

The benefits of 'Playing Up'

MULTI-SPORT PARENTING



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In the pursuit of reaching their fullest potential, many talented youth athletes eventually face the decision of whether to continue playing with their peers or move up to compete with more experienced and older players.

The issue is controversial because there is not a clear-cut answer. The benefits vary depending on the cost of the sport, physical development, emotional maturity and skill level of the child as well as the specific circumstances, such the coach and the other team members.

Joining an older age division, making a select squad or accepting a spot on a varsity team grants access to better coaches and provides greater opportunities for increasing skill development by competing against stronger

players. The lure of playing on a championship team is tempting, especially since it can generate full-ride college scholarships and multi-million dollar pro contracts.

In some cases, parents might feel as if they are holding their children back by not having them play up. Other times, parents push their kids to compete at elite levels because of the status symbol it represents. For these reasons, it is critical that the child drives the decision. However, even hyper-competitive kids can burn out, so the decision should be reevaluated every season.

The disadvantages of playing up

Just as playing up can lead to lucrative opportunities, the decision often backfires as the former all-star transitions into an average player when competing against better players in a higher division. The younger members often log more time on the bench than playing in the game. Additionally, youth athletes playing up are at increased risk for injuries, are often forced to sacrifice other interests and miss out on the camaraderie of participating with school friends. Besides requiring a larger commitment of time and money from parents, moving up also means athletes have less time for academics, quality family time and the freedom to just be a kid.

Aggressively pushing a child's interest in a sport or stressing their age-appropriate boundaries can stunt their development, notes Donna Merkel, a sports clinical specialist at Bryn Mawr Rehabilitation Hospital in Exton, PN, in an article for [Open Access Journal of Sports Medicine](#). More important than physical dominance or mastery of skills, emotional maturity should be the deciding factor. Children who are not mentally ready for the intimidation of playing against more skilled athletes, the intense training schedules and the increased pressure to win often lose confidence and sideline themselves from the sport.

Strengthening league rules

Playing within their own age group also has several benefits for star athletes,

including having the opportunity to develop their leadership skills as a captain. Each youth sport organization sets its own rules for playing up. While some prohibit it completely, most have adopted guidelines that allow for exceptions. Reasons for doing so often include kids who have mastered skills that their peers do not possess or those who are so much physically bigger than their peers that they dominate the games. Leagues may also take into consideration which team needs the athlete more.

The [Ohio Valley Soccer League](#) in Barlow requires players to participate in the correct, age-appropriate division, but it does permit athletes to play up one age level if it, “benefits the child and the league.” Decisions are made in consultation with coaches and approved by the League Board of Directors based on the child’s skill level and physical size.

With the drawbacks largely outweighing the benefits, several youth organizations have recently tightened their age parameters. New requirements take effect in [2015 for AAU Basketball](#), in both the national recreation and elite divisions, that group players by grade. A player who is outside the 24-month age window must play up in the next grade division. Rare exceptions for playing down are made if an athlete is in a grade above their normal age.

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