

CHILDREN AND SPORT

Most children play sport. Some play more than others. Some just play at home with their friends and siblings and that's as serious as it gets. Some children get up to train at 6am, train 6 hours or more a day and are aiming for the next Olympics. Most children fall somewhere between these two extremes. By and large, being involved in sport is a good thing for children, but sometimes it's not. Read on, for information on problems that specifically affect children in sport.

First of all, let's define terms. I'm using the term 'child' roughly, to refer to those under 19 years age. This is because the bones and muscles are still developing up to this age and some continue to develop after. This grouping can be divided into children under 11 and teenagers. Problems associated with sports tend to differ between the two groups. In younger children, the sports that are usually engaged in are team sports, often at a 'mini' level of the adult version, and individual sports such as swimming and running. These are the activities that are most suited to young children. Because of the chemistry of the muscles and bones, aerobic type activities are safest and best, ideally those activities that have short in-built breaks. Heavy weight training or high force sports are unsuitable for young children as the bones are still soft and the muscles are not yet ready. Most children, thankfully, aren't involved in these types of activities. Because of the way the muscles are developing, children under 11 who are good at any type of activity will probably be good at all types, i.e., be able to sprint and run long distance. The muscles don't 'specialise' into sprint or endurance type muscles, like adult muscles, until well after 10. Therefore, children should not be pushed into specialising at this age or younger. Just remember, children (especially those under 10) aren't small adults. Their bodies differ in many ways. For instance, they're not as efficient at controlling their body temperature and can overheat or chill very easily. They're not very good at recognising when they're tiring and therefore need to be supervised and not pushed. They need to be encouraged to take enough fluids so they don't become dehydrated. Sensible supervision is essential.

Different problems start to arise in the early to middle teenage years, especially if the young athlete is a high achiever or an early developer. Then they often start to drastically increase their level of training, especially strength based training, and competition. The bones and muscles are growing rapidly at this stage and are more vulnerable than normal to stress and strain. It's very common for teens and preteens to develop 'growing pains' at this stage, when they are either in the middle of or after a major growth spurt. Persisting in very frequent high level sporting activity at this stage can cause what might have been a minor ache to develop into a serious pain that goes on and on. Don't ignore these pains - see your local Chartered Physiotherapist or GP. It's vital to prevent the young athlete from overdoing things when they start shooting up. I know from experience that it's very difficult to do this, especially if there's a lot of talent there! At this stage, talented youngsters are often at training or playing matches 7 days a week. This is too much, especially if you take into consideration the PE classes at school and the messing around

in the back garden which are extra to training. There should be at least 2 days in the week when there's no organised sport.

Once the young athlete gets well past their period of fast growth and start to mature physically, which is at least 16 for boys and slightly younger for girls, then it safe to start allowing sports specialisation and increased weight training, but only under the careful supervision of a good coach. Gradual, sensible increase in level of training is the name of the game.

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