Youth Sports

The Fear of Falling Behind in Youth Sports

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Abstract

Many parents fear that their child or children will not be successful in sports if they do not begin early participation and in some cases, early specialization. In addition to parental pressure on children to participate, there is a youth sport industry that encourages young athletes to purchase the essential equipment for participation in specific sports. This financial investment along with early participation, and often a “win at all cost”, places extreme pressure on children to succeed at sports at an early age. This paper offers suggestions for children to participate in sports at an age-appropriate level.
Introduction

The youth sport industry is growing at an exponential rate (Woods, 2016); however, there are 2.6 million fewer children playing certain youth sports (basketball, soccer, baseball, football, and softball) alone in the past five years (Lee, 2015). Many parents are fearful that their children will not be successful in sports if they are not specializing and competing at an early age (Koba, 2014). As such, parents are feeling pressure to enroll their children at a young age into a sport they believe fits the needs of their children (Benson & Strand, 2014). This forced enrollment and sport specialization can cause a myriad of future problems for children (Brenner, 2007).

Not only is there parental pressure on children to participate, but there is also a lucrative youth sport industry that encourages young athletes to purchase the necessary equipment for participation in specific sports. Noticing all of the sport related equipment available for young athletes can easily give one the impression that everyone is participating in sports and if they are not, they need to buy the gear and get their children involved.

Parents are spending thousands of dollars on youth sports (Koba, 2014). When making significant monetary investments towards sport participation, parents are banking on the hope that their child becomes the next Jordan Spieth or Jason Day. “Spending on sports has grown so high - up to 10.5 percent of gross income - that it is hurting family harmony. A family bringing in $50,000 a year could be spending $5,500” (Sullivan, 2015, p.1). If parents were to put that same money towards a savings account for college, that one individual would have saved $33,000 in six years, enough to cover a complete college education at some state universities (Trends in Higher Education, n.d.).

This financial investment places pressure on children to succeed at sports (Farrey, 2008). The “win at all cost” mentality does not help either. Some parents do not even care about youth development in sport and just want a chance at money. Koba (2014) wrote, “It’s not just about learning teamwork but about money” (p.1). The money being referenced is college scholarship money. This pressure can certainly cause psychological problems in the future, especially if the child hates the sport (Merkel, 2013). There needs to be a better way for children to participate in a diverse sport experience without being forced into a sport with a fear of falling behind. This paper offers suggestions of a better way for children to participate in sports at an age-appropriate level.

Creating Longevity for Young Athletes

Parents and coaches must be educated on the importance of children learning the fundamental skills of sports, rather than just competing and pushing children so hard they burnout and quit before 12 years of age (Johnson, 2012). If young athletes burnout and quit before age 12, they are unlikely to have a positive outlook on the benefits of participating in sports (Baker, 2003). The goals of most youth sport programs (e.g., American Youth Football, n.d.; Satellite Beach Soccer Club, n.d.; Woodbury Athletic Association, n.d.) are to help children have fun, learn valuable life lessons, as well as physically develop in an appropriate manner.

There should be no fear of falling behind or being left behind teammates and peers in youth sport programs. Every child develops at his or her own rate and has plenty of time to develop and grow before he or she needs to worry about early specialization. In fact, specialization does not need to occur for children to reach the elite level. Jayanthi, Pinkham, Dugas, Patrick and Labella (2012) found that many world class athletes were likely to start competing at a later age, participated in a variety of sports, and were selected for a sport federation program at an older age.
To facilitate appropriate training and development, parents should encourage their children to participate in a variety of different sports. Many benefits result from playing a variety of sports that include, but are not limited to, “longer playing careers, enhanced peer relationships as college athletes, increased physical capacity and motor skill base, less sport-specific training in adolescence to reach elite status, increased ability to transfer motor and psychological skills to other sports, and increased motivation, confidence, and self-direction” (Sagas, 2013, p. 2). If parents choose to push their children to specialize in one sport at an early age, the negative consequences from early specialization may outweigh the positives they had desired. These negative consequences can include early dropout, increased chance of injury, social isolation, burnout, lack of enjoyment, limited motor skills, and even shortened careers (Brenner, 2007; Sagas, 2013). These negative experiences can certainly adversely affect a child’s future in sport or physical activity. It is hoped that children have a positive experience and learn lifelong lessons from competing in sport (Kosel & Strand, 2015; Miller & Strand, 2015); however, if youngsters drop out of sport before they reach middle school, it is impossible for them to learn the valuable lessons associated with sport participation.

According to the World Health Organization, forty-two million children under the age of five were considered overweight or obese in 2013 (World Health Organization, 2015). These numbers are alarming. However, playing a sport can keep children active and fight the obesity epidemic. With the increased chance of having a negative experience with specialization, young children may stop performing physical activity all together; not a positive trend, especially with childhood obesity on the rise.

Take the Time for Appropriate Development

This can be alluring for parents because it gives them hope that their child can achieve stardom with enough practice and thus, the promoting of early specialization. Some parents are pushing their child or children to specialize early in hopes to attain 10,000 hours (Witte, Kiewra, Kasson, & Perry, 2015) as it has been speculated that if a person performs at least 10,000 hours of deliberate practice on a skill, they are more likely to become an expert in that given skill (Gladwell, 2008). Research on the 10,000-hour rule, however, has failed to find a definite relationship between the rule and attaining expert status in sports (Macnamara, Hambrick, & Oswald, 2014). In fact, for some specific sports, individuals have achieved expert or elite status with 4,000 hours (Baker, Cote, & Abernethy, 2003). Further, a recent study (Sage, 2013) on high-performance Australian athletes reported that 28 percent of senior national athletes reached elite playing status within just four years of beginning their sport and that 69 percent of novice athletes developed into senior elite athletes in an average of 7.5 years.

There is sufficient evidence to support parents to consider waiting until their child or children are 10 or 11 years old before they start participating in organized or structured sports rather than beginning at age 5 or 6. Delaying entry into organized competitive sport also allows children to develop proper motor patterns that set them up for a healthy and successful sports experience (Callender, 2010; Goncalves, Rama, & Figueriredo, 2012). In addition, parents save money instead of spending it on youth camps where a child might not be developing properly at such a young age (Hyman, 2012). Starting organized sports at a later age can also reduce the pressure children may experience from parents who are living vicariously through their children (Gould, Wilson, Tuffy, & Lochbaum, 1993; Scanlan, & Lewthwaite, 1984).
It is important that parents recognize that their children are not miniature adults and need the appropriate time to develop physically, emotionally, and socially before transitioning into one sport on a year-round basis (Purcell, 2005). The benefit that parents envision from beginning early and focusing on one sport, is that their child may have a better chance at a scholarship or becoming a professional athlete (Farrey, 2008). This is highly unlikely however as less than 0.2% of high school athletes will achieve elite status in adulthood (National Collegiate Athletic Association, 2015).

It has been suggested that there may be an optimal development period for acquiring a complex skill, similar to that of learning a new language (Vaeyens, Lenoir, Williams, & Philippaert, 2008). This might be great for a skill like music, but it does not always apply the same way for sport skill development (Macnamara, Hambrick, Oswald, 2014). Sport participation occurs in a chaotic always-changing environment that is much different than trying to learn a new language or music skill in a fixed setting.

Parents and their young athletes are better served delaying early sport specialization and instead experience a variety of sports, known as sport diversification (Wojtys, 2013). A study with Division I female intercollegiate athlete noted that “83 percent of the athletes indicated playing more than one competitive sport as a youth” (Sagas, 2013, p.3). Therefore, a large majority of these college players participated in multiple sports prior to reaching the Division I level. Even Olympians and current athletes at elite levels attribute playing multiple sports to their development to play at that high of a level (American Medical Society for Sport Medicine, 2013).

Positive Youth Development (Life Skills)

While there are programs that try to create strictly professional athletes and only emphasize the importance of winning, it is important that programs establish proper ways for children to develop appropriately. Programs should utilize different methods for children to learn valuable lessons and skills that they can carry with them for the rest of their lives. Involvement in sport can have several positive outcomes in children’s cognitive, psychological, and physical development if there is an emphasis on those elements as well as how to transfer those skills to real-life settings (Turnnidge, Cote, & Hancock, 2014).

There are two different designs that have been utilized to help promote positive development in youth sports. One design is the implicit approach, which emphasizes the importance of developing sport specific development outcomes, rather than the transfer of skills. The second approach is the explicit approach, which states that sport programs should deliberately teach youth about the transfer of personal skills (Turnnidge et al., 2014). Even with these two different designs, it is important that coaches teach young athletes personal life skills. They can do this directly by telling them about it, or they can take advantage of teachable moments that naturally occur during practice or events.

Summary

Parents are pushing their children in youth sport with the hope that this push will lead them to become youth sport and high school champions, scholarship collegiate athletes, and eventually professional paid athletes. Children, however, just want to understand the sport, be accepted by their peers, and have fun while they are playing the sport. There are certainly many lessons and skills that children learn while playing sport, but if a child does not ultimately enjoy what is happening, he or she is likely to drop out and not receive the benefits that sport participation provides (Turnnidge et al., 2014).

To foster long-term enjoyment and lifetime participation of sport and physical activity,
parents must ensure that their children have 
diverse and healthy sport experiences in which 
children learn and develop sport skill 
fundamentals while minimizing the risk of 
injury. As detailed in this paper, research 
suggests that there is no need to start children 
in organized and structured sport programs at 
the age of five and then have them pick one 
sport to specialize in for the rest of their lives. 
Parents must remember that children develop 
at different rates and there is no need to force 
them into one sport in hopes of getting a 
college scholarship, which is highly unlikely as 
college scholarships are scarce and not many 
college athletes continue to play professional 
sports. To the contrary, parents should focus on 
their children gaining life skills from sports. 
Parents should trust that their child or children 
are trying their best and getting the most they 
can from their sport experience so that the 
children do not feel pressured and can enjoy 
and learn from their sport experience.

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References


