

Helping kids balance and sports and school

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Youth sports today are quite different than they were when you were a youngster, to be sure. With travel teams, year around sport participation and sport specialization, it's very easy for your child to get caught up in the time commitments needed to excel in sports -- and sometimes at the expense of balancing school studies or other important developmental life experiences.

Instead of the days where kids played about a dozen games a summer, today's generation sometimes plays as many as 50-plus games during that time, not to mention practices and travel commitments leaving many families to wonder if all this is healthy for children?

As you examine your child's sport schedule, take time to consider some of the following pointers when deciding how much of his or her schedule should be devoted to sports, school and other growth opportunities.

- Know the realities of how many kids earn college athletic scholarships. When I talk to parents and tell them that roughly only 5 percent of all high-school kids will earn scholarship money to play sports in college, and an even smaller percentage will earn "full-ride" scholarships, many parents tell me they had no idea it was so difficult. Some parents have even told me had they known that fact, they would have balanced their child's schedule more evenly between sports and school, rather than put all their eggs in one basket with athletics.
- Optimal balance is key. In my experience, kids who distribute their time and energy more equally between sports, school, the arts and various other social endeavors are often happier; more confident and well-rounded; and ironically, typically pretty good at everything they try. One reason for this is they are less likely to become burned out (discussed in more detail later in this article), leaving them more energized, confident and interested in the various things they do.
- Communicate effectively, set goals, and measure progress. It is important while creating optimal balance for your child that you take time to communicate in an authoritative, not authoritarian, manner. (The first is a very democratic style that offers kids reasons and rationale for your actions; the latter is a much stronger, dictator style of "do it because I said so" style.) Explain to your child why a healthy balance between sports and school is important for future life success, and write down specific schedules that help your child know when it's time to leave the ball field to go home to take care of homework. As your child begins to master time-management and organization skills, note all of his or her accomplishments and be sure to offer hearty praise and reinforcement for his or her efforts.

If your child is too heavily invested in sports (and at the cost of not spending enough time with school and other life experiences), watch for signs of burnout. While burnout is not a psychological disorder per se, it is often the result of doing too much of one thing, leaving a person to sometimes feel bored and depressed or even anxious, agitated and short-tempered. Signs to watch for with kids involved in youth sports who might be burned out, in addition to the

previously mentioned symptoms, include disinterest in going to practices and games, lack of pride with accomplishments, an overall flat affect, and in worst-case scenarios, sometimes alcohol and drug usage. Working with your child to achieve optimal balance is the best first step in overcoming burnout, but if symptoms persist, seek professional assistance.

- Balancing a busy schedule can be very stressful, even when things are going well. Help your child understand the difference between chronic and acute stress as well as healthy and effective coping methods. Chronic stress is the long, enduring kind of stress such as having a lifelong illness or living in a volatile home environment. Acute stress is the daily stress we all deal with that is usually harmless and goes away quickly -- traffic jams, hot days and, for kids, bad games. Help your child quickly move past acute stress and distinguish it from chronic stress whenever possible. It is also important your child learns means to effectively get his or her mind off of the stress but to do so in a healthy way. For example, reading a book or listening to music is usually effective and healthy, while turning to drugs and alcohol is not.

Help your child identify and use athletic-transferable skills. Most kids take for granted how invaluable setting goals, rebounding from adversity, getting focused and motivated for competition and working together on a team really are even outside of sports. Help your child use these same skills, as well as the countless other athletic transferable skills your child is learning through sports and apply them to the classroom for academic success.

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