

When Are Children Ready for Organized Sports?

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If you've ever watched a group of 4- or 5-year-olds playing soccer or tee ball, you've probably seen a player or two stray away to pick flowers, do somersaults or watch a plane pass overhead. Such behavior is typical for children of this age because they usually are not ready for organized sports.

Somewhere between the ages of 6 and 7, most children develop the mental capacity to understand rules and focus on the game for more than a few minutes. They become more capable of working together as a team and gain the maturity necessary to deal with defeat. But prior to this point in development, most young children are just not ready to play an organized sport.

Pediatricians also have concerns about sports injuries to children. Ask your child's doctor about the risks of a specific sport and whether your child is physically ready to play.

Give some thought to your child's emotional development as well. Children vary widely in personality and emotional maturity, and you know your child better than anyone. Involvement in organized sports before the child is developmentally ready can hurt your child's self-esteem and self-confidence. Waiting a few years allows your child time to develop the physical, mental and emotional capacities necessary to play team sports.

Meanwhile, many activities at school and home lay the groundwork for team play. Schools frequently plan cooperative activities and projects in which children work together, such as preparing a meal, making a mural or designing a block city.

At home, parents can make a point of involving their children in tasks in which cooperation is key, even simple two-person jobs such as folding a sheet or using a dustpan. When kids hear, "Good team work, guys!" or "We finished so quickly because everyone helped!" they see the value of working together.

As a parent of a young child, ask yourself these questions before enrolling your child in organized sports:

- Will practice include a balance of structured activity and free play? The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends 15 to 20 minutes of structured activity combined with 30 minutes of free play.
- Does the coach emphasize safety, learning and fun ("Everyone plays. Everyone is a winner.")?
- Is the coach trained in first aid and CPR?
- Will the children get plenty of water breaks to avoid dehydration, especially in hot weather?
- Do children warm up their muscles at the beginning and then cool down during practice?
- Does the coach physically show the children what to do instead of just giving verbal instructions?
- Will the coach encourage your child rather than yell (because yelling takes the fun out of the game and will not make a child learn faster or play better)?

References:

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2. American Academy of Pediatrics. (2001). *Organized Sports for Children and Pre-adolescents*. Pediatrics 107(6).
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