

Youth Athletics

Three-Sport Wonders

Thursday, October 27, 2011 11:07 PM CDT

Just recently, my wife and I had to ask our 7-year-old what we thought would be the biggest question of his young life: soccer and tennis, or hockey and tennis? We prepared for this potentially upsetting conversation by spending many hours discussing the pros and cons of 'forcing' this decision, considering the impact of our son's friendship with his fellow teammates, and worrying about his reaction. He chose hockey and tennis, and then ran out of the room to go play with his brother.

While my son's reaction to this potentially life-changing question was uneventful, it made me sad as a parent to think that he had to give up something he really enjoys. I came to realize that today's youth sports are extremely competitive and commitment is just as important as winning.

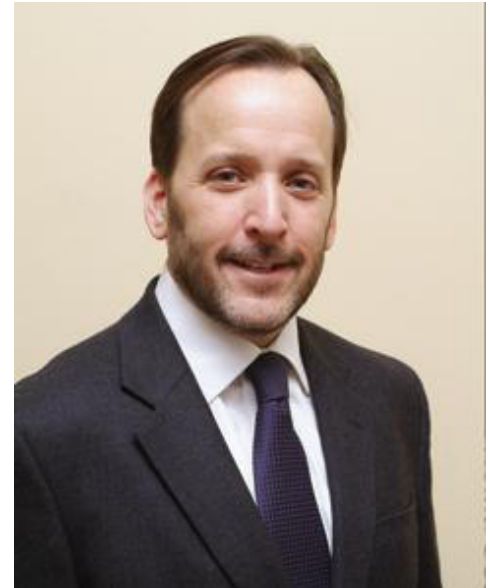
Now, nobody told us that our son couldn't play everything, but it would have been unrealistic to think that every week, he could practice multiple times and play multiple games in multiple sports without suffering injury or burnout. And the logistical conflicts--especially because we have two kids--would have been impossible to manage.

The days of the three-sport junior athlete have come to an end as kids must start at an early age and participate year-round to stay part of a team. While on the surface, this seems like an excellent way to develop players; it may, in fact, have the opposite impact because each sport teaches you something different: Baseball develops hand-eye coordination, soccer teaches 'foot' skills, and basketball emphasizes full body movement.

Furthermore, this modern-day talent development approach may actually be causing more physical harm to young athletes than in decades past. Sports injuries are on the rise, but, more interesting is the fact that 'overuse' issues, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics, account for almost half of all teen injuries. Year-round training has led to repetitive and prolonged stress to bone, muscles and joints. Young jocks now have tendinitis, plantar fasciitis and other physical problems that were previously only seen in adults.

Team sports, however, have so much to offer kids. They teach cooperation, improve listening skills and develop self confidence. Unfortunately, many kids get left behind because they don't develop the passion or the talent to be part of a team. This singular focus causes approximately 70 percent of all young athletes to quit by age 13.

To counter-balance modern-day sport programming, parents should promote lifelong athleticism by being less concerned about the talent their child has today and be more concerned about developing a passion for tomorrow. Avoiding early specialization in favor of sampling a variety of sports will foster a 'bigger picture' perspective.



If your child does, however, desire to move up the competitive ladder and focus on one sport, take steps to ensure it is a good experience. Choose a reputable program by reviewing the league philosophy and team website. Stick to a manageable practice schedule even if that means missing the occasional training session. And check out the coach prior to committing to avoid an overly enthusiastic, untrained individual who pushes kids in an unproductive way. These steps will prevent unwanted stress and foster competitive enthusiasm.

Organized youth sports began approximately 100 years ago to provide kids with a community activity, foster healthy soldiers and develop future leaders. Somewhere along the way, little league changed as parents began to ponder the prospect of scholarship opportunities and professional possibilities. Winning is important, but developing passion is the bigger score. Make sure to ask your child, Did you have fun? more often than Did you win? and everyone goes home a champion.

Russell Hyken is a psychotherapist who works with families and young adults. For more information, call 691-7640 or visit teenparentingexpert.com.