

Meltz, B.F. (1989, January 16). Giving Kids a Sporting Chance. The Boston Globe.

OVERVIEW

Pushing a child into competitive sports before age seven is puts them at emotional risk for no purpose according to David Elkind, a nationally respected psychologist from Tufts University in Boston.

"There are two viewpoints on competition at an early age. One says competition is the Great American Way, that it makes strong bodies. The other says organized sports is an organized form of child abuse," notes Michael Goldberg, chief of orthopedics at the New England Medical Center. He personally subscribes to the latter and does not recommend competitive sports before age twelve.

Sociologist Elliott Medrich, at the University of California at Berkeley, after fourteen years of study on this subject, has developed some interesting perspectives. Children under eight quickly perceive the simplest message of competitive sports—to be valued you must win. He finds this pressure unhealthy for normal ego development. Elkind agrees that a child self-evaluates by his or her success at the sport. From such a perspective, a 7 year-old is too young to formulate a good sense of self. Elkind further believes it could be ‘catastrophic’ to the child’s development process. Asserts Elkind, "He could become a bully, where every action is competitive with an attitude of having to do it better and first." The results of such a pattern are difficult for the child, and he or she can become a problem child who must win—at all costs—destroying friendships in the process.

In addition to the peer relationships that can crumble for the excessively competitive child, this situation also affects the parent-child relationship. This is probably more tragic. "Most young children aren’t likely to say no to something their parent is excited about and wants them to do," notes the article. Elkind believes that a child may feel that love is conditional on winning, although a parent may not realize that the message is being sent. Elkind adds, "Years later, a child may feel he was used or pushed by a parent."

So, should children under seven years of age participate in sports? This group of specialists, particularly the psychologist, feel that the competitive side of the sport should be de-emphasized. The focus should not be on winning. Rather, the focus should be on fun and learning. The specialists advocate teaching skills of sports during the early ages. Games for young players should allow them to sharpen their skills, focusing on personal accomplishment instead of victory. Good foundational skills will stay with a child and he or she will probably enjoy the sport for many years. Medrich believes that membership is important for children giving them a sense of belonging. It is up to "the parent to make sure not to put a susceptible child into a situation where winning is stressed and only the top players play. For some children, competitive sports are never good."

There are two fundamental survival goals for children in the younger ages. Children want to please others—particularly someone who is significant to them. Second, they want to be liked and feel comfortable in their environment. Do not motivate a child by suggesting that the only way to succeed is by winning or being the best. Being who they are should be enough for them to gain love and acceptance.

IMPLICATIONS

1. Kids are people, too! They are just a little more vulnerable. Youth workers, parents, and teachers need to refrain from living their lives through them. One's childhood should not be reproduced for another. One's previous disappointments do not have to be another's goals for success. One's fantasies are not another's dreams.
2. Listen to the child. If they are repeatedly saying that an activity is not fun—discontinue it and find a new one. Involve them in the decision; give them a sense of control.
3. If a child is gifted with a talent and they want to pursue it, seek out a coach who understands the age and development of the child as well as the sport.
4. Children naturally feel pressure. Those who work with kids should help ease their burden. Verbal and non-verbal messages must encourage a child be positive about his or her attempts, and not only by the results.
5. Childhood should be a time of fun, growth, and learning, filling a young person with a positive sense of well-being and self-worth. Anything that helps them experience and achieve these values will be appreciated as the child moves into adolescence.

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