

INAUGURAL ISSUE | YOUR YOUTH SPORTS RESOURCE!

Dublin YOUTH SPORTS

Celebrating The Spirit

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Seeking The Elusive

"Right Fit"

FOR YOUR CHILD?

Keep the focus on fun and **key into your child's individual needs** to help them achieve maximum success and enjoyment. | BY DR. CHRIS STANKOVICH

An estimated 45 million kids participate in youth sports in the United States every year. Evidence increasingly supports the notion that youth athletics provides an opportunity for children to acquire physical, psychological and social benefits that can help them throughout their lifetimes.

Many parents recognize this fact, yet they struggle with finding and maintaining a "good fit" for their child in a program that provides a healthy, rewarding experience throughout their childhood and into adolescence.

"Parents today have so many more choices for their kids," said athletic counselor Dr. Chris Stankovich. "Back when most parents were growing up, kids were grouped into one youth league. Today's sports landscape is much different: Elite, travel, recreational, club, varsity—the choices available to our kids can be overwhelming."

But navigating that landscape is do-able: According to Stankovich, kids' primary motivation for getting involved in sports is to have fun—and that goal or expectation should remain at the forefront throughout the child's athletic experience. "Research shows that at a young age, kids don't rate winning as the most important factor; they really want to play the game and have fun doing it," he said. "As children get older, winning becomes more of a factor—but even at a more advanced level, kids still

need to enjoy the experience."

That fun factor is the centerpiece of most youth sports programs for children 10 and younger. "Parents should seek youth leagues for this age set that also provide developmental components," Stankovich said. "An ultra-competitive environment at age 8 is going to flush out the fun and become counterproductive for most kids." He offers a simple checklist for a sports program geared toward the younger athlete: It should be fun; allow for participation and play time for all players; and promote basic life-skills development.

Stankovich contends that there is not an "ideal" age for a child to begin participating in organized athletics. "It's not about chronological age, but more about how that child is supported." Allowing a young child to sample different sports, as opposed to stressing single-sport specialization, provides healthy opportunities for kids, Stankovich said.

Lack of variety is often associated with youth sports burnout. With more kids today participating in one sport year-round to maintain a competitive advantage, burnout is an increasing phenomenon. While an official diagnosis doesn't exist for burnout, Stankovich offers common-sense red flags that parents should look for: 1) lack of interest or motivation, 2) uncharacteristic behavior, such as a child tuning out family or

social opportunities, and 3) lack of pride in accomplishments.

To help kids reap the greatest benefit from their athletic experience—regardless of where they fall on the age and ability spectrum—Stankovich suggests that parents provide for their children unconditional acceptance. "Far too many times we as parents might say 'It's ok if you don't want to play,' but our body language and our demeanor suggest otherwise. Children feel that pressure to please." Stankovich also cautions parents not to assume that kids love playing a sport. "Just because dad played football or mom was a swimmer doesn't mean their child shares that same passion. It is important to create an environment where kids can open up and talk. Using open-ended questions is a great way to get kids to speak their minds," he said.

Finding out how your child is feeling about a coach, a team or an experience is vital to gauging their overall well-being—and whether or not you've got the right fit."



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