

THE RISKS AND REWARDS OF YOUTH SPORTS

Concussions. Cheating. Coaches behaving badly. When it comes to sports and our kids, are the negatives starting to outweigh the positives?

BY ERIN ZAMMETT RUDDY

I got an e-mail from a neighborhood dad the other day asking me if my son, Alex, would join his indoor travel soccer league that plays Friday nights at 7 p.m. "This is probably going to sound bad," I typed back, "but Friday at 7 p.m. is cocktail hour in my house." I added a smiley face so he'd think I was joking (I really wasn't). Alex is 5. Five! Why does he need to be on a travel team? Yes, he loves soccer, and as a former athlete, I am all for youth sports. But his rec league seems like enough right now. I'll have years to sacrifice my weekends for Alex's sports schedules, so why start when he's still in kindergarten?

I'll tell you the reason: It's called the professionalization of youth sports, and it's happening in gyms and on fields and rinks across our country, says Dan Gould, Ph.D., director of the Institute for the Study of Youth Sports at Michigan State University. "Kids are competing at younger and younger ages—and focusing too soon on training, performance, and outcome." You've probably heard about parents who hold their kids back from kindergarten until they're 6 so they'll be more ready academically—now there are some who do it for the sole purpose of having their kid be bigger, faster, and more coordinated than his peers. "I see kids

practicing six and seven days a week," says Elizabeth Pieroth, Psy.D., a board-certified neuropsychologist who treats patients from 5 years old to pro (she's the concussion specialist for the Chicago Bears, Blackhawks, White Sox, and Fire). "I'm very pro sports—for all the good things kids get out of them," adds Pieroth, whose sons play hockey and baseball. "But it's gotten so crazy-competitive: Are we burning them out?"

Starting sports young is not the problem; it's the intensity and the specialization (playing the same travel sport year-round) that troubles so many experts. "With the exception of gymnastics and figure skating, ideally kids wouldn't be focusing solely on one sport until they're around fourteen," says Gould. Before then it can lead to injury because growing bodies need a break. And there are benefits to being a multi-sport youth athlete. "Playing a variety of sports allows kids to use different muscles and increases cognitive brain activity," says Julie Gilchrist, M.D., pediatrician and medical epidemiologist for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). "Kids who are involved in a bunch of sports get cross-training, if you will."

Ready to play? Here's what you need to know to navigate the sidelines and beyond.



THE SPORTS STATS THAT REALLY COUNT

It's obvious that kids who join teams are spending less time playing Minecraft and will be getting more heart-pumping activity than their screen-loving peers. But there are other benefits you may not know about. Here's the breakdown:

- 20%** KIDS WHO PLAY SPORTS ARE 20% MORE LIKELY TO GET AN "A" IN MATH.
- 87%** OF KIDS WHO PLAY SPORTS MAKE MORE FRIENDS THAN THOSE WHO DON'T PLAY.
- 80%** GIRLS WHO PLAY SPORTS ARE 80% LESS LIKELY TO GET PREGNANT.
- 82%** OF WOMEN IN EXECUTIVE-LEVEL JOBS PLAYED SPORTS IN SCHOOL.
- 49%** OF KIDS ARE MORE LIKELY TO TRY DRUGS IF THEY DON'T PARTICIPATE IN SPORTS.



WHAT THE HECK?

Wondering how to deal with the head-scratching, mouth-gaping, how-do-I-not-screw-you-up-for-life stuff that sports throws your way? We've got it covered.

SITCH *Your 5-year-old is the one picking weeds on the soccer field—but all her friends play. Keep her on the team or try again in a few years?*

SOLUTION Becoming distracted is normal at this age. The real question is, does she want to play or are you dragging her to the games? "Ask her if she enjoys being part of the team," says Patrick Cohn, Ph.D., a youth sports psychologist in Orlando and founder of youthsportspsychology.com. "If so, she may like it for the social aspect rather than the playing part, and that's OK. As she develops her skills, she may want to join in more."

SITCH *Your kid gets mad and cries when she loses.*

SOLUTION "Ask her what she hopes will happen in the game, and why—she may think you or the coach expects her to win every time, so you need to make your goals for her clear as well," says Cohn. Then you can help her set and focus on manageable tasks to perform (making great throws, catching the ball, listening to the coach). "Don't dwell on errors or losses," says Cohn. "You can talk to her about what she did well or improved on after the game—use it as an opportunity to get better instead of lose confidence."

That said, all athletes, even the youngest ones, must know that losing is a part of sports, adds Cohn. Tell her about times when you or Uncle Steve or an older

sibling had to deal with a heart-breaking loss, too, so she sees that it happens to everyone.

SITCH *The coach's frequent yelling and emphasis on winning is freaking you out.*

SOLUTION Give the coach your feedback in private—not when he's busy coaching or in front of the kids, recommends Cohn. "Explain that you want your young athlete to focus on the process, not on the product," notes Cohn. "You can say that you're worried that focusing too much on winning could undermine his confidence. This is a common challenge—kids begin to pressure themselves and start worrying about failing or focus too much on avoiding

mistakes." End your conversation positively—compliment him on something good that he does and add that you know he wants what's best for the kids on the team, too.

SITCH *You want to steer your child toward one sport—or away from another.*

SOLUTION Cohn and most experts recommend parents introduce athletes to several sports and then allow them to decide which they prefer, but that's not to say you can't be a little sneaky. "Don't introduce her to sports you do not like," says Cohn. Also, kids tend to gravitate toward the sports you

play at home. So if you want a future Tiger Woods, get a bucket of balls and start swinging. Still, some of this will be out of your control (e.g., when the entire third-grade class decides that hockey is the coolest and everyone must play), so you have to be prepared to either cave or stay strong.



PARENT PERSPECTIVE #1

"Here's the selfish reason I'm loving my five-year-old, Alex, being on a soccer team: I get to play, too. Now that Alex has learned how to trap and kick, it gives me a real workout. A legit run-sweat-score water-break-needed competition. I can actually play with my kid, and that makes me wildly happy." —E.Z.R., MOM WITHOUT A FILTER, PARENTING.COM

FOOTBALL PLAYER: DIANA KEHO/PHOTOGRAPHY; GETTY IMAGES; PREVIOUS SPREAD: SPORTS ILLUSTRATED; SHUTTLESTOCK KIDS CONFERENCE; ABLE IMAGES; GETTY IMAGES; SOURCE: FOR SPORTS ILLUSTRATED; LIVING RESEARCH; IPSOS-REID SURVEY; WOMEN'S SPORTS FOUNDATION; OPENHEIMER; U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

RIGHT: SHUTTLESTOCK (4)



PARENT PERSPECTIVE #2

"I don't watch sports. I don't contract March madness. I don't follow baseball. And I hate football. What baffles me to this day is why my father, an orthopedic surgeon, would put his son on a tackle football team against his will. In the first play of the second game, I was on the receiving end of a block and I blew out a ligament in my left knee. My dad examined my knee on the sideline, initially determined that it was sprained, and urged me to get back in the game. I declined. I was relieved when I had two daughters instead of a football-nut son. This experience taught me to make a real effort to respect and honor their passions, even if they don't dovetail perfectly with mine. (I'm talking to you, Katy Perry.)" —BRIAN BRAIKER, SHOW AND TELL, PARENTING.COM

HOT SPORTS NOW

An Olympic favorite, **FENCING** is now available nationwide. It's great for kids who may not be interested in team or contact sports. Find a local club at usfencing.org.



Young, social-media-savvy pros like Bubba Watson and Rory McIlroy are adding to **GOLF's** appeal. And programs like The First Tee are bringing lessons to 1.6 million elementary kids via gym class. Learn more at thefirsttee.org.

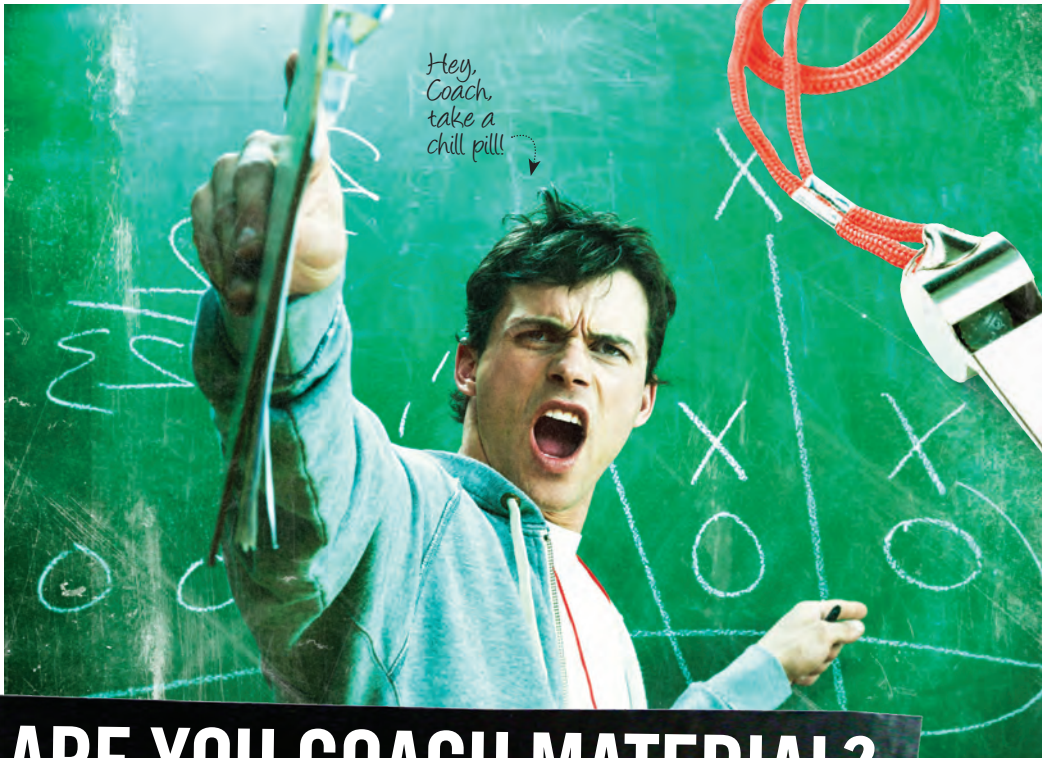


LACROSSE, once mostly played in the Northeast, has made its way to rec leagues and schools around the U.S. The number of kids playing more than doubled in the past decade, according to uslacrosse.org.



Finally, **ENDURANCE RACING**—cross-country, triathlons, and cycling—is drawing more and more young athletes. USA Track & Field (usatf.org) boasts more than 64,000 youth members nationwide.





Hey, Coach take a chill pill

ARE YOU COACH MATERIAL?

What to ask yourself before you sign up—from parents who've been there.

1. AM I REALLY GOING TO WANT TO PUT ON A BRA AND MAKEUP BEFORE 9 A.M. ON A SATURDAY?

"Being held accountable every Saturday for practice and Sundays for soccer games was a lot. A coach has to organize and notify the parents on uniforms, cancellations, rotate a snack schedule, set up the field, attend board meetings, etc. I did find the commitment overwhelming at times, but it was so worth it."

—MEGHAN SHEAR, mom of Ayden, 5

2. CAN I REMEMBER THAT THESE ARE NOT THE METS/PATRIOTS/LAKERS/_____ (FILL IN THE TEAM YOU SCREAM AT)?

"My focus is on fun, so in practice we play games and give pats on the back to everyone. You'd think this would be a no-brainer, but I see so many coaches making their players stand in line while barking orders for them to run drills. Kids come back to my team season after season."

—WILL YANDELL, dad of Luke, 10, and Sawyer, 5

3. CAN I PUT THE PARENTS BEHAVING BADLY IN THEIR PLACE?

"From time to time there are parents who enjoy coaching from the sideline, or opposing coaches who act as if they have a World Cup team. With my parents, it's a conversation (which is not the most comfortable) that usually gets things on track. Opposing coaches need to be ignored, unless they start coaching my players, which has led to some (also uncomfortable) conversations on the field." —W.Y.

4. CAN I PRETEND THAT MY OWN KID, UM, ISN'T REALLY MY KID?

"Some favoritism is inevitable and expected, but if you are sacrificing the growth, learning, fun, or experience of the other players for the sake of your son or daughter, you will run into problems. The easiest way I have found to help with this is to approach my team not as my son and nine others, but to treat all ten of the players as my own."

—TRAVIS COPLEY, dad of Tanner, 9, and Tyson, 5

5. CAN I LEAVE IT ON THE FIELD?

"If kids see their coach being a poor sport after a loss, they will develop this same attitude. They should see their coach highlighting the positives while building from the negatives. If your goal is to win every game by as many points as possible, do us all a favor and don't coach. If your goal is to teach, mentor, and build confidence, youth sports needs you!" —T.C.

DON'T BE "THAT" MOM OR DAD ON THE SIDELINES

There's always one parent who takes it all a little too seriously. How to tell if it's you:

You arrive at games 30 minutes ahead of time to warm up...your cheering voice.

The following phrases come out of your mouth: Get him! Get her! Get them! Get out of your head out of your a**!

You get laryngitis after every game.

There are no other parents within a 10-foot radius of you.

The coach runs the other way when he sees you walking toward him.

When you tell your child you have to miss her game, she looks relieved.

You need a stiff drink after every game. Even the morning ones.

You have never, not ever, sat during a game.

You own a bullhorn.



BUMPS, BRUISES, BREAKS, AND SPRAINS

One third of all kids' injuries occur during sports activity, but before you bubble-wrap your little athlete, read this.

Sports update: Alex did wind up joining that indoor soccer league (turns out games are all held in the same nearby gym about ten minutes from our house).

I was a little wary as I watched the kids plow into each other (and the walls) at top speed. But the only injury was a concussion one of the kids got when he fell off his kitchen counter. Yes, sports can be dangerous but not more than, say, climbing trees (or counter-tops). Four ways to keep your co-pays down:

1. GET IN THE GAME

Parents need to know proper tackling technique for football—and proper

header technique for soccer and checking technique for hockey, etc. USA Football's Heads Up program has instructional videos for parents (usafootball.com).

2. DON'T PUSH THE GLORY POSITIONS

Having a star pitcher sounds great...until he's having shoulder surgery at 13. "Beware of over-use injuries," says Pieroth. Unlike acute injuries (broken bones, concussions, and sprains), overuse injuries develop as a result of repetitive strain (think pitching, throwing, running, shooting) or playing when a previous injury hasn't healed properly.

3. REMEMBER KIDS

GROW—FAST Whether it's a fielder's mask, a cup, shoulder pads, or a helmet, be sure sports equipment not only has the most up-to-date technology but that it fits, and that he wears it consistently and correctly.

4. MEDDLE A BIT

You don't want to be the one pushing for more playing time, but you can get up in your coach's biz about safety. Training in first-aid and injury prevention is a must—especially when it comes to concussion—and a first-aid kit should be on hand at all times. (The CDC has online courses at cdc.gov/concussion.)



DREAMING OF A COLLEGE SCHOLARSHIP?

C'mon, you know you've thought about it—but it's time to wake up. Here's a breakdown of high school athletes who go on to play in college (with or without that scholarship).

BOYS

5.7%
BASKETBALL

7.5%
FOOTBALL

8%
TRACK & FIELD

9.1%
SOCCER

11.2%
BASEBALL

11.4%
LACROSSE

GIRLS

6.1%
VOLLEYBALL

6.2%
BASKETBALL

6.9%
SOFTBALL

9.6%
SOCCER

9.6%
TRACK & FIELD

11.2%
LACROSSE



ERIN ZAMMETT RUDDY's high school soccer team was ranked number one in the U.S., and she played volleyball at the University of Tennessee.

PARENT PERSPECTIVE #3

"When my wife and I asked our second-grader, Jackson, what sport he wanted to play this year, he replied, 'I'd like to do football.' He played flag football last spring and his coach encouraged us to sign Jackson up for his team the next season, so this would be a no-brainer except for one thing: In this league, they wear pads. That means tackling. I'm not OK with that. 'We'll look into it,' I replied. But that was a lie. The truth is, since that conversation, I've pretended we never spoke about it. I'm hoping he doesn't remember." —SHAWN BEAN, POP CULTURE, PARENTING.COM