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THE CHECKUP

Keeping the Fun in Children's Sports

“The evidence shows that what makes sports really fun for kids is trying hard, making progress, being a good sport, experiencing positive coaching,” a doctor of sports medicine said.

By **Perri Klass, M.D.**

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A new clinical report on organized sports for children, preadolescents and adolescents from the American Academy of Pediatrics keeps coming back to the question of fun.

The report summarizes evidence on the many benefits of sports participation for children, from acquiring motor skills to developing positive self-image, from strong social interactions to higher levels of physical activity and good weight management. But especially in younger children, all of this should spring from the child's desire to get out there and play, and kids who participate in organized sports should also have lots of time for less formal activities with friends.

“It doesn't necessarily have to do with winning,” said Dr. Kelsey Logan, the director of the division of sports medicine at Cincinnati Children's Hospital, and the co-author of the report. “The evidence shows that what makes sports really fun for kids is trying hard, making progress, being a good sport, experiencing positive coaching.”

Dr. Michele LaBotz, a sports medicine physician near Portland, Me., and a member of the A.A.P. council on sports medicine and fitness, said: “So much of what drives the sports industrial complex is, what's your team's performance this year, short term.” But as someone who cares for these young athletes, she said, she is more concerned with how they are developing over the long term, both in terms of their athletic abilities and “their ability to move forward and make good decisions.”

Parents with younger preadolescent children should “embrace variety in the way your kids move.” If all they do is a running sport like soccer, she said, they aren't getting all the movements they need. “You've got to enable younger kids to move their bodies in as many ways as possible, organized sports but also free play,” she said.

“Younger kids need variety, not repetition, that’s a big mistake I see over and over again,” Dr. LaBotz said. She may see parents with an 8- or 9-year-old whose soccer coach wants him to give up swimming for indoor soccer, for example, she said, and “that’s not the right choice.” Children should balance a running sport like soccer with a sport that uses more upper-body motion like baseball or swimming or tennis, she said, or with an activity that requires more motor control like martial arts or gymnastics or dance.

[Try the Healthy Sport Index, a tool to find the best sport for your priorities.]

Dr. Logan said that some children, even though they participate in team sports, may not be sufficiently active for their own health. “Both pediatricians and parents assume that kids in organized sports are getting enough physical activity, but they actually might not be,” she said. “There can be a lot of standing around at practice.”

Several studies have looked at this in different sports, she said, and at ways to educate coaches with strategies to increase the amount of moderate to vigorous activity for everyone on the team. “Watch what your kid is doing on the field,” Dr. Logan said. “You might be surprised at what you see.”

For kids who are getting vigorous intense workouts, rest is also important. “It’s important to train hard, and I say this to patients all the time, but it’s also important to recover hard,” Dr. LaBotz said. “Working out, you’re breaking your body down — it gets stronger in that recovery period in between workouts.” If children are playing on multiple teams, or going home from baseball practice to throw a ball in the backyard, they may be shortchanging their bodies.

Kids need a few days a week away from organized sports, she said, but they also need bigger blocks of time off, at least a couple of four-week blocks every year away where their activity is just playing casually with friends.

And for all the importance of coaches and teammates, studies show that parents really matter. “The coach-athlete relationship is incredibly important,” Dr. Logan said, but the evidence shows that parents have an even more central role in helping children get the most out of their participation in sports.

“Organized sports needs to be tailored to the child’s developmental stage, not just their age,” Dr. Logan said, so it’s particularly important to be sure that the coach is working with children in a developmentally appropriate way. Parents can play an important role here, looking at their children to see what they are developmentally ready to do, and not pushing them too early into situations that will be frustrating.

[Read more on how to avoid burnout in youth sports, and Norway's declaration of children's rights in sports.]

When she sees children with sports-related injuries in her practice, Dr. LaBotz said, she focuses on understanding the mechanics behind how they occurred, and how they can be prevented. “The biggest predictor for future injury is past injury,” she said. “What is it that set this kid up for injury?”

She also sees kids with chronic or overuse injuries, she said, and “I have the recovery talk over and over again.” She talks about the importance of appropriate rest, about the role that getting enough sleep plays in injury prevention, about the right amount of the right kinds of nutrition, “getting what you need from foods rather than tapping into supplements.”

Sometimes, she said, this involves explaining to parents who have come to feel that carbohydrates are to be avoided at all costs that they are in fact “the best, most effective fuel for young athletes.” She tells them that if they don't have carbohydrates on board, “your body will break down muscle, and you've worked too hard to build it.”

Dr. Logan said that she has started to talk to parents about the issue of abuse by coaches and what they need to look for in a program to be sure that the environment is safe. “Most parents don't ask any questions of the sponsoring sports organization,” she said. She recommends a parent checklist developed by Dr. LaBotz, available on the A.A.P. website.

Dr. LaBotz also points out that “the most prevalent forms of abuse on sports teams are between teammates, hazing, bullying.” She talks with parents about paying attention to a child's emotional experience on the team. Watch for the same kind of signs you might see with bullying in other contexts — is your child shying away from teammates?, does your child's personality seem to be changing? — and most of all, keep talking, keep asking questions, stay involved.

“The parent plays an absolutely essential role in supporting the child's progress, skills, development, enjoyment,” Dr. Logan said. Parents should also be keeping an eye on other aspects of children's lives, making sure they're getting enough sleep, getting the right nutrition. “I find myself having a lot of conversations about how organized sports is fitting in with the rest of the child's life,” Dr. Logan said

Sometimes adults and schedules and pressure can take the fun away from kids who originally just wanted to go out and play, Dr. LaBotz said. “I've learned to ask the kid directly: Are you having fun? There's one right answer for sports: It should be, ‘Oh, yeah,’ with some enthusiasm behind it.”

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