

Children and Sports

Sports are big part of American culture. In the US, millions of children play organized sports. The best reason for children to play sports is to have fun. However, there are many other benefits for children who play sports.

What are the benefits to playing sports?

Twenty percent of children in the US are overweight. These children have a greater chance of being overweight adults, which can increase their risk of developing diabetes, high blood pressure, and other health problems. Playing sports is a great way to make exercise fun and help children to develop healthy habits. Sports can also help children improve their agility, balance, and coordination.

Participating in sports can help build a child's self esteem. Giving and getting encouragement and respect from peers can help children feel good about themselves. Studies have shown that drug and alcohol use are less common with teenagers who are involved in sports.

Good sportsmanship teaches children about emotional control. It is important for a child to learn how to win well and to know how to lose well. Being on a sports team can teach a child about commitment and about the benefits of hard work. Studies show that children who play sports work harder in the classroom. Children also learn problem solving skills and time management skills when they are part of a team.

How can I make sure that my child has a positive sports experience?

Encourage your child to try more than one sport. Focusing on one sport can lead to burn out. Give children the freedom to try the sports that interest them. Check in with them and see how they feel about the experience. Regularly discuss things such as sportsmanship and being part of a team.

Be actively involved if you can. Practice with your child. Attend practices and games. Volunteer to coach. Don't yell or get upset at the coach, other players, other parents, the referee, or your child. Remember that you are the role model for good sportsmanship. Children learn by watching you. Keep your cool.

Don't push your child to perform. Give them unconditional positive encouragement and approval no matter how well or how poorly they do. Emphasize having fun. Remember that they are still children and need to have down time just to play without a set of rules. They need time to just be kids. Play down the idea of competition. Don't focus on future college scholarships or professional careers. This can put too much pressure on a child. Don't try to live out your sports dreams through your child. Very few children will grow up to be professional athletes. The most important thing is that kids have fun and have a positive experience through sports.

What are some health and safety concerns?

All children should have a physical exam before they begin playing any sport. Tell the coach if your child has any medical problems. Children should not participate in sports when they are sick, in pain, or tired.

- No matter how small the sports injury, your child's health care provider should check the injury to make sure that it is not more serious than it looks.
- Make sure children drink plenty of fluids, especially when it's hot outside. Kids are at a higher risk for heat illnesses.

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- Encourage children to eat a healthy diet and exercise even when they are not playing their sport.
- Make sure your child knows and follows the rules of the sport. This helps prevent injury.
- Be sure they have the proper equipment and that they know how to use it. Buy the right kind of protective gear and make sure the child uses it for practice and not just for competition.
- Encourage the child to warm up before playing sports to reduce their chance of injury. Children need 2 or 3 days of rest or free play each week. It is also better not to do any one sport for the entire year to prevent overuse injuries.

How do I choose the right sport sporting program for my child?

Most children should not play organized team sports until they are at least 5 or 6 years old. Think about what kind of time, money, and commitment will be involved for you as well as your child.

Remember that not all sports require a team. Some children do better at individual sports such as karate. Find out what your child is interested in and what they think is fun.

There are many places to find sports programs for children. Ask other parents about their experiences. Check with your child's school. Other sources include:

- local parks and recreation district
- youth organizations such as the YMCA, Boy's and Girl's Clubs, or the Girl and Boy Scouts
- local sports teams that sponsor youth teams
- health clubs.

Talk to the coaches and other parents to make sure you are comfortable with them. Make sure that the equipment and location are safe. Find out the procedures if a child becomes ill or injured.

Look for a program that encourages each child to participate. The program should stress helping children learn skills rather than winning and competition. Watch children playing the sport and see if they are having fun. Children who are having fun and learning feel good about themselves. And that's a great reason for children to play sports.

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