

Four ways youth parenting can help or hurt a child's experience

Sports

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It is estimated that more than 21.5 million children between the ages of 6 and 17 play team sports. This data, collected by ESPN, also found that 60 percent of boys and 47 percent of girls are already on teams by age 6.

ESPN's research also indicates the No. 1 reason a child quits a team sport is because he or she was not having fun.

"I absolutely agree," regarding ESPN's research study, said Toi Chisom, recreation superintendent for the city of Santa Clarita. "For us in recreation, our number one goal is for the youth to have fun."

Why are these children not having fun? With obesity being a health epidemic in America, shouldn't adults be trying to ensure that the children are enjoying active participation in sporting programs?

It's well-documented that parents can get out of hand at games, and anyone who has sat on the sideline of a game, whether recreational or competitive, can understand why many of these children are not having fun. Simply put: The adults are ruining it for the children. The actions of some parents and coaches are taking all the fun out of sports.

"Some athlete's parents have a huge influence on how they race (perform)," said Saugus senior Samantha Ortega, who is a three-time Foothill League Cross Country and three-time Signal Cross Country runner of the year. "At times it can take the fun out of the sport, making races all that more serious and critical and sometimes nerve-wrecking," she continued.

Below are four problems youth sports programs are facing.

1. Focus is on winning, not on having fun.

Many have lost perspective about why team sports were started. The U.S. Youth Soccer organization states its "mission is to foster the physical, mental and emotional growth. Our job is also to make it fun, and instill in young players a lifelong passion for the sport."

"We do recognize winning is a part of sports but not the main focus. Fun is our main goal in youth recreation," Chisom said.

According to the Little League, which was established more than 75 years ago, "The outcome of a game will never outlive the pride of belonging, the experience of playing, the friends and the fun."

These mission statements are the reason so many parents, coaches and volunteers decide to spend time with children engaging in sports activities. Somewhere in the process, many of these adults and children forget that having fun is more important than winning.

The pressure to compete for athletic scholarships also plagues high school athletics.

"It varies athlete to athlete," Ortega said. "Personally, my parents have never put pressure on me."

"There has never been pressure to obtain a scholarship," Chisom said. "But there has been pressure

to compete, to win. It's more important that they're moving and not sitting at the table. Parents need to allow kids to have their own experiences and also allow them to have fun," Chisom said.

At the end of the day, only 1 in 6,000 players will make it to the NFL; 1 in 4,000 will make it to MLB; and 1 in 10,000 will make it to the NBA, according to Statistic Brain. The odds of a child's professional sports dreams are slim, so parents should spend more time helping him or her enjoy the game while he or she is young.

"The only way to go professional in a sport is for the kids to enjoy what they're doing," Chisom said.

2. Children's performance becomes more important than their health.

A June 2011 report from the American Academy of Pediatrics, published in the journal *Pediatrics*, warned that "stimulant-containing energy drinks have no place in the diets of children or adolescents."

"For recreation the priority is placed on fun and healthy activities" said Chisom.

Have you witnessed parents on the sidelines giving their young children these types of energy drinks, hoping to increase their performance? Are you guilty of providing your child with unhealthy options to boost his or her performance during a game?

While the financial costs of youth sports continue to rise, the threat of injury and not properly taking care of these young bodies is a much bigger concern. What price are parents willing to pay for their child to excel at the sport of his or her choice? Is the time these children spend training excessive based on their age?

Safekids.org reports that 1.24 million children were seen in emergency rooms for sports-related injuries. It also states that more than half those athletes injured continued to play in the game because they didn't want to let their coach down or were afraid they would be benched.

We need to be more concerned about a child's lifelong health instead of his or her (or a parent's) temporary sports aspirations.

3. Specializing children too young.

According to a research brief prepared by John O. Spengler, "Sport specialization may be considered an intensive, year-round training in a single sport at the exclusion of other sports."

Many youth sports programs begin training academies for children to develop their skills as early as 6 years old.

"At 6 years old, you really don't know much about anything; all you do know is you want to have fun," said Chisom

If children don't begin in these specialized training academies, parents worry their children will miss the opportunity to play competitive sports when the opportunity arises, many as early as age 9.

Research done by Spengler for the Aspen Institute Project Play determines, "Early sport specialization does not enhance the opportunity for long-term athletic success in almost all sports and may increase the risk for overuse injury and burnout."

Children are being forced to "specialize" or pick one sport before they are even preteens. They rarely get an opportunity to experience numerous sports because coaches expect undivided attention to the sport they are coaching. The time and money commitments make it almost impossible for children to play more than one sport.

"Not every kid is going to be interested in one thing," Chisom said. "They don't know what they don't know — give them options."

In an article published in the New York Times, Paul Sullivan writes, "With travel teams and indoor versions of outdoor sports now in full swing, some former top athletes and even the coaches who feed parents' obsessions are encouraging caution. The willingness to spend heavily — in money, time, emotion and a childhood — needs to be looked at more carefully, they say."

"The best athlete is the well-rounded athlete," said Chisom. "The football quarterback might really be a star point guard; the pitcher might really be a great goalie, but they will never know if they are never given the option."

4. Caring more about the game than the child.

"We try to keep the kids first," Chisom said.

In an article written by John O' Sullivan, author of "Changing the Game," he suggests six questions parents should ask themselves about their child's sports experience:

1. Is my child having fun?
2. Does this game/league/event serve the needs of the children, or the needs of the adults?
3. Have youth sports become more important to me or my child?
4. Is there a way to get a similar experience in a less intrusive, less costly way?
5. What is my child learning from this experience, and does it match the values we are teaching at home?
6. Is our family keeping our priorities in order (family, church, school, vacations, sports, finances, commitments, etc.)?

O'Sullivan suggests to leave the child alone on the car ride home. If the child wants to talk about the game then let him or her bring it up. He suggests: "Many children indicated to me that parental actions and conversations after games made them feel as though their value and worth in their parents' eyes was tied to their athletic performance, and the wins and losses of their team."

"It's all about the kids. We have a coaching rating system, where coaches are rated based upon certain criteria, and if they do not meet those specific criteria they will be dismissed," said Chisom. "We have dismissed parents before too, if they do not follow our 'kidzone' rules."

Despite the pressure to do well, Sam Ortega said "at the end of the day, each athlete on our team finds some sort of joy in running. Kids look up to their parents and coaches. Parents and coaches can create a positive or negative experience — it's up to them," concluded Chisom.

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