

Choosing a Sports Program for Your Child

By Barbara A. Brehm, Ed.D.

The benefits of a good sports experience are many: positive self-esteem, regular physical activity, improvements in physical fitness, lower risk of depression and, best of all, lots of fun. But sport involvement also requires a great deal of commitment in terms of time and sometimes money. Participation in sports also carries some risk of injury, even in the safest programs.

Parents play a critical role in determining whether their children get involved in sports programs. Your children are more likely to participate if you value sport experience and have a positive attitude about youth sports programs. Parents are also usually the ones who provide the money and transportation required to be part of a sports program. You may need to help your children shop for equipment, and get to practice and competitions on time. Many parents even spend time practicing sports skills with their children at home.

Parents also help to determine the nature of their child's sports experience. Parents can create enjoyable experiences by signing their children up for programs that will be fun. They can also create stress and anxiety by placing excessive pressure on their children to excel, or enroll them in programs that are unsuitably demanding. Here are a few suggestions for helping your children have positive sports experiences.

Think long-term

What are your reasons for encouraging sports involvement? Most parents hope that sports will improve their child's physical and emotional health and development. They want sports to be challenging yet fun, so that their children can feel successful and proud of their progress.

The best sports experiences develop when children and programs are a good match. Look for programs that are appropriate for your child's age, motor development and interests. Young children need experiences that teach skills through games and play, with less emphasis on competition. Older children may be ready for more competitive experiences, although many in this age group still prefer something low-key.

A child's first sports experiences is important, because if these experiences are embarrassing or discouraging, children (and adults!) may decide they hate sports and to stay away from them forever. This is unfortunate. Many children who have

been pushed (too hard?) to participate in sports at a young age drop out before they reach adolescence. Yet the teenage years are the time when boys and girls really need sports and other forms of vigorous physical activity to help them deal with the emotional stress of their changing bodies and moods. When you think long term, you look for sports programs that are most likely to give your child a positive emotional experience.

Talk to other families involved in youth sport programs. As you ask around about good coaches and programs, you will start to hear certain names over and over again. Ask kids and their parents why they chose the program, and what they like about it. Are these the qualities you think your child would enjoy?

Make safety a priority

Be sure your children have the proper safety equipment recommended for their sports, and that the equipment fits well and is in good condition. Encourage children to drink plenty of water before and during practice and competition, and to avoid vigorous exertion if the weather is hot and humid. Attend to aches and pains that could be an early sign of overuse injury. Ask the coach to limit your children's participation if injuries develop.

Show positive support and model good sportsmanship

Show an interest in your child's sports experience, but find a level of involvement that works for you and your children. Be supportive, but don't dominate the experience. If you are unable to attend a game, ask your child about it. Monitor the experiences your children are having. Are things going well? Do they like going to practices and competitions?

Be a good spectator at contests. Sit where the coach asks you to sit, and cheer all the children on your team, not just your child. Never boo the opposing team (these are just kids!). Don't try to coach from the sidelines, or argue with the coach or referees. And be sure to thank the coaches for their work.

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