



CAPE COD SPORTS MEDICINE INC.

ORTHOPEDIC SURGEON

Donald E. O'Malley, M.D.
Lisa A. Mayhew, PA-C
Karen A. Trait, PA-C

PO BOX 765
FALMOUTH, MA 02541
OFFICE: (508) 540-0200
FAX: (508) 540-0201

SPORTS AND THE YOUNG CHILD

We are frequently asked by parents; is it safe for my young child to play Pop-Warner Football? How young can a child start playing sports? Is there a higher risk of injury with children playing sports? Is there any sport better than the other for young children? What injuries do you usually see in my child's sport? We'll attempt to answer most of these questions in this discussion of sport as it relates to the young child.

SPORTS PARTICIPATION

There is no magic age to start sports. Organized athletics is a healthy way for the young child to dissipate some of that abounding energy in a positive, constructive and supervised manner. The most important question I'll ask back to the parent is "what makes you feel your child is ready?" It is important that the child and not the parent are ready for them to start sport. Sport must be kept in the proper perspective. Being part of a team is an integral part of our life, both on the field, at work and in the family. The child learns discipline and the need to cooperate with others to accomplish a common goal. The child's participation in sport should be regarded as an extended part of school time, playtime and family time. It should not replace these critical elements in childhood development. Children less than 5 years old have little understanding of organized sport. Their world revolves around free play. Pushing a child to sports too early may frustrate them and turn them against a sport. Certainly it is okay to have a football, soccer ball or basketball around the play gym, but let the child seek these toys out.

Once a child begins attending school, he learns about interaction with peer groups. Organized play with other children begins to take on an element of fun. Athletics at this age is an exercise of providing fun and play. Often the concept of the game, rules and scoring are lost on this age group between 5 and 9. Short attention spans make it difficult to execute coordinated plays. I had the lucky opportunity to observe a 6-year-old get the football at a Pop-Warner game. With everyone yelling "run...run" the child took off in the wrong direction and ran the length of the football field, then the adjoining football field and finally stopped in the middle of a softball field! He did what he was told. As long as the sport, coaches etc keep the game fun with little emphasis on rules & structure, these children do okay.

The ten-year-old to twelve-year-old group begins to put the concept of sport together. Their pre-pubescent bodies just aren't ready to model their favorite player on TV. The mind is willing, the body just not able yet. This age group in varying degrees grasps the organization and philosophy of sport. "Making the team" is a major social rite of passage. Kids will hangout with their teammates as friends. The socialization of sport begins to be something carried over to all aspects of their life. The posters on the bedroom wall are changed, the thermos better have an all-star on it. They ask for sport clothing at Christmas or Birthdays. They accept increasing amounts of structure and become goal oriented. Parent participation by attendance at games is critical at this stage. They are still not independent. A major caution is the 12-year-old that has gone through puberty early and is now 5'11" and 210 pounds. This person presents a hazard to the playing field. Organized athletics have increasingly gone to weight restrictions for sports, as the science of growth is still rather unpredictable.

The child going through the rapid growth spurt between the ages of 12-16 is ready for all aspects of athletics. The history of sport becomes well known to them, Sport discipline is well accepted by these kids. They are ready to perform at their best.

In summary, children have different responses and approaches to organized sport. Any child is physically capable of participating in sports as long as parents and coaches understand the objectives for sport in that age group. There is a benefit to children participating in organized sport at an early age.

WORKOUTS IN THE YOUNG CHILD

The child prior to puberty lacks the physiologic and hormonal controls to allow him to benefit from weight training, wind sprints etc. Studies have shown that the prepubescent child is slow to respond to training programs. Fast muscles for sprinting or slow muscles for distance running ratios changed little in children before puberty despite their activity level or training regimen. Little change was measured in cardiovascular parameters in young children despite their training. The child's bones are different than adult bones with soft areas that are prone to overuse injuries if overstressed. A balanced training program without overexertion should be the goal. Included in this should be taught flexibility and stretching exercises, so the child obtains these injury prevention strategies early. Despite physiologic differences, child before puberty do gain some measurable skills by being involved in sport. Dexterity, balance, motor skills, fine motor coordination, work ethic and proper training habits are all benefits that the pre-puberty athlete can gain.

SPORT TYPES FOR YOUNG ATHLETES

Young children should participate in a variety of sport activities. There is no one sport better for the young child than another. The best sport is the one the child (and not the parent) is interested in. There is no compelling data to suggest a non-contact sport over a contact sport in the young age group. The acquisition of basic individual skills should be the goal in this age group. The child should not be pushed to what the parent or coach couldn't become in their youth. Children have the capability of identifying sport activities that "fit" them both physically and psychologically, and should be allowed to choose.

THE INJURED YOUNG ATHLETE

There is no question that injuries occur throughout the entire spectrum of sport participation. The real question is whether sport in childhood exposes the child to undue risk. Several studies have documented a low incidence of injury in young children involved in organized sport. In fact crossing the street has a much higher likelihood of injury than participation in sport. Interestingly, the occurrence of injury in sports is actually lower in the organized sports for the younger child (pre-puberty) when compared to the young adults (age 17-22). Because the child has a lower body mass, lower acceleration and lower center of gravity, they tend not to get hurt as bad as big kids do. The most common injuries I see in the young athlete are sprains and bruises. Rarely do I see a wrist fracture from a fall. I see far more wrist fractures from falls off the jungle gym, bicycles and skateboards.

SPORT SPECIFIC INJURIES

This is somewhat of a misnomer, as no sport claims exclusive rights to any one injury. I've seen the same injury caused by contact and non-contact sports. Thankfully most injuries are minor sprains, scrapes and bruises. An athlete with **persistent** complaints over 12-24 hours should be evaluated further. Splinting the extremity and applying ice should be the first step. It is important that coaches and parents be responsive to athletes with complaints of injury in all age groups.

Overuse injuries are seen in sports requiring repetitive motion or high stresses during one part of the motion such as pitching, track, tennis, golf and swimming. Pitchers develop "little leaguers elbow, tennis elbow, shin splints and shoulder tendonitis are more examples. Once recognized these injuries should be managed by an athletic trainer and referred for evaluation if symptoms don't abate with rest, or worsen. A sport specific//injury specific training program should be developed for that athletes return to sport.

SUMMARY

Youth Organized Sport is a worthwhile and beneficial activity for young children. Carry-over value from sport to school and family is very high. Sports create a discipline for maintaining good nutrition & fitness which can be incorporated into a healthy adult lifestyle. Organized sport provides a worthwhile outlet for childhood's excess energy. The risk-benefit ratio of injury is acceptably low. Sport activity in an organized setting will benefit most children.