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Organized sports pick should match child's personality and skills

Spring has finally arrived in the Northeast, paving the way for a new sports season. While some have dreams of another pennant sweep, others are anticipating more personal issues. As their kids dream of becoming athletic heroes, many parents wrestle with whether their children should even participate in organized sports. Many are unsure as to which sports to choose and seriously wonder about the risks and benefits of getting involved.

Without question, both children and adults benefit from physical activity. We live in a sedentary society, and obesity is an ever-expanding epidemic. Increasing numbers of us suffer from diabetes, cardiac disease and hypertension, indicating that all children and adults need to engage in regular physical activity. While organized sports provide positive choices for some children, for others, neighborhood recreational activities or noncompetitive sports provide necessary exercise.

For many children, organized or competitive sports present desirable challenges. The physical activity improves health and wellness, and properly run organized sports promote responsibility and growth. The activities should be enjoyable, since we refer to them as "playing" sports. Physical fitness improves as new skills are learned and others are enhanced. Healthy relationships and lifetime habits are established. Within the competitive environment, children learn the value of rules and how to relate to others.

Every child has his or her own personality and unique needs and skill sets. Some kids are naturally physically talented. They learn new skills quickly and easily and are leaders from an early age. The positive feedback helps build confidence, ego strength and self-esteem. Other children learn skills more slowly and in a competitive environment may lose confidence and self-respect. Parents and adult mentors must be extra attentive to the child who appears less successful and/or unhappy to provide extra support for skill building. All children benefit from individual support and encouragement, but some youngsters may require more creative searches to find physical activities that match their abilities and that they find interesting.

Parents should also consider that, in addition to creating bruised egos, participating in sports can lead to physical injuries. In football, the sport with the highest rates of injury, one in three athletes suffers an injury every year that causes them to miss at least one game. Wrestling, girls soccer, boys soccer, and boys and girls basketball follow football in order of risk. Most injuries are minor and without serious consequence. It is notable that most injuries occur in practice, as more time is spent in practice than in actual game play. All physical activity is potentially risky, and biking, horseback riding, in-line skating, skateboarding and trampoline gymnastics may actually have injury rates higher than those seen in organized sports.

The goals of childhood sports participation should be improved physical health and wellness, acquisition and development of new skills, enhanced self-esteem, and enjoyment, not winning. Parents and coaches play a critical role in determining success or painful failure. Parents know their children best and, in addition to thoughtful sports evaluation and family discussion, should learn all they can about local sports programs and coaches. Which coaches are most knowledgeable, positive and interested in skill development? Who focuses on the child, and who only in winning? Stop in at practice and talk with coaches about their philosophy. Ask if every child plays in every game.

Once the sport and coach is chosen, parents should be involved, both as personal role models for physical fitness and by providing unqualified love and support for the young athlete. They should refrain from criticizing or continuously providing suggestions, because that's the coach's job. Since kids respond to positive feedback, cheering and encouragement is likely to enhance your child's sense of confidence, physical fitness and sports performance.

Sports should be a positive and rewarding experience for your child. Talk with your kids and learn what they like and why they avoid certain other activities. Explore your local community to learn about available opportunities that meet your child's needs. Speak with coaches and leagues to assure they provide age-appropriate positive experiences and skill building that make sports an invaluable childhood experience.

Further resources and information are available at www.aap.org, just type in 'sports for kids' in the search bar.

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