

CHILDREN AND SPORTS: Finding a Healthy Balance from *Renewal* Magazine Volume 14, Number 1 (Poplawski)

Over the last thirty or forty years, the sanctity and wholesomeness of early childhood have been under attack. Exposure to sex and violence in the media, pressure to achieve early reading, measurable academic factors have produced the “hurried child.” Many children today are forced into choices and activities for which, in terms of their physical, emotional, and intellectual development, they are not yet ready. This has demonstrably taken place in the realm of sports.

In previous generations, most children learned and played games such as baseball, basketball, football, and soccer in their neighborhood, playing with children who lived nearby. Parents were involved very little in this. The stay-at-home mothers of the time were there to help if someone got hurt and to provide cold lemonade for thirsty players.

Today, unsupervised local play and sports activity is much less common. In many areas there are concerns about safety. Also, since in many families both parents work, there is no one at home to provide safety-net supervision. The result is that today children are likely to wind up after school in a supervised aftercare situation or doing some adult-organized and adult-let activity. And the organized activities of choice today are competitive sports. Hence, we have the ubiquity of the soccer league, the swim team, the basketball league, and so on, complete with uniforms, team names, scheduled games, championships, coaches, sponsors, and so on.

Organized teams and leagues for youngsters did exist in the past. They were much less common, however, and supplemented rather than replaced neighborhood play. And they were mostly for children who were approaching adolescence or had entered into it. Today there is a trend to have younger and younger children take part in organized athletic activities—in preschool soccer leagues and swim teams, for example. There is a tendency too to have children specialize in a single sport and to do that sport all year round, rather than just during its particular season. While in some communities the idea prevails that sports for children are wholesome play rather than competition, the current growing emphasis on achievement and winning has endangered this attitude. Thus, organized sports for children have taken on a disturbing life of their own. Often they do not serve the physical and emotional health of the child, and sports can undermine rather than enhance the life of the family.

Stresses on Young Bodies

The growing muscles and bones of young children are not strong enough for the rigorous, repetitive training and practice regimens used by adult athletes. When these regimens are imposed on children, problems arise.

Tendonitis is a very common problem among child athletes. Stress fractures, caused by repeated overtaxing of the bones that are not yet fully calcified, are also very common. To make matters worse, almost a quarter of all children with athletic injuries are—according to a study by the Minnesota Amateur Sports Commission—encouraged by parents and coaches to continue playing.

This compromising of the healthy growth of children’s bodies goes on in spite of there being no evidence that starting a child before age eight or nine in any organized team sport gives a lasting advantage. Rather, there is abundant evidence that engaging in adult-level sports at a young age carries the risk of long-lasting injuries. Besides, many experts in child development—as well as disinterested common sense—tell us that growing children need to experience a variety of physical activities in order to grow in a balanced way.

Stresses on Families

A child's joining an athletic team has a big impact on the child's and on also the family's schedule and daily life. Homework, music lessons, and other activities have to be squeezed into a suddenly much fuller schedule, and there is little space for free play and time to just relax and unwind. The family dinner hour is often disrupted. A regular and appropriately early bedtime is a common casualty as well. Parents usually find that their chauffeuring duties increase markedly as they are enlisted to drive budding athletes to practices and games. Parents may also spend time (willingly or unwillingly) watching games and practices and waiting in parking lots for their children to be ready to go home.

According to New York child psychiatrist Alvin Rosen, structured sports time has doubled in the past generation, unstructured playtime has been cut in half, and time for that essential ingredient in family life—the family dinner—has declined by a third.

Especially problematic has been the proliferation of so-called “travel teams.” These teams provide professional-level coaching and stiffer competition but place greater demands on the child and the family. A travel team may practice twice a week and play another two times a week. Its away-games can involve a round-trip of up to four hours. Such time-demands obviously put a lot of pressure on the schedules of children, parents, and families.

The travel team offers the child with some talent and interest an accelerated development in the sport and a better chance to “make the team” at the next level. Most travel teams have involved children in the year or two before high school. In some areas, though, the soccer travel team now involves eight-year-olds concerned about making the ten-year-old team. As one soccer mom complained, the whole thing can begin to feel like “an arms race.”

Children on travel teams are often encouraged to play the same sport in more than one season. They are told that they will fall behind their peers if they do not play all year round. This full-time involvement puts a lot of emotional pressure on the child.

Besides the narrow focus may prevent the balanced physical development that playing a variety of sports brings. Former major league baseball star Cal Ripken Jr. has been very critical of year-round single-sport involvement for young people. He feels that specialization in a single sport before age fifteen has no advantages and may in fact cause harm. Ripken himself played three sports throughout high school and attributes some of his success to this. Through soccer he developed footwork and balance and, through basketball, explosiveness and quickness. Ripken urges aspiring young baseball players to “put the glove down” when the baseball season is over.

Early Does Not Mean Better

The appearance of “the earlier the better” philosophy in sports training is no surprise. Tiger Woods, who began to play golf at age three; the East European world-class gymnast who began training soon after they learned to walk; and other similar examples have convinced many parents that their child will miss out if they do not start early.

Sports history, though, reveals that often it is the late bloomers, who had to work longer and harder to catch up, who later became stars. The same applies to early and intense ballet training. Rudolf Nureyev began formal training at age eleven.

There are substantial pressures on parents to go along with the trend toward early, organized athletics. When a child of seven or eight comes home reporting that all her friends are joining a

soccer league, the parent feels compelled to let her join the crowd. Besides, many children need more exercise, and there may be no other opportunities for out-of-school group games. Organized competitive sports may seem to be the only option.

For some parents, the hope for their child of a college athletic scholarship or even a career in professional sports is also a factor. However, for children involved in organized sports, the dropout rate before adolescence is very high and is increasing. A *U.S. News & World Report* article (June 7, 2004) called “Fixing Kids’ Sports” reports that 70 percent of children involved in early, organized sports eventually drop out.

For a child who continues in a sport, the best motivation to do so is love of the game. The odds of even a talented child who persists in a particular sport profiting financially from it is not great. Dan Dayle, director of the Institute of Sports at the University of Rhode Island, cautions parents who hope that their child will get a college sports scholarship. His research shows that of the 475,000 fourth graders playing organized basketball, only 87,000 were still playing as seniors in high school. Of these, less than 3,000 won scholarships for their first year of college, and only 160 made it to the professional level. In soccer, the odds are much longer because many colleges recruit foreign players. For other sports, there is a similarly large gap between those who aspire to get scholarships and those who actually get them.

The Waldorf Model

In Waldorf schools, the healthy, balanced physical development of the child is emphasized, perhaps more so than in any other approach to education. From the kindergarten through the elementary grades and high school, the children do activities that develop their fine-motor and coarse motor coordination. Finger games, handwork, outdoor games, eurythmy, Bothmer gymnastics, Spatial Dynamics, and (in the older grades) competitive sports such as soccer and basketball comprise an integrated approach to developing a healthy body that will be the basis for healthy emotional and intellectual life. Organized sports are indeed important in the healthy development of the child. Waldorf educators do not oppose organized sports but only counsel that they be begun at a particular age and be done in a particular way. Most schools have teams beginning in the sixth or seventh grade and going through high school.

During the first seven years, the child lives in a world of fantasy and imagination. As Rudolf Steiner said, “Play is the work of the young child.” Free play (both indoors and outdoors) and simple noncompetitive games are all that is needed for the child’s healthy physical development—assuming, of course, that the diet is a balanced one, based on a variety of whole, natural foods.

At this stage, pushing a structured or competitive activity can be problematic. It can lead to a “hardening” that is physical, emotional, and psychological. The young child’s body can start to lose its characteristic softness and flexibility. Aggressiveness and competitiveness may develop, along with an awakened self-consciousness that is not really appropriate at this stage. Free play and noncompetitive games played for the fun of it should dominate in the first several years of formal school.

After age nine, the child changes, becoming less dreamy, more self-aware, and more independent. Also, he begins to be able to really practice, develop, and master the skills involved in a sport such as gymnastics or baseball. He may be ready for organized sports.

If the child does begin an organized athletic activity, the joy of the game rather than the competitive achievement should be emphasized.

Also, the activity should not become too much of a focus in a child's life. There should be other activities and other sports. And a healthy family life should be a priority. If a child's sports involvement is wreaking havoc with a family's daily schedule and with their time together, that involvement should be critically examined.

Even if the child shows interest and promise in a sport, it is best to proceed slowly. Travel teams, four days a week of gymnastics practice, and the like, are best left until the child is a few years older.

Some parents fall into the trap of overscheduling their child, of arranging too many activities. They may enroll their children in two or more sports in a single season, while organizing a smorgasbord of sports, art, musical, and other activities. Children need lots of unstructured time to relax and do what comes to mind.

For the younger child, overscheduling may lead to health and emotional problems. Even after age twelve, the young person needs unscheduled free time.

For teenagers, sports and physical activity are very important. Adolescents tend to have a surplus of energy that needs to be channeled. Otherwise, physical and emotional problems may arise. Sports and physical disciplines such as dance or eurythmy are ideal at this time. Unfortunately, with the current emphasis on early sports, many young people are burned out by the time they reach high school. Having played one hundred soccer games a year before they set foot in high school, they are ready to take a rest. The high dropout rate in youth sports means that when young people really need this outlet in their adolescent years, many have already given up on it.

The American Academy of Pediatrics released the following statement in 2000:

“Those who participate in a variety of sports and specialize only after reaching puberty tend to be more consistent performers, have fewer injuries, and adhere to sports play longer than those who specialize early.”

In many areas of modern life, the adult world is impinging on the world of childhood. With the “ratings creep” in movies, for example, adult content and language are increasingly allowed in G- and PG-rated films. This is happening in the world of sports as well.

Parents and teachers need to work together to see that children are protected from the very problematic trend of intense, early athletic competition. Waldorf educators generally have a clear idea of what is appropriate for the children in their classes.

It is up to parents to see that outside of school hours their children and the shared life of the family are not adversely affected by current trends in intense, early, organized sports activities. Parents of younger children can arrange children's play and sports gatherings outside the local league system. If there is no local neighborhood, parents can create an “intentional neighborhood” to do the same. Children need only to be brought together in a safe venue, given the necessary equipment, apprised of the rules of the game, and then left pretty much to themselves. A weekly after-school third grade baseball get-together, for example, can be an alternative to the more intense, organized league.

When a child is ready for organized sports, the parent can ensure that the involvement does not adversely affect the child or family life. Sports can provide young people with enjoyable and valuable experiences. Sports are an important part of life, but only a part.

