

Sports and Your Child

Guidelines for Parents



From the backyard to the playground, more American children than ever are playing games and competing in sports. Close to 6 million high school boys and girls take part in team sports on courts, in pools, on fields, and in gyms. Another 20 million join in recreational or competitive sports out of school.

Sports help boys and girls in many ways. When a body is fit, it looks and feels better. But even more important is that fit people stay healthier longer. With the right guidance, sports activities can promote a sense of personal satisfaction in young people—and that can lead to increased social acceptance.

Your pediatrician plays a vital role in making sure that your child's sports program—whether in or out of school—gets the right results. Each young athlete presents a unique picture of health, growth, physical maturity, and knowledge of basic skills. A complete medical exam will highlight your child's physical strengths and weaknesses. This “physical” may help your young athlete choose the sport that will be most rewarding for him or her.

Your doctor can counsel you in many other aspects of safe and enjoyable sports participation for your child, such as proper diet and injury prevention. Make sure that your young athlete gets the best guidance possible. Here are answers to questions that parents often ask their pediatricians.

At what age should a child get started in sports?

Infant exercise programs are unnecessary because these programs do nothing to improve your baby's physical fitness. It is a good idea to wait until your child is 6 years old before beginning team sports, since children do not understand the concept of teamwork until this age. Free play is advised until then. Although the age just mentioned is a good guideline, remember that all children are different. Two children the same age may grow and mature at different rates. A child's build also determines his or her ability to perform certain tasks. When children reach the teen years, there are many different levels of maturity.

A study of Little League World Series players revealed that almost half had already passed through puberty, although all were younger than 13 years old. Age, weight, and size should not be the only measures when deciding whether to compete in a sport at a certain level. A young teenager's physical and emotional development also are important. In puberty, boys gain more muscle mass and, therefore, more strength. Two wrestlers who are the same weight and age will not be equally matched if one athlete is mature and the other is not. This puts the less-developed boy at a disadvantage and may increase his chance of injury.

Late-developing teens should delay contact sports until their bodies have caught up with their more mature peers. A child should not be pushed into a sport that he or she is not physically or emotionally ready to handle. But if the child has a strong interest in a sport, then it may be proper to allow participation—so long as common sense prevails.

Should boys and girls play in sports together?

In recent years, sports participation for girls has been encouraged as strongly as sports activities for boys. This welcome trend pays off in many ways. By having the chance to take part in sports, girls gain self-confidence and a healthy respect for physical fitness.

Until the onset of puberty, boys and girls can compete together because boys and girls are almost the same size and weight. Girls generally enter puberty between 10 and 12 years of age, about 2 years before boys do. After puberty, boys gain an advantage in both strength and size. Therefore, safety and fairness dictate that boys and girls should no longer compete against each other in most sports. However, if there is no team for girls in a certain sport, some laws state that a girl must be allowed to compete for a position on the boys' team.

What are the risks of injury in various sports?

Despite safety measures, such as protective padding and helmets, the risk of injury is present in all sports. Some sports pose a greater risk than others, with football leading the list. Children and parents should be aware of the risks involved with each sports activity.

The chance of injury increases with the degree of contact in a sport. Football produces many times the number of injuries as the next group of sports with significant injuries: wrestling, gymnastics, soccer, basketball, and track/running. Knee injuries are the most common serious injury in major sports. Boxing involves a high risk of brain damage; therefore, no young person should participate in this sport.

Most sports injuries involve the soft tissues of the body, not the bony skeleton. Only about 5% of sports injuries involve fractures. By far the greatest number of injuries—two thirds of the total—are sprains and strains. Sprains are injuries to the ligaments, which connect one bone to another. Strains are injuries to the muscles.

If players wear protective equipment, many sports injuries can be prevented. You should urge your young athlete to use protective gear and teach your child that this equipment will increase long-term enjoyment of the sport.

What if a child wants to quit a sports program?

A child has the right to share in the decision to end his or her involvement in a sport. If a child confronts you with a desire to quit a sports program, gather as many facts as you can. Talk with the child. Ask why he or she wants to quit. There may be a blunt and simple reason, such as not getting along with a coach, or the frustration of being “benched” and never playing in any games.

Observe your child. Are there any signs of stress related to sports participation, such as vomiting, loss of appetite, or headache? Does the child appear depressed—sleeping more often than usual, acting lethargic or withdrawn? These symptoms may suggest that the degree of stress is great enough to warrant withdrawing from the sport.

Base your decision on what your child says and what you observe. Remember, children also must learn not to “quit.” Your child might have won a place on the team, preventing another child from playing in that sport. Simply quitting may waste an opportunity for your child and other young athletes. However, “sticking it out” is not always in the child’s best interest when tough problems crop up. You may want to work with your child’s pediatrician or coach to solve the problem.

How can sports-related stress be prevented?

The main source of stress in the young athlete is the pressure to win. Sadly, many coaches and parents place winning above the values of play and learning. Measure your child’s performance by the yardstick of effort; a young athlete should set goals and then strive to reach them. He or she will respond better to rewards for trying hard, or for gaining skills, than to punishment and criticism for losing.

In sports, stress can be managed through a number of simple steps. Children should be placed in groups that maintain a narrow range of age levels and degrees of skill. Only players of similar height, weight, ability, and maturity should be matched as opponents in contact sports. The rules of a sport can be changed to make it fairer for all to play. For instance, a basketball net could be lowered or a race could be shortened.

Learning to cope with stress is an important part of growing up. Children can develop stress-related symptoms from other sources besides sports, including family problems, peer conflicts, school pressures, and changes in residence. The degree of stress caused by sports often is minor compared to these other sources. Actually, sports can teach the skills for coping with stress caused by any problem. This is one reason why pediatricians encourage participation in athletics.

Should bad grades keep a child from sports?

There is no simple answer to this question. A child having trouble in the classroom still needs all the benefits of exercise, competition, and a sense of accomplishment. Sports may be the only avenue of success in a child’s life, and it could be harmful to take it away.

Parents should look for other causes of poor classroom performance. Conflicts with a job or other duties might be one problem; too much TV watching might be another cause. In some cases the family and school may decide that the child is not studying enough. In this situation it is reasonable to make sports involvement dependent upon achieving better grades. Ask your child what you can do to help him or her improve at school.

Your pediatrician is the right coach to have on your team when you have concerns about your child and sports. Questions about your child’s health and fitness for playing a sport can best be answered by a trained doctor who specializes in children and young people. Make sure your child gets a complete physical exam before starting a sports program. Ask your pediatrician for advice. To ensure that sports are fun for your child, keep them safe.

Physical fitness is just one important part of preventive health care for children. The American Academy of Pediatrics, representing the nation’s pediatricians, is dedicated to working toward a better future for our children. Join us by making sure your children receive proper health care.

The information contained in this publication should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician. There may be variations in treatment that your pediatrician may recommend based on individual facts and circumstances.

From your doctor

