

BALANCING COMPETITIVE PRESSURES WITH FUN AND DEVELOPMENT

CONSIDERATIONS FOR A TRANSITION TO MORE COMPETITIVE SPORTS PROGRAMS

In today's youth sports environment, parents and caregivers can often feel pressured to enroll their athlete in more competitive programs. This pressure can come from concerns about their athlete falling behind peers, keeping up with other families, seeking a more challenging experience, or feeling pushed by coaches to specialize in one sport.

Enrolling your athlete in a sports experience that isn't developmentally appropriate for them can lead to ⁽²⁾:

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DID YOU KNOW?

Studies have shown that elite athletes typically didn't start intensive training until late adolescence and that these athletes regularly played other sports before specializing. ⁽¹⁾

01

Poor skill development because winning is emphasized over fundamentals

02

Failing to reach optimal performance levels

03

Added costs and fees

04

Burnout and dropout of sport

05

Over scheduling leading to lack of sleep and recovery time ⁽³⁾

06

Added pressure on athletes

07

Less enjoyment and less fun

08

Increased risk for experiencing injury

These tips can guide parents and caregivers in making choices that help ensure sports stay fun, safe, and impactful for their athletes.

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PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS SHOULD CONSIDER...

01 WHAT IS DEVELOPMENTALLY APPROPRIATE FOR THEIR ATHLETE

The US Olympic & Paralympic Committee's [American Development Model](#) (ADM) was designed to help sports clubs, coaches, and parents/caregivers create a healthy sport experience and support an athlete based on their physical, mental, and emotional level and their potential for growth. According to the ADM ⁽⁴⁾:

- **Athletes 0 - 12 years of age** should participate in sports activities that are varied, promote physical literacy by developing fundamental movement skills, and emphasize fun, exploration, and discovery.
- **Athletes 10 - 16 years of age**, after being engaged in a sport and wanting to explore more organized training options, should focus on programs that refine sport-specific skills through age-appropriate challenges like recreational competition or organized sports programs at a local/regional level.
- **Athletes 13 - 19 years of age** can engage in more clearly defined competition and increase sport-specific training while still incorporating recreational and multi-sport play to avoid burnout, provide cross-training, and allow the athlete to fully develop. Club competition and school teams are appropriate challenges for this age range.
- **Athletes 15 + years of age** may choose to pursue higher-performance environments that require greater commitment.

**0-12
YEARS**

VARIED SPORTS ACTIVITIES

Movement Skills
Emphasize Fun

**10-16
YEARS**

ORGANIZED TRAINING

Sport-Specific
Skills
Age-Appropriate
Challenges

**13-19
YEARS**

CLEARLY DEFINED COMPETITION

Sport-Specific
Training
Multi-Sport Play to
Avoid Burnout

**15+
YEARS**

HIGHER PERFORMANCE

Require Greater
Commitment

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02 THEIR ATHLETE'S PREFERENCES

Allow athletes to take the lead in deciding whether they want to pursue a more competitive sports experience. Do this by:

- Waiting for them to express interest before discussing or researching more competitive programs.
- Discussing their sports interests and goals: Do they wish to participate in a more competitive environment? Why? Are they prepared for the extra time and work? Are they prepared to give up other activities if needed?
- Athletes should only advance to the next stage of competition when they're both ready for it and genuinely interested.



03 EVALUATING PROGRAM CULTURES

Just because a program is more competitive does not mean it should be ALL about winning. Talk to friends, community members, program administrators, and those already involved with more competitive programs to ensure coaches are properly balancing the added pressures with fun and life skill development.

Explore programs together and encourage your athlete to connect with others to understand what it's really like. This helps prevent signing up for something that could dampen their love of the game.

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04 SPECIALIZATION GUIDELINES

Participating in a more competitive program doesn't necessarily mean specializing in a sport - but if that is what you and your athlete are considering, keep in mind:

- Early sport specialization can put young athletes at increased risk of injury and psychological stress, contributing to the likelihood that they might quit sports at a younger age. ⁽⁵⁾
- Athletes who participate in a variety of sports have fewer injuries and play sports longer than those who specialize before puberty. ⁽¹⁾
- Current evidence suggests that delaying sports specialization until after puberty (late adolescence, approx. 15 - 16 years old) will minimize injury and burnout risks and increase the likelihood of athletic success. ⁽¹⁾
- Experts recommend that athletes participate in multiple sports as long as they can to maximize the physical, psychological, and social benefits of sports. ⁽⁶⁾

05 CONSULTING THEIR ATHLETES' CURRENT COACHES

Coaches who don't stand to benefit financially or personally from your athlete advancing to the next level of competition can offer particularly valuable insight. Their observations of how your athlete practices, competes, and responds to challenges can help gauge how the athlete may handle a more competitive setting. The coach's perspective shouldn't be the only deciding factor, but it's an important piece of the puzzle. After all, research shows that coaches are a primary influence on athletes' decisions to increase training and specialize in a sport. ⁽¹⁾

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