

## **Making Sports Fun! – Summer 2006**

The manner in which children today participate in sports is quite different from the experiences their parents and grandparents had as children. Prior to high school, young children traditionally used free play and sports to satisfy their primary need for fun. Beginning in elementary school, today's youth are exposed to a much more competitive sports environment, many playing one or more sports year round. By 5th grade, many young athletes are pressured by competitive coaches to give up other interests and pursue a single sport exclusively. Unfortunately, this level of pressure on young children at such an early age often backfires, as many children eventually "burnout" on sports altogether. In fact, according to the Institute for the Study of Youth Sports at Michigan State University, 70% of children will quite playing sports by age 13.

While many young children dream of becoming a famous athlete someday, very few will eventually pursue a career in sports. Despite competitive pressures in today's society, children's primary need in sports is the same as that of previous generations - to have fun. When considering participation in sports for young children, parents should keep the following goals in mind:

- Provide a positive experience where children can have fun with peers and learn the value of teamwork.
- Provide exercise needed for healthy growth and physical development.
- Provide the opportunity to improve coordination and motor skills.
- Provide introduction to sports rules and skills in an environment where individual improvement is valued over winning.
- Provide the opportunity to identify with new adult models and varied peer groups.
- Provide an opportunity to sample different sports, both individual and team, to determine what a child finds most enjoyable.

### **When are children ready for more competitive sports?**

What children need from sports changes as they grow. While younger children primarily need to have fun and an opportunity to interact with other children, adolescents look to sports to provide opportunities to test their skills, enhance their self image, belong to a peer group, and provide opportunities for goal setting and leadership. At what age a child is ready for more competitive sports can vary depending on his or her rate of physical and emotional growth and maturity. Some children may be ready for more competitive sports by 5th grade, while others may not be until they enter high school. Some children may never be suited for competitive sports, but this should not prevent them from enjoying lifelong physical activity. There are plenty of opportunities for recreational sports through local park and recreation districts. Often middle schools offer after school sports that are less competitive, and many local sports clubs offer recreational leagues. Most high schools also offer a few sports that are less competitive, particularly at the freshman level.

### **Children need parents help and guidance in finding the most appropriate team or league to play on.**

While the decision of what sports to participate in should ultimately be the child's decision, parents should offer children the opportunity to sample various sports and leagues to identify what they enjoy best. Children should never be forced to participate in something that they do not enjoy. Once a particular sport is selected, parents can help to find a league or coach that best matches the skills and temperament of their child. Parents should look for coaches that stress developing fundamentals, teamwork and a love for the game. Here are some tell tale signs that a coach is more interested in the final score, than helping your child to become a better player:

- Players don't get to try playing different positions.
- Players receive unequal playing time.
- The coach argues frequently with the referee.
- The coach threatens harder practices and drills for poor play.
- Team instruction and strategies relate more to the score than developing players' skills.
- The coach belittles players.
- The coach is visibly unhappy after a loss.
- Your child doesn't want to play anymore.

***Daily physical activity is important for all children and adolescents. Help your child to find activities that he or she enjoys, so that it will lead to a lifelong commitment to physical fitness and a healthy lifestyle!***