

How Young is Too Young for Your Child to Specialize in a Sport?

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Long gone are the days of seasonal sports where youth were encouraged to play one sport per season. Today the highest level of competitive youth sports has 10-year-olds signing contracts stating that they'll play exclusively for one local team, and children are being pressured to pick one sport by being benched anytime they miss practice, even if it is for another youth sporting event. Since these select level teams typically play and practice year round, playing a second sport is nearly impossible. If you're considering allowing your young child to specialize in one sport, here are some things you should consider:

Playing different sports will create a well-rounded athlete. According to healthcare professionals at UPMC (University Pittsburgh Medical Center) that specialize in sports medicine, specializing in a sport before the age of 14 can have detrimental effects. When children play different sports they are using and strengthening different muscle groups. By specializing in one sport too early kids will miss out on all of the gains they could have made by working those other muscle groups. Kids that are involved in different sports will be more well- rounded athletes and are less likely to be injured.

Repetitive use injuries are more likely in athletes that specialize too early. Nearly 40% of all sports related injuries involve kids ages 5-13 according to Safe Kids USA. Young children's muscles have not fully developed, and when those muscles are over-worked there is a much higher likelihood that an injury will occur. Overtraining causes the bones and muscles to weaken, and without the proper amount of rest for those muscles to rebuild an injury is more likely to occur.

Burnout is on the rise. Sport psychologists from the Guilford Sports Medicine Center define "burnout" as losing interest in sports, physical and emotional exhaustion, and a reduction in athletic accomplishment. Too much of anything, even something you love, can result in burnout. Burnout can be avoided by mixing things up for your young athlete and making sure that he wants to be going to the practices and games that he's attending. Make sure that your star athlete has some down time and keep it fun.

Specialization is no guarantee for future success. A Belgium study, published in the *Journal of Sports Sciences*, finds that kids who delay specializing in one sport are more coordinated and more physically fit than those who specialized early. There is no proof that those athletes that specialize early will outperform those who played multiple sports. Very few professional athletes specialized early. Two stand outs that did are Andre Agassi and Tiger Woods. Most others played several sports growing up and did not specialize early. Alex Rodriguez played basketball, football and soccer before landing in baseball, and Kobe Bryant was a soccer player before he found his love for basketball.

What if there's something better out there? Kids who play high level sports tend to have a natural aptitude for sports that will allow them to do well in almost any sport. When kids specialize in one sport at the age of 8 or 9, they miss out on an opportunity to try other sports. Maybe his true calling is in track or football, but he'll never know because he started playing soccer at the age of 3 and never had a chance to try anything else.

The bottom line is that there are far more studies that show there is no benefit to encouraging young athletes to specialize in a sport. Athletes have a greater chance to have repetitive use injuries, experience burn out, and miss out on the advantages that playing multiple sports can give them when they do. Encourage your kids to try different sports and to have fun while they are doing it.