

Martin, K. (1986, October). Is Winning Everything? Parents.

## OVERVIEW

Barry Goldberg, M.D., associate clinical professor of pediatrics at Yale University and pediatric consultant at the Institute of Sports Medicine and Athletic Trauma at Lenox Hospital in New York City, warns: "As adults intervene in children's games we have to accept the responsibility for the end product." The end product is often less than ideal. Some indications that overzealous parents may create disastrous situations for their young athletes:

- \* Fainting from dehydration during athletic contests.
- \* Paralyzation and death from "spearing" in football games.
- \* Physical and verbal abuse.
- \* Unrealistic demands.

Even when the effects are not physically evident, "failure" in sports or heavy-handed approaches by parents and coaches can destroy a child's self-esteem. This approach may also foster negative attitudes toward authority figures and hostile and aggressive behavior in the child.

Tara Scanlan, Ph.D., associate professor of kinesiology at the University of California in Los Angeles, has extensively researched the socio-psychological aspects of competitive youth sports. She finds that when children worry about performance evaluations of their parents and coaches, it causes them great distress. Notes Scanlan, "Kids are very dependent on adults for feelings of their own competence and sense of self."

When young people play, they have a different perspective on sports than adults. A ten-year study indicates that ninety percent of the young people who responded would rather play on a losing team than "warm the bench" on a winning team. Young athletes want fun and excitement; they want to improve their skills and be with their friends. Adult intervention overstructures children's sports leaving them very little opportunity for innovation and creativity.

Pediatrician Nathan Smith, sports medicine specialist at the University of Washington in Seattle, and David Feigley, Associate Professor of Recreation and Leisure Services at Rutgers University, offer a developmental approach to youth athletics. "We're just beginning to gain a better perspective on what kids are supposed to get out of sports at different age levels. Fun, pleasant association, and exercise are appropriate goals for the elementary-school-aged child. Developing sophisticated sports skills isn't appropriate until later."

Parents and coaches must recognize that their children have different needs at different ages, and success must be seen as an ongoing process of achieving potential at each stage of their development.

## IMPLICATIONS

1. Before involving their children in sports, parents must ask themselves if they are ready to be the parent of a loser or a "bench warmer." If parents can understand their own expectations and motivations, they can better help their children understand theirs.

2. Coaches must help young people develop their athletic skills in ways that are developmentally appropriate.

3. It is important for kids to see athletics holistically.

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