

Speaking Up on Early Sport Specialization in Youth Sports

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Youth sport participation allows children to leave their smart phones behind and promotes an active, healthy lifestyle. In addition to skill development in a particular sport, it can foster goal-oriented teamwork and the ability to develop healthy relationships with peers and coaches. Young athletes typically find enjoyment out of playing sports and at the same time learn valuable life lessons such as leadership, commitment, and navigating adversity.

Most would agree, however, that youth sports are changing. Many athletes are choosing to play one sport year-round at the exclusion of other sports. Termed “single sport specialization,” this trend has become prevalent in youth sports. An athlete is considered “specialized” if they play one sport at the exclusion of other sports for greater than eight months per year^{3,4}. In contrast to the positives of youth sports participation, year-round single sport specialization often comes with a downside. Research has shown a higher risk of overuse injuries, increased psychosocial pressure to succeed, reduced time for play, and a risk of burnout^{1,3,6}.

Many athletes and parents feel pressure to focus exclusively on one sport to increase their chances of playing in high school, college, or beyond. The message lacking in the media, however, is that elite athletes were usually multi-sport athletes during their childhood. Research shows that specialization is not necessary to reach an elite level in one’s sport^{2,5}. Tiger Woods and Lionel Messi seem to be the exception, not the rule.

Overuse injuries are tied to playing the same sport year-round without allowing adequate time for rest or cross training in other activities. More specifically, however, it is still unclear what the exact drivers of the overuse injury epidemic are. Is it hours per week, months per year, or intensity of training? Does the type of sport matter? Should we factor in the physiologic age and psychologic maturity of the athlete? Is the problem too much training, too many games, excessive practices, or all of the above? These are the questions that researchers are exploring that will shape our discussions and recommendations on this topic in the future.

We should encourage youth athletes to play multiple sports. Time off for rest and diversified activities that use different motions and muscle groups should be prioritized. We need to emphasize free play. We should encourage athletes to wait until at least high school before focusing on one sport. And we need to track single sport specialized athletes to better understand the cumulative effect of their participation over time.

There are many voices that are influencing children and their parents to focus on one sport at an early age. The perception by many is that this is the path to elite status and athletic prowess. Adults, specifically coaches, should be a balancing force to encourage healthy sport participation and focus on education to prevent overuse injuries and keep athletes on the field.

References:

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