

An Honest Look at the Huge Commitment of Youth Sports

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By Laura Hudgens



A few weeks ago I was chatting with my friend Audra when our conversation turned to talk of summer. “Soooo, we were going to sign Timothy up for baseball this summer, but I don’t know. We like having our weekends free. And he’s just eight. It can wait a couple of years. Right?” she asked causally.

I wasn’t sure how to answer her. I don’t think Audra had any idea how complicated that question is.

Maybe there was an era when Little League Baseball or Mighty Mite football or Pee Wee basketball were just simple childhood pastimes – games that children played in the summer or on weekends. But now kids’ sports are a much, much bigger deal. And the implications of signing your child up for a sport (or not) can be massive.

What difference does it make?

When Audra causally tossed out the idea of waiting a couple of years, I didn’t have the heart to tell her that it might already be too late for their son to play baseball – at least on a serious level. Our youngest son began T-ball at four (a year later than many of his peers), and by

seven he was on an all-star team that traveled to compete with other seven-year-olds around the state.

We live in a small town where the talent pool is small, and competition for a position on an all-star team is minimal. But in larger cities, like the one Audra lives in, it can be very difficult for kids to jump in and be competitive when they are already two years behind their peers.

I've seen kids playing T-ball in pull-ups and a young soccer player racing down the field with a binky in his mouth. It was cute. Parents and spectators were delighted, and the kids in each of these scenarios seemed to be having a great time. There was no pressure on these little ones to win or even to understand the game.

But this doesn't change the fact that an early start is often considered an important factor for a kid's future in the game. According to Brian Watson of the Finneytown Athletic Association, the earlier kids start playing a sport the better.

Still, isn't starting baseball later an option for kids who aren't interested in highly competitive travel teams?

Maybe. But with more players specializing – starting younger with intense leagues and in many cases private coaching, the structure of kids' baseball (as well as other sports) has changed dramatically. Often city league baseball just isn't what it used to be. University of Nebraska researcher David Ogden has said that the high level of play leaves more broad-based organizations, such as Little League and YMCA teams, with “a lot of kids who can't get the ball over the plate, so the game is less fun and kids drop out.”

So, yes. Children can start playing baseball when they're older, but they might find themselves playing a watered down version of the game because so many other players have moved on to competitive club teams. As a result, some families find themselves having to choose between highly competitive travel teams and low skill-level city league teams. Unfortunately, the game seems to be missing a happy medium.

Baseball isn't the only sport or activity that has intensified in this way. A child who begins dance lessons at four is more likely to be selected for a competitive dance troupe than one who starts at 10. A gymnast who begins as a toddler is more likely to progress in the sport than one who begins as a pre-teen. This is simply the reality of youth sports today. Stiffer competition means that parents are looking to give their children every edge – and that edge begins early.

Of course, it isn't just that kids who start younger are better. It isn't even necessarily that they have more skill. But the younger a child starts in a sport or activity, the more likely he or she is to gain the attention and admiration of coaches. Coaches look for skill, but many of them also like to work with the same kids year after year and “coach them up” to create their own close-knit, well-oiled winning machine. Sometimes long-term commitment and familiarity trump talent.

Playing any sport is hard and it's a huge commitment. The seriousness of youth sports at least partially explains why 70 percent of kids drop out of sports by age 13. They start too young, play too hard, and in many cases burn out too soon.

Of course for kids and families who are interested in competitive sports, starting early isn't the only consideration. Usually being on a high level sports team involves considerable financial cost, as well. Often high level youth players receive private coaching with fees that can be nearly a hundred dollars an hour or more. Then there's the cost of equipment, club and park fees, and of course, travel. This can add up to hundreds, even thousands of dollars per year. The cost of highly competitive sports becomes even more staggering for families with more than one child.

Naturally, the high price tag of competitive sports contributes to the high pressure. Even the most laid back parents start to feel the need to win when they've spent a small fortune for their child to play. The loss is tougher when a family has driven (or flown) several hours, forked over money for a hotel room and meals, and taken time off work in order to compete.

Yet, while the intensity of youth sports can be overwhelming, not placing your child in a sport could mean missing out on some significant advantages. According to truesport.org, there is a great deal of research to back this up. But really it's common sense. Sports require discipline, commitment, team work, and the ability to accept victory and defeat gracefully. These are all important life skills that will serve a child well long after he has pitched his last inning or she has lobbed her last volleyball.

Sports also provide a forum in which kids can naturally exercise, make friends, and what's most important (or should be), they have a lot of fun.

It's hard to overestimate how valuable sports can be in the life of a child. According to the University of Missouri Women's and Children's Hospital, the benefits of sports also include higher self-esteem, better grades and lower stress.

So, youth sports are a must. Right?

Given such strong endorsements, it might seem like involving your child in sports at an early age is a no-brainer. But, as with most parenting decisions, there are several factors to consider – especially now that sports have become highly competitive and are a much bigger time and financial commitment than they were a generation ago.

When it comes to kids and sports, the above benefits make perfect sense – until they don't. As every parent knows, each child is different. And while the benefits of sports might be numerous they do not necessarily apply to all children.

For example, sports can be a great way to build self-esteem. A child who is the star pitcher for his baseball team or who wins medal after medal at her swim meets is likely to get a great confidence boost from being in a sport. But the same cannot be said for the child who struggles or who can't keep up with his or her teammates.

The days of “The Sandlot” are long gone. Remember that movie? When Scottie Smalls moves to a new town he doesn’t know a soul. But he makes friends by playing baseball with a group of neighborhood boys at the nearby sandlot. Scottie is terrible, but the other boys don’t care. They are playing in an abandoned lot, wearing tattered sneakers and using baseballs they’ve scrapped their spare nickels and dimes together to purchase. When Smalls shows up, they are just happy to have another player.

But kids playing today are wearing expensive cleats and playing at multi-million dollar facilities. They aren’t just looking for somebody else to play. They’re looking to win. Sports are a great self-esteem builder but probably only for kids who consistently contribute to a win. For the Scottie Smalls of the world, team sports can serve as an exercise in frustration and humiliation.

The MU Health webpage also touts academic benefits as one of the upsides of enrolling kids in sports, reporting that “sports require memorization, repetition and learning — skill sets that are directly relevant to classwork. Also, the determination and goal-setting skills sports require can be transferred to the classrooms.”

This makes sense. And yet, the article fails to mention that when long weekend tournaments and late night games and practices rob children of precious sleep, the impact on their grades, as well as their mental and social well-being, can be significant.

It isn’t uncommon for 4th and 5th graders to have ballgames on school nights that keep the players out late and deprive them of the recommended amount of sleep for children their age. It can’t be argued that the benefits of sports outweigh the benefits of a good night’s rest, yet families all over the country sacrifice their kids’ sleep for the game on a regular basis.

As far as sports being a stress reliever, again, that depends. Exercise is an excellent way to burn off energy and relieve tension. But the high stakes nature of many kids’ sports today can add an unhealthy stress component to childhood. Not only do some children feel intense pressure to win and to excel, but the amount of time required to be on a highly competitive team can prevent kids from getting much needed downtime – a crucial factor when it comes to stress relief.

It’s this downtime that my friend, Audra, is so wisely trying to protect for her family. How do families juggle sports with the need and the desire for a freer schedule and plenty of time to just hang out and be together? How do we encourage our kids to play sports without ruining childhood?

Balance is key.

It isn’t easy. While my husband and I don’t advocate specialization in just one sport (a practice that is increasingly coming under fire, in part because of the increased chance of injury), we do enforce an off season. Mercifully, off season for all of our children coincided this year. The entire family took the winter off.

It was glorious.

We ate dinner together as a family night after night. We were in our pajamas most nights by 7:00. We read books and binged watched entire seasons of “Lost” on Netflix. Most nights the kids were in bed at a reasonable hour — even our two high school daughters who both carried heavy course loads. In short, our winter was relaxing, happy, and sane. Sports are great, but it’s also hard to overestimate the value of quiet evenings at home as a family.

This isn’t to say that an off season is the answer for every family. For some families the balance might lie elsewhere; they might decide against team sports all together. The important thing is realizing that this isn’t 1955 or even 1985. Any decisions parents make about sports will likely have specific and possibly significant consequences for the entire family.

There’s no question that there are very real benefits for children who play sports. There are also very real dangers if sports are taken too seriously. So, what do I tell Audra?

When (and if) your family is ready, sports are awesome. You will enjoy many hours at the ball field or on the road together. Sports can be a great way to bond as a family and for your child to gain new skills – both on and off the field. So sign him up! Encourage him! Cheer for him!

But whether he plays on a high stakes, competitive team, or he warms the bench for the worst team in the league, don’t forget to have fun!