

A Balanced Approach to Youth Sports

At age 20, Major League Baseball player Ryan Jaroncyk retired, saying he had never really enjoyed the game (that he had started at age 5) and had continued to play primarily because his parents wanted him to.

Being involved in a sport is a lot different for most of today's young people than it was for their parents or grandparents. Kids start younger, train harder, play more often, forego other activities, and, like Jaroncyk, feel more pressure. For some this means the horizons are broader and brighter than ever. Sometimes, however, sports takes over a family's life as parents shuttle between home and practice or games, spend thousands of dollars on equipment, and drag younger siblings along or leave them at home. Fortunately, it doesn't have to be this way. With a little bit of support and guidance from you, your children can find great fun and healthy ways to include athletics as one part of a well-rounded life.

Try it...

For parents with children ages birth to 5

- Introduce babies and young children to lots of different physical activities, such as throwing and catching a ball, bike riding, swimming, and climbing.
- Play with them.
- Resist the urge to sign your young children up for formal, structured programs. A few children will be ready for this kind of organization, but many will find it confusing or stressful.

For parents with children ages 6 - 9

- Offer encouragement and praise for participation rather than achievement. At this age, it's best to focus on enjoyment of the activity rather than mastery.
- Avoid comparing players to one another, making comments (even positive ones) about players' abilities, or complaining about mistakes or missed opportunities. Instead, emphasize and highlight positive attitudes and experiences.
- Volunteer to be a coach or team helper.

For parents with children ages 10 - 15

- Encourage your child to try at least one new sport or physical activity each year or two. They may feel like everyone around them has already "picked what they do," but most likely, that's not the case.
- Help your children think about what they enjoy and don't enjoy about each of their activities. Make a "pros and cons" list if it helps. Some children will have very strong opinions about which things they want to do, and others will need more parental direction and guidance.
- Help your children organize informal sports events such as pick-up basketball, flag football, or a rope-jumping expo. If your physical health allows, join them!

For parents with children ages 16 - 18

- Monitor your teens' health habits, especially if they are seriously involved in sports. Are they eating well, getting enough sleep, doing what they can to avoid injury? Stay connected with your children and their coaches so you know what's happening with the team and with training.
- If you have a teenager who is seriously into a sport (or multiple sports) celebrate that while also promoting balance for the entire family. This could mean taking turns attending events, making sure that there is at least a short "off season" when your teen's body can rest and recover from intense training, talking about what's most important to you as a family and as individuals, and being flexible about finding time to just be together when you're not focusing on a sport.
- Regardless of the skill level of your teen, don't overburden them with the stress of trying to earn scholarships, awards, or professional contracts for their sports involvement. If your child really wants those things and has the skill to achieve them, then encourage and support them in their efforts. If not, though, their time is probably better spent focusing on school and making more reliable plans for the future.

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