

HEALTH AND FITNESS



by Dr. Steve Lucey

Seventy-two percent of kids quit their sport by the age of thirteen!

Let me repeat that: seventy-two percent of kids quit their sport by the age of thirteen! WOW! That should make all of us stop and ask some questions.

As a sports medicine doctor, I see youth athletes frequently for overuse injuries. However, as I have followed these kids through the years and built relationships with their families, I see another "overuse injury" that is psychological and not physical. We simply call this BURN OUT.

Just as the body of a youth athlete can only take so much repetition before the bones and muscles get sore from overuse, the heart and mind of a youth athlete can only take a certain amount of repetition, competition, and focused effort. More and more research is being done to measure burn out in kids. There are several questions that need to be answered. First, how many times a week should a kid participate in a particular sport? And how many weeks and months of the year should a kid participate in a particular sport? Additionally, how many sports should a kid play? When is it OK for a kid to "specialize" in a particular sport?

If we go back a couple of decades, kids played whatever sport was in season. And, that was in addition to the neighborhood pick-up game of kickball, basketball, football, or whatever. These days, kids begin to specialize in a single sport by the age of ten or earlier. Youth sports have become professionalized. Many kids practice their sport two or three times a week, go to speed and agility training another two days, perhaps weight training, and then play games on the weekends. It is often a six or seven day a week affair at a very young age. This is usually when I meet these young athletes and their families, coming in to my office with joint aches and pains.

The American Pediatric Association wrote a position statement on youth sport participation. They recommended several things for the 40

million or more young athletes playing sports in the United States between the ages of 6 and 18. First, they recommended that children and young adults play more than one sport. Second, they encouraged coaches to keep practices and workouts focused on fun and age-appropriate. Third, children should have take at least two days off from organized sports each week and encourage a couple months off each year. Fourth, the focus overall should be on health and wellness and not just performance and achievement. The APA states that "the goal of youth participation in sports should be to promote lifelong physical activity, recreation, and skills of healthy competition that can be used in all facets of future endeavors." Well said!

So, as parents, what should we do? Let me make a couple general recommendations. First, take a step back and take inventory of the situation. The number one reason a kid quits a sport is that it is no longer fun. You will have to work hard to figure this one out, but you need to figure out if your child is still really having fun. Often times, the parent decides that the child will play one sport or another and how often they will play. I've heard it a thousand times, "My child loves playing soccer five days a week." I've got news for you: kids just want to play. If you ask an eight year old, "Do you want to play kickball tomorrow?" they will answer "yes." If you ask that same eight year old, "Do you want to play soccer tomorrow?" they will also answer "yes." Our job as parents is to offer variety to our kids and allow them to recognize their strengths in sports over time.

Second, do not live vicariously through your child. In some ways, there is a sense of status associated with having a "talented" youth athlete. Some parents will tell me out right that they are pushing for their child to get a college scholarship. However, in fact, only two to three percent of children go to college on athletic scholarships. In addition, I see parents who did not achieve athletic success themselves somehow deriving a sense of significance from having children who are "elite athletes."

Third, parent for the day your kid stops playing their sport competitively. In other words, the real value of sports is in teaching life lessons. Our goal, as parents, is to foster a love for sports that will continue through life. The average youth athlete will play their sport through high school and then play recreationally as an adult and be a fan of that sport. I think a good youth sport parent should parent all the while with this end in mind. A good youth sport parent should try to raise a well-rounded, well-adjusted, health-minded

sports fan who wants to play, coach, cheer, and be involved in sports in the future.

In closing, I will encourage parents and coaches who are reading this to "give the game back to the kids." Don't over schedule them. Make it fun! Teach them life lessons. Use the sporting experience to grow them into young men and women. When these things are focused upon, rather than an obsession with winning, burn out will be minimal and kids will be healthy and happy.

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