

KEEPING OUR EYES ON THE BALL

Do you remember when you were 10 years old? Did you play sports? If you did, you probably played a different sport in every season. I remember playing basketball in the summer and football in the fall with my brothers and friends all day long, until it was so dark that we couldn't see. It was pure fun, and we loved it. That is all sports had to be when we were kids. Little did we know, that the more fun we had, the more we played, and the better athletes we became. We also failed to consciously recognize the cross over benefits that came from playing multiple sports. Unfortunately, these days children are too often subjected to pressure to choose and excel in a single sport. This is particularly troublesome when kids are forced to pick a sport before their bodies fully develop. Often kids that excel at long distance running at a young age, for example, undergo a growth spurt or otherwise develop physically in such a manner that is not well suited for running. If the child then decides to try to participate in a different sport, he or she may find it difficult to compete with children that have been playing the other sport for several years. The result is often disappointment, and the lost opportunity to experience and develop skills in other sports or activities that the child may have had an interest in playing. The point is – keep things in perspective.

As parents, we seek to strike a balance between encouraging our children to strive to achieve their fullest athletic potential, against the risk of placing so much stress on them that they develop feelings of inadequacy, low self-esteem or burn out. Unfortunately, on occasion we take our eyes off the ball, and lose sight of what is really important – the happiness and development of our children. To be sure, sports offer great benefits to both children and adults alike. Sports and athletics help children develop confidence, foster friendships and instill life-long lessons of teamwork, discipline, self-sacrifice and physical fitness. But to a child, those lessons are purely incidental to the real reason they play – to have fun! Not surprisingly, it seems that the best athletes are those who truly love to play and compete. They are the ones that will come home after 2 hours of practice, and beg their mom, dad or sibling to play more in the backyard. You can't force a child to develop that type of passion – all you can do is create an environment in which it can flourish. We can do that by exposing our children to a variety of sports and activities, allowing them to gravitate to any that they enjoy, and then supporting them completely. It doesn't matter what the activity is – it can be soccer, basketball, horse-back riding, art or writing, as long as they enjoy it. Fun leads to passion, and passion leads to success (as defined individually).

Few things compare with the joy of seeing our children happy and laughing. I see it in my daughters on the soccer field. To be sure, they love challenging themselves, the competition of the game, and winning, but they also love the friendships they have made, the experiences they share with coaches and teammates, and the camaraderie they enjoy at practice and on the playing field. I know that it is far more likely that they will remember each teammate and the personal experiences that they have shared, rather than the score of a particular game. My guess is that you encourage your son or daughter to play soccer – not because you think it is important for him or her to develop into a great soccer player, but rather because you believe that it is simply a piece of the larger puzzle of a good childhood, and that it will contribute to your son or daughter developing into a good person. So the next time you are on the sidelines watching your son or daughter play, remember to give him or her positive support and encouragement, no matter what the result of the game, and always – keep your eye on the ball.

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