper preparation for participation in sports
- The right for equal opportunity to strive for success
- The right to be treated with dignity
- The right to have fun in sports

Does your child HAVE to play in organized sports to become physically fit? Of course not! There are lots of physical activities that can be done individually: biking, running, swimming, ice skating, dancing, roller blading, gymnastics...to name just a few. Anything that gets you moving counts! The goal should be to gradually increase moderate to vigorous physical activity to 30-60 minutes per day five days a week.

What Are The Immediate And Short-Term Benefits Of Physical Activity?

- Having fun
- Spending time with friends
- Improving body image
- Maintaining a healthy weight
- Increasing energy levels
- Increasing endurance for sports or hobbies
- Improved self-image
- Feeling stronger
- Getting muscles or definition
- Just feeling better about oneself

Countering Common Reasons Not To Get Physically Active:

- I don't have time! Build activity into your day. Walk or ride your bike for transportation. Get off the bus a stop early. Take the stairs whenever possible. Plan fun, active activities with friends. Walk around the mall twice before you start shopping.
- I don't like sports! Choose an activity that you enjoy. It does not have to be a sport. Walking, dancing, biking, and swimming are great activities. Consider active hobbies or volunteer work.
- My neighborhood isn't safe! Use a workout DVD or video within your home. Consider exergaming (Wii Fit et al). Dance at home to your favorite music. Find a YMCA or Boys and Girls Club nearby your home. Sign up for after-school activities.
- I'm not any good at sports! You don't have to play a sport to be active. Walking, dancing, swimming...anything that gets you moving counts. Find a friend, sibling, or family member to be an activity buddy, and schedule a fun activity 2-3 times each week.
- I'm overweight and out of shape! Start slowly, with 10 to 15 minutes of activity until the activity is comfortable. Build short activity breaks into your day. Count up your daily sedentary activities (TV, computer, video games) and decrease them by 30 minutes per week until less than 2 hours daily.

Thanks for reading!!