

Chapter 3

Getting Of To A Good Start With Your Own Children

Introduction

Sport activities are healthful. They can provide an enormous source of enjoyment for children. Most all children like to play. It is fun. It is a vital part of growing up. Just as important, however, is that the seeds for lifetime participation and enjoyment from sport are planted during these years before the age of 12 or so, both for boys and girls. The movements of sport are cradle to the grave activities that bring joy, even in what is ingloriously referred to as old age. In fact, physical movement may be more important for our seasoned citizens than it is for our children. As such, it is quite important for parents and coaches to realize this.

Activity patterns that are established during these early years influence participation in years to come. There are a number of things that we can do for our children in sport to help them find opportunities, be comfortable, and be successful (however that might be defined) during these first 12 years of their lives.

This chapter provides basic information about how parents can help their infants and pre-school children experience, explore and learn motor skills, physical activities, and very simple sport skills in and around the home. The latter portion of the chapter presents ways to modify and adapt our dominant sports to fit the immature motor skills and movement patterns of youngsters. Some people want to mold our kids to fit the games. This chapter describes how to make our sporting activities fit the kids.

The Parents Role With Infants And Young Children *(see footnote 1)*

In our society it seems quite natural that parents want their children to be athletic, to be starters on their teams, and to be winners in the sport arena. Americans value skilled performance in all walks of life, but skilled performance in sport is, for some reason, particularly revered.

However, parents must be realistic. Only a relatively few people are sufficiently well skilled in sport to pursue it successively at the high school, collegiate or professional levels. There is considerable evidence to show that those who do become our best athletes, possess certain traits and abilities to be great. A proper body build, speed, strength, agility, quickness, perceptual skills and an intense desire to achieve are factors that are common among the elite performers. Most people do not have these traits. However, with effort, most of us can become well skilled and derive considerable pleasure from one or more sports. Children with normal ability need only encouragement and opportunity for their individual talents to emerge. Parents should not expect their children to become elite performers in a particular sport. Rather, they should help them become skillful in a variety of sports, sometimes referred to as movement skills. This will help them reap the benefits of a lifetime involvement with

sport. All children need the same encouragement and opportunity. For the most part, however, greatness in sport is not a realistic goal.

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How Parents Can Help Their Children Become Well Skilled In A Variety Of Sports

The first step is for parents to provide their children with many opportunities to participate in physical activities. The earlier this begins in the life of children, the better it is. There are findings (Lawther, 1968) to indicate that an increase in pre-school opportunity to learn motor skills produces an increased range of interests, more confidence in new ventures, superiority in certain skills, and better attitudes about physical activity than non-participants. This superiority tends to persist into later years. Thus, by the age of two and certainly by the age of three, it is important to introduce your children to a variety of activities.

Motor Activities for Pre-School Children (ages 2-5). Pre-school children should be exposed to a variety of movement situations. They can benefit from activities that build strength, general coordination, courage, eye-hand coordination, general body awareness as well as positive attitudes about their own ability to move in a variety of situations. Specific activities for pre-school children include:

Activities for strength and/or courage

- Climbing - - ladders, poles, play gyms, trees, ropes
- Balancing - - balance board, curbs, walls, logs, horizontal ladders
- Hanging - - rings, ropes, play gyms, horizontal ladders, bars, trees

Activities to develop general coordination and body awareness

- Rhythmic activities - - ice skating, roller skating, dance
- General locomotor movement - - walking, running, jumping, hopping, skipping, galloping, sliding, leaping, and climbing
- Tumbling - - individual and partner stunts with parents, forward and backward rolls, log rolls, tripods, head and hand stands with assistance, cartwheels, et cetera
- Swimming - - children as young as three months can learn elementary water skills

Activities for eye - hand coordination

- Throwing - - Use balls of various sizes. Most children do not develop a mature throwing pattern until six to eight years of age. Thus, at the preschool level, precise form is not an objective. Use soft balls, bean bags and yarn balls.

- Catching - - Use large balls with younger children. Young two and three year olds will not be able to respond by moving to catch a ball. Throw, bounce and roll the ball into their hands and lap. Use a variety of balls and balloons.
- Hitting - - Use lightweight bats, paddles, rackets and clubs. Begin by hitting a stationary object like a ball on a cone, ball on a string, and ball hit out of the hand. Then toss the ball or balloon to where they swing. By the age of four or five, children can begin to move into position or adjust to hit a tossed ball.
- Kicking - - Use lightweight balls and balloons. Provide opportunities to kick, dribble and punt the ball.
- Bouncing/dribbling - - Use either hand and both hands. This is a difficult skill. Children can have some success at this between the ages of two and three.

All of the above activities can and should be conducted in a fun filled, positive atmosphere. The key, at the pre-school level, is to provide numerous opportunities to participate in a wide variety of activities. The best way to be sure that your children receive sufficient movement opportunities is to play with them yourself. This can start as finger grasping activities with infants. Once head control is developed, toddlers can be pulled, rolled, swung and moved through a variety of "exercises." When two - footed locomotion is achieved, physical activities have few limits.

Most learning seems to occur in a step-wise or developmental fashion. That is, primary skills must be acquired before more complex skills are learned. The primary skills form the foundation for success in later skill development. These foundation skills not only take much time to develop, but seem to need more attempts or trials before they are acquired. Thus, the more opportunities children have in activity during the pre-school years, the more likely they will grow in their potential for acquiring the more complex sport skills.

Other Factors That Enhance Early Skill Development. Providing opportunities for your children to learn is probably the most important factor in early skill development. However, there are several other factors that contribute to skill acquisition. Here are some important suggestions for parents to help pre-school children.

- A. Play with your children. Do not treat them like fine china, even while in the crib. Move your children. Manipulate them. Roll them. Get them active.
- B. Do not labor over correct form when engaging in specific physical activities. Instead, concentrate on what is to be accomplished. Rather than correcting the throwing motion, emphasize where the ball should go. For example, you can say: "Throw it right to me." or "Throw it high." or "Hit the ball right to Mommy."
- C. When you set a goal for them to accomplish (e.g., "Throw the ball all the way to me."), it should be attainable. Pre-school children have limited tolerance for failure. However, it is not always necessary to set a goal. Rather, it is perfectly fine to throw the ball back and forth. Exploring ways of throwing - - underhand, overhand, side arm, big ball, little ball, hard ball.

D. Resist the urge to coach your child all the time. Playing together as equal partners and just having a good time provides many opportunities for children to be involved in various sport and skill activities. Frequently, the interest of children in an activity will persist longer in a playful environment than in a teaching situation.

E. Be positive and have fun when playing with your children. When their interest begins to wane, change activities, stop playing, or do something else. Young children have short attention spans. Do not expect them to “stay with” one activity for long periods of time, particularly if it is not fun.

F. Use child-sized equipment. For children aged two or three, balls for catching should be large and relative soft. Balloons make good toys. For all pre-school children, bats, rackets and other striking implements should be light in weight. Plastic bats, rackets and balls are good toys. A light racquetball racquet is good for hitting tennis balls. A sawed off hockey stick works well for both ice and field hockey. Basketball goals and home made goals should be low to insure success.

G. Encourage your children to watch others who are well skilled. While watching games on television, you can say: “Do you see how the batter hits the ball?” Children are great imitators. Thus, if they are provided with good models to observe, they will perform many skills correctly just by copying what they see.

When parents play with their children, this gives youngsters the skills to play on their own. When children play on their own and with other children, they will learn many skills useful in sport through trial and error. The four keys to building good fundamental movement, physical activity, or sport skills are: opportunity, doing, success, and fun.

School Age Children

When children reach school age, their interests become more focused on learning the skills of specific sports like baseball, football, basketball, soccer, ice hockey, swimming or tennis. For children six and older, there are many opportunities in most communities to become involved in organized sport programs. The decision to participate can be left to them. However, encouragement from parents to participate in a sport or to try different sports is certainly acceptable. Between the ages of six and twelve seems to be the best time for people to learn specific sport skills. Children of this age are quite interested in learning new skills. They like team and gang activities, and they have free time for play. Some parents may not wish their children to play organized sports at this age. Generally, sport is safer at the younger age levels than at the older age levels. Most sport activities are safe when there is no excessive sideline pressure on the youngsters to play beyond their capacity. Again, the opportunity to participate in sport activities and have fun in a positive environment are the key ingredients in skill development or acquisition.

How Parents Can Help Their School Age Children. School age children like to play and they like sports. Here are some important suggestions for parents that can help school age children develop their sport skills.

A. Play with your children. Take time to play with them. Show them, by your actions rather than words, that you value play and the progress they make. When playing with your own children, there may be a tendency to want to teach, to offer suggestions and to correct skill errors. Though it is certainly not wrong to try to teach sport skills to your own children, there is great value also in being an equal partner in play with your children. There are benefits also for your children. Just to play and have fun with a parent is something that children can remember and treasure. It helps build a bond between parent and child.

B. Encourage your children to participate in and/or a number of different sports. Some people are more suited to one sport than another. The best way for children to decide which of the hundreds of sports they enjoy most is to explore many activities. Rather than specialize, we recommend that by the age 12, youngsters should have played in at least two team and two individual sports.

C. Encourage your children to participate in other activities in addition to sports. Interests and skills in music, art, reading, the computer and other fields are developed in the same way as are skills and interests in sports - through opportunity. A variety of interests and abilities add immeasurably to one's quality of life.

D. Help your children be realistic about their abilities. Some children, even with endless opportunities, may never be great or even average. Playing on the church basketball team may be a great accomplishment. Setting unreasonably high goals for your children and expecting them to become something unattainable will lead to many frustrations, both for children and parents. Setting goals too high may cause your children to lose interest in sports completely. Help them understand sports and their abilities.

E. When your children participate in organized programs, be aware of their reasons for wanting to play. Talk with them. Ask them what they enjoy most about playing and why they have decided to play. In many cases, a child's reasons for playing sports may not agree with that of the parents and coaches' perceptions of why children play. For the most part, children under the age of 12, and for many above that age, the reasons for playing include:

- have fun
- play with their friends
- make friends
- explore their capabilities
- see improvement in their ability
- participate in games at their own level

- help make up games
- seek and conquer challenge
- share praise and recognition with others (Gradussov. 1982:8)

The goals of parents may be very different from those of their children. Parents want their children to be a starter, to excel, and to be on a winning team. For coaches, the typical goal is to develop winning teams. Find out why your children play!

F. Help your children develop good attitudes about winning and losing. Sports, by its very nature, is competitive. It is in the spirit to play hard and make every reasonable effort to win. Thus, playing to win is basic to the game! However, in any given contest one person or team wins and the other loses. Losing after playing one's best is just as honorable as is winning when playing at one's best. It is just that losing is not as much fun as winning.

It is very important for children to understand that losing is not bad. The fact is, most young children would not consider losing bad if they did not hear negative comments about it from parents and coaches who make them feel badly when they lose. Responding to your children's efforts and quality of play without regard to winning and losing will help them keep the importance of winning in perspective with other things in life. Keep this in mind. Throughout life, winning and losing is not crucial in many of the things we do. It is how much you get to play that really counts.

Sport programs for children are just that, FOR CHILDREN. Since they are children, what they usually hope to gain from playing are fun, friends, getting better, and acquire some type of team identity. This is what parents should try to provide.

Developmental Factors That Affect Sport Performance. Coaches and parents of children who participate in sports should be aware of two important developmental aspects that affect children's performance in a variety of sport skills. Studies in physical education indicate that two types of skills are greatly influenced by developmental factors. These are tracking skills used in catching a fly ball or hitting a ball. The other is serial skills associated with linking independent skills together. They form activities patterns that become known as basketball, soccer, football and the other sports. (Drowatzky, 1981) Both of these skills place high demands on the child's ability and capacity to process information and make the appropriate responses.

Tracking Skills. Children between the ages of six and twelve were tested on their ability to predict the flight of and the landing point of a tennis ball. They did this by observing a portion or segment of the flight of a ball. Not surprisingly, the results of the study revealed that children's ability to accurately judge the flight of a ball improved with age. (Williams, 1967) The six, seven and eight year olds responded quickly, but were unable to predict the flight of the ball accurately. They moved, on the average, 22 feet beyond where the ball would fall. These findings help explain missed fly balls, dropped passes, poor heading, faulty trapping in soccer in the younger age groups.

At the age of nine, children began to make more accurate judgments about where the ball would land. However, it took them a long time to make the decision. At age 10, the rate for processing ball flight information increased, but the landing spot judgment decreased. By age 11, children were able to make both accurate and rapid decisions.

Thus, it appears that it is unrealistic to expect youngsters under the age of 11 to be well skilled or even consistently successful in skills like batting, catching, fielding, and heading. It is not within the ability or capacity of some youngsters to perform these sport skills consistently, even with practice. Opportunities to practice these skills and to play in games may help children improve their tracking skills. However, it will not insure that they will be able to perform these skills successfully on a consistent basis. In short, coaches should be patient when working with children in activities involving moving objects. Some children mature more slowly than do other children. They may not be capable of consistently appropriate performance until after the age of 11.

Serial Skills. Linking related skills together into a flowing motion is referred to as serial skills. Children's ability to learn serial skills appears also to develop and improve with age. There is some evidence to indicate that children's ability to serially order or link together perceptual motor tasks begins at about the age of five. It is relatively well developed by the age of 12. Thus, it is unreasonable to expect six and seven year old children to remember and execute a series of skills during a game, like a set play in basketball. They are equally unable to perform or remember the proper series of responses when certain game situations arise. This includes making a double play or covering first base in a bunt situation. Keep in mind that a double play involves several decisions, four moving bodies (i.e., fielders, runners, ball), five skills (i.e., running, catching, stepping on the base, throwing, getting out of the way), the ability to process and coordinate all of this, and then the timing to execute it.

An awareness of these two developmental factors reinforces the notion that children are not merely small adults. They are highly individualized human beings growing according to their own internal clocks. They are physically, psychologically, socially and intellectually immature beings. They need opportunities to develop without undue stresses in an environment structured to their needs, ability level, and current state of development. It is up to us, who are physically, psychologically, socially and intellectually mature, to design our youth sport programs so that they provide the best possible environment for our children to become skillful in a variety of sports. If we adults are going to conduct programs for youngsters, it is our responsibility to do it properly. If not, we should not interfere with the play and sport activities of our children.

Working With Beginners Compared To More Advanced Players

Beginners. Skilled coaches and teachers recognize that different approaches and techniques are used when helping beginners in contrast to the more advanced players. Most children under the age of nine, and all people regardless of age, who are just learning a sport are beginners. Beginners are people who have decided to invest in

something new without knowing how they are going to do. Most beginners need a significant amount of early success to stay with a new sport. This success helps them develop good feelings about their ability to learn and perform. Without this good feeling, beginners become discouraged and quit, unless strong motivational drives exist. To develop the confidence that comes with success, beginners should perform in a positive and supportive environment. Skills should be presented and practiced in such a way that they enjoy a high rate of success.

The way that performance errors are corrected is important. Error correction with beginners is most effective when attention is focused on the desired outcome of the movement rather than the specific error. In the initial stages of learning, players need to acquire a general or overall picture of the skill to be learned. (Gentile, 1972) During this early learning period, errors occur randomly. That is, beginners do not make the same error repeatedly. They make a variety of errors. Their performance of a skill is not sufficiently set or ingrained that any one trial looks like any other trial. Therefore, it is more productive to focus on what they are trying to do, the outcome, rather than how to do it, error-free.

Beginners have difficulty using large amounts of new information. Thus, extensive verbal lectures and instructions are ineffective. Their vocabulary and conceptual understanding of what they are trying to do is limited. Beginners are not able to use, or even make sense perhaps out of, prolonged (i.e., five minutes) lectures on a particular skill, strategy or concept. A more productive use of time would be to identify two or three key points about performing the skill or strategy. Then, set up a practice situation that will allow them to work on that specific thing. After a little practice, stop. Make one or two key points, briefly, and then return to practice.

Beginners become fatigued, physically and mentally, more quickly than do advanced players. Physically, they do not possess the muscular strength and endurance to practice as long or as hard as can the advanced players. Due to the inefficient movement of unskilled players, beginners expend more energy performing the skills that advanced players do with ease. Notice how the top players always look as though they are moving effortlessly. Finally, beginners have yet to develop a great amount of skill in the sport. They are not as committed to practice and staying with skills until they are mastered as are the more skilled players.

Advanced Players. Unlike the beginners, advanced players, regardless of age, are more highly committed to the sport and to the alluring goal of continually getting better. The advanced players do not need to be encouraged to “stay with it.” Advanced players need and want highly specific information about their performance, errors, how to improve, and what to work on next. They want to know exactly what is wrong so that it can be corrected.

Advanced performers have developed a form or style. They will make consistent errors. These errors should be brought to their attention, and can be corrected in this fashion. Ask them to briefly practice and feel the incorrect movement. Then, practice

the correct movement. The correct movement must be practiced extensively in all of the ways it will be used in game situations. If this is not done, players will revert to the previous incorrect movements, the errors, during competition. This forces them to concentrate on skill rather than their opponent and their own game.

Advanced players should be permitted to develop their own unique styles or forms as long as the movements are mechanically sound. Individual differences in body build, strength, and flexibility plus years of correct and incorrect practice make slight variations in form acceptable. If style does not detract from successful performance, accept it without change.

As a rule, drastic changes in technique or adding more advanced skills should not be done during the season. This kind of change can lead to a dramatic drop off in performance. It takes practice time to become comfortable with new skills.

Unlike beginners, advanced players can play a important role in their own skill development. Advanced players know about the skills within a sport and how complex it is to integrate new skills into games and matches successfully. Because of this knowledge, advanced players can learn and profit from different teaching methods and aids. They include: reading about skilled movements, watching video replays of their own individual skills and game situations, watching highly skilled players, detailed and extensive information and feedback from knowledgeable coaches, and the careful use of mental practice or visual mental rehearsal.

Coaches of youth sport and school teams are not likely to have groups of all beginners or all advanced players. In most situations, there is a wide range of abilities or skill levels with which coaches must deal. And, deal with them they must. No one child is more important than another child. Each player needs the opportunity to improve and become an equal member of the team. When coaches and parents are aware of the differences between beginning and advanced players, they can use the most appropriate techniques to help each one improve. Then, every child on the team can experience the basic goals of youth sport - - to participate, to improve, and to have fun.

Changing Games To Fit The Kids - - Changing reality

When this material was first delivered in an oral presentation, it followed an NFL football player at the microphone. Throughout his brief talk, he stressed the "Reality of Competition" in every day life. This is a common theme of many people, but particularly for people who have spent most of their life in sports. When this presentation on changing games to fit the kids was delivered, it became apparent that a more appropriate title, to contrast with his talk would be, Changing Reality. Changing the reality of competition is to modify the games to fit the ability of the players.

Some people force youngsters into games that they cannot play. Those who cannot measure up are cast out, in a “sink or swim” approach to programming. This type of elimination dominates sport. This section is directed to the ways we can change games to fit the kids so that more of them can be included. If youngsters show interest in sport, and most do when given the opportunity, then our intent should be, not to exclude them, but to develop programs that include them totally into the activities.

In working on “changing games,” it will be helpful to alter your style of thinking. We want you to avoid “tunnel thinking” and words like “we cannot do that” or “that will never work.” Rather, study the following pages without pre-formed ideas about what is possible. Say to yourself, “how could we do that” or “how could we change that to make it more suitable for our kids.” Once your mind is free of the restraints imposed by traditional sports, a media or perspective bias, new ideas can flow freely.

In dealing with changing games, the first question to ask is: should we change our games? The answer is: of course. No game is sacred. Change anything. Wait no more. For unknown reasons, some sport people, traditionalists perhaps, feel that youngsters must play the adult version of sports. It is doubtful that these people would put a child behind the wheel of a car, push them out on a bicycle without support, or ask them to go to war. It is difficult to understand why people would object to youngsters playing sports under modified rules, but they do. They do it in the USA and they do it in other nations. (Winter, 1983:27, 37) Playing according to modified rules is not, it might be interpreted, a sign of weakness or “sissified.” According to Mehl and Davis (1978:48), “To adapt the rules for young players does not lessen the value of sport. Instead it gives the child the opportunity for proper skill development as opposed to the development of bad habits for the sake of success by adult standards.”

Sport leaders in Australia have given considerable attention to modified games. They feel that the problems with what they refer to as “junior sport” are: excessive physical demands on the players, complex adult rules, too much competition, elimination, lack of enjoyment, drop outs, maturation differences, pressure, adult hostility, plus no systematic modification. (Winter, 1983:6-8) She predicted that if some modified approaches to junior sport were not developed, “many children will continue to find organized sport quite unrewarding.” (Winter, 1980:8) The recent growth in what some people call “ecosports” plus high drop out rates in some sports are two concrete examples of how players feel about their traditional sport opportunities. They are looking for something else to do.

Modifying sport is not new. Many recreational and physical education staff people present games and other activities according to the developmental level of their players or students. The following progression, applied to racquetball, is an accepted way to move youngsters from beginning to advanced activities over a period of years. It involves; exploratory activities or basic movement skills followed by low organized games using simple sport skills. Next, lead - up games are organized with simple and modified rules. This prepares the youngsters for THE GAME, physically and mentally. (Hutslar, 1982b)

Watch children play in yards, driveways, on playgrounds and in gyms. Seldom do they play, nor do they have enough players to create the “adult version” of the sport. Even when given the option to design their own games, “they design a game in which most of them are successful most of the time.” (Winter. 1980:27) That is not adult sport. They modify their activities to fit their abilities and the number of players who move in and out of their games. The so-called “trash sports,” super star and stupor star competition are other examples of modified sport. Some would make great youth sport games. Many sport activities are modified and more could be modified to suit the players.

Based on the social and emotional development of immature human forms, kids, here are some good reasons why more sport activities for youth should be conducted under modified conditions. Winter wrote that young players have: (Winter, 1983:34)

1. smaller capacity to cope with stress so that during the pressure of competitive games, they forget rules and skills which can lead to anger, frustration and a sense of humiliation;
2. less ability to think ahead, anticipate developments in the game with the result they cannot apply known skills and game techniques effectively;
3. the level and span of concentration is lower so that they cannot remember to apply techniques they have been taught;
4. a more limited ability to make decisions so that they may not even act effectively to save themselves from injury;
5. they are self centered (e.g., they want to be where the ball is) and find it difficult to accept the restraints imposed by teamwork;
6. less ability to grasp abstract concepts which are inherent in many rules. (*see footnote 2*)

2. *Used with permission of the Division of Recreation, Education Department of Tasmania, Australia. Revised to remove sex bias language.*

Our children are not miniature adults, no matter how we dress them. They think, act, and are motivated by the minds of children. The main advantages that children have over adults are that their cuts and bruises heal faster and they forget more rapidly. They forget things that adults never forget, if you know what we mean. Kids are up beat, positive, and bounce back quickly. Adults have lost this. So, returning to the question, should we change our games, the answer again is yes. When your answer IS yes, here are some places where changes can be made. They include; goals or purposes, leadership, equipment, facilities, intent or rules of the game, and the conditions of play.

Goals Or Purposes

There are few limits to what can be done or accomplished with youth in the sport scene. The first consideration when dealing with this topic, however, is that the games should exist for the players. (Hutslar, 1982) This is not generally observed. Proper goals might include fun, exploration, full participation, development and progress according to each child's own biological or maturational time schedule, and lifetime participation. Goals, something that does not receive serious attention, need to be clearly identified. Lengthy goal and mission statements are hard to follow. The use of one or two simple words to identify your goals is much more precise.

In modifying the goals of youth sport experiences, activities can shift between a product orientation (e.g., outcomes, wins, press clippings, championships) and the process (e.g., developing, having a good time). The product is usually something tangible. The process is less easy to identify. The sport process can be one that nurtures all youngsters and makes sport a warm host during their early learning periods. All participate as dictated by their interests. All progress. All attain higher levels of performance. This allows them, as teenagers and adults, to continue participating in the activities they enjoyed as children. The process becomes one of building lifetime interest, both for girls and boys. See Orlick and Botterill (1975:161-163) and Hutslar (1980a) for other suggested changes.

An educational or developmental thrust in traditional sport activities changes the nature of games. They move from elimination, win-lose, "Me Tarzan" or "We're Number" to "Let's try that again." In school classrooms, the emphasis is on acquiring certain basic skills in reading, writing, arithmetic, computer and healthful living. Activities are designed to get students actively involved in learning by giving them many opportunities to try new skills with the help of expert guidance. (Perhaps we have to ignore the fact for the moment that 60% of the teachers come from the bottom 40% of the college student pool.) Then, they progress to more difficult skills. The process does not stop. We are limited only by our ability to understand and our interest to continue. For some, unfortunately, that interest never develops. Initially at least, that is the fault of the home, not the schools.

In some of our youth sport activities, the players could benefit from instructional activities that allow them to try, learn, and develop. All players who wish to participate would be accepted at their current state or stage of development. As a rule, we are not able to predict adult sport performance levels from youth performance levels. In fact, we do not do too well at prediction, generally. So, rather than engage in a guessing game with six or eight or ten year olds, it would be more advisable to get all of the kids involved in the activity, and help them learn and progress. Then, let their performances at the high school and college levels be what determines their "rise" in sport. Help them negotiate the sport funnel. Primarily though, we should help every child learn what they are capable of learning. Then, let the players themselves choose their own sport preferences based on current performance and interest, rather than the "predictions of others."

Leadership

Games and sports can be altered or modified by changing the leadership style. The common styles are referred to as autocratic, democratic, and laissez faire. During the 1980's, attention to Japanese management styles, Theories X, Y, and Z, became common expressions. They meant, bear down, be optimistic, and become completely involved, respectively. In the sport situation, these styles of leadership can be transformed and applied in these ways.

Trained Professional Leadership. This leadership style usually involves one trained leader who works with groups of people who might be considered staff or students. It applies to those who are specifically prepared in education, recreation, and school sport programs. In education, teachers might serve as coach, referee, schedule maker, evaluator, health counselor, and administrator. Some take on the tasks of a social director. Teachers, in particular, are usually able to give considerable time and assistance to everyone when the skill level of the participants are somewhat equal. The orientation of the professionally trained person is based on values and skills that are not shared generally by the population at large.

Cooperative Leadership. The cooperative leadership style places the teacher, coach, referee, supervisor, parents and players where able, in helping relationships. They act in concert to guide the players. In practical terms, this means that there is little or no distinction between coach, referee and supervisor. All help the youngsters as the need arises. Winter noted (1980:22) that referees and umpires in some programs have been renamed "guides" to better describe their role. Whether called guides, cooperative leaders, or tutors, their purpose is clear. Everyone assists all participants.

A study from Tokyo (Uniforms Separate, 1980) revealed that 95% of 75 companies surveyed required some type of company uniform. Of the reasons given for uniforms, two relate to cooperative leadership-increasing efficiency and building company spirit.

Can this apply to youth sport and enhance cooperative leadership? We believe so. Suppose the staff (i.e., teachers, coaches, referees, supervisors, scorers, and others) were supplied with a standard or stock uniform; there would be no distinguishing team colors, names, stripes or other symbols around which leaders would take sides or build fences. People might more easily view one another as guides and tutors on the same side. They would be less inclined to see others as opponents to be vanquished, tricked, or misdirected because they are on the "other" side. A standard uniform MAY bring helpers together and enable them to work toward the common good of all players. Uniformed helpers MAY assist the players regardless of who they play for or how skilled or unskilled they appear. It is an idea worth trying, if you do not mind changing games, particularly for the younger players.

Pre-Service Leadership. There are a number of youth programs that are staffed by pre-service or pre-professional leaders. This can be described most simply as older

kids working with younger kids. Where adult, volunteer or paid assistance is not available, youngsters can step in. Many scout, camp and church programs rely heavily on this approach to staffing their leadership positions. Typically, as kids come through the ranks, certain ones emerge or are selected to become "junior leaders." In many cases, these youngsters have only their experiences in the program to guide their efforts. In other cases, as in camping, they receive additional training.

One such pre-service model was used in a West Virginia recreation program. Here, 18 to 22 year old college students who were majors in health, physical education or recreation gained valuable field experience running the community sport program. This gave the college students practical experience with kids and adults. At the same time, it provided the youngsters and the community with near-professional leadership in coaching, refereeing, and supervision.

Joe Manjone, recreation professional, explained that the college students rotated from team to team, conducted non-traumatic practice sessions and games, restored peace to a troubled program, and gained valuable in-service experiences in their field of study. (Manjone, 1982) There are, no doubt, many instances where similar arrangements could be made between community organizations and school/college departments. The "pre-service" model has great potential for providing reliable sources of good leadership as does any plan in current use.

Peer Leadership. Peer or intramural leadership usually involves one or more administrative supervisors. The administrators plan the activities. The activities are then supervised largely by students who have elected to become involved. This type of leadership, peer with adult guidance, is used effectively from the elementary school through college, and in many recreation leagues. The problems with this style are usually less than what develops in the traditional sports leagues. Exceptions to this occur when winning and awards become more important than participation. (Gilbert, 1975; Rokosz, 1977) In many cases, coaching, officiating and supervision are done by the students with a minimum of staff or adult intervention. Participation is the main goal.

Coparcenary Or Patron Leadership. This style of leadership, newly labeled here, is characterized by untrained and interested citizens. They are likely to be the parents of the participants. The strict use of the word coparcenary is a legal term that means "joint heirship." This adequately describes the interest that parents have in the future of their children in sport and in life. This style of leadership may be typified by local community organization run by inspired mothers and fathers. It may be also parents who are participants with their children under the direction of trained professional leaders. (Monash-Barrack, 1983)

In this second example, parents came onto the fields and courts and worked directly with their children and other children in a one to one relationship. Obviously, the goals in this type of program must be compatible with a mixture of child and adult interactions. Going for the "winning run" may not be a primary concern for any of the participants. This style of leadership is used also in many individual sport activities

including golf, tennis, swimming, fishing, camping and more. It is typified by parents who play with their babies, and how children learn when they play with their parents. Parents generally have no formal preparation as coaches and teachers in the coparcenary, patron or civic leadership style. As a result, their "leadership" may be described by trained teachers and coaches as playing with, trial and error, or extemporaneous.

There are many leadership styles that can be adopted in order to conduct successful youth sport programs. Numerous sport operations rely completely on one trained, professional staff person -- physical education, recreation, dance, fitness, aerobic dance, swim clubs, and muscle centers. At the other end of the spectrum, we under use our younger students and our own children to help with their peers. Kids are a great source of "person power" that is largely untapped.

Equipment

Equipment or the implements of our games come in all sizes. It is difficult for youngsters to learn, move efficiently, and play well when they are too small and have insufficient strength. Adult size equipment is too large and may be too heavy for youngsters. The same problems may exist for adults who are new to the game. In sports like gymnastics, track and field and baseball, sport leaders do well in seeing that the players have equipment to fit the players. There is no evidence to indicate that players who start on "junior size equipment" suffer or progress any slower than do those who play only with "adult size equipment." If anything, the use of adult size equipment delays participation and yields poor form. Youngsters cannot play that game we call basketball when the ball is too heavy to shoot toward a goal that is too high.

Purchase equipment for young players that they can manipulate easily. Usually this means that youth equipment needs to be smaller (basketballs), larger (play balls for toddlers), lighter (baseball and softball bats and gloves), or softer (baseballs and gloves). In selecting balls for your children, look for those blue in color. Researchers have noted that youngsters prefer blue over yellow and white balls. (Watch The Ball, 1981; Winter, 1980:13) Other equipment that is commonly available to fit the smaller players includes: all kinds of rackets, clubs and sticks; an assortment of junior size balls for basketball, football and soccer; bowling balls; and a wide variety of plastic sport toys like bats, balls, and rackets.

Some equipment that buckles and snaps are hard for young hands to manipulate. Just watch how long it takes catchers to work these clasps on their backside. More appropriate clasps are those with either larger fasteners, adhesive strips that are widely used in sport clothing now, or non-buckling straps that are similar to goggle straps that swimmers and skiers wear. Equipment is now available that has been designed for kids. The use of junior equipment will help the players learn and have more safe sport experiences.

Facilities

Generally, it is a waste of time and facilities for small children to play on adult size fields and courts. An 80 yard run by little ones is an endurance contest, not football. Fields and courts can be sub-divided into smaller playing areas. This allows more players to use baseball, soccer and football fields, and basketball and tennis courts. It seems like swimmers have always divided their pools for maximum usage. The regulation football or soccer field can be divided into three playing areas without sacrifice. In fact, it is a plus. With a reduced playing area, there can be corresponding reduction in team size. A six on six soccer or football game will allow more players to handle the ball more frequently. This will help them develop skills faster.

Generally speaking, baseball does well at modifying or grading their fields and equipment to fit the age of the players. However, some basketball people still seem to resist eight foot and lower goals, even where cost is not a factor. A Virginia Saturday morning program grew from a two-goal, one - gym program to a community center program involving six courts. They use modified goals, played five on five basketball, and half court games. (Saturday Morning Sports Program, Inc.) The growth of their program was designed for the kids and they came running.

We tend to think of sport in terms of regulation playing fields, arenas and stadiums. We should not ignore, however, the playing areas that can be developed in “spare rooms” or unused corners. These areas can make fine activity spaces for skill development ranging from dance to simple ball skills to diaper gyms. Diaper gyms are introductory gymnastic activities for preschoolers. Spare rooms can be turned into fine rebound walls, bowling lanes, mini-tennis courts and practice areas for certain types of skills.

This raises the question of safety. Young players move with less body control than skilled adults. Beginners are more awkward and inexperienced in how they move in both contact and non-contact sport activities. Therefore, it is essential to provide protective padding on walls, at quick stop areas, around fence tops, and at doors. Recess drinking fountains, fire extinguishers, and vending machines to eliminate collisions. Mark parking areas well and keep pedestrian and auto traffic away from activity areas.

The use of junior size equipment and facilities go hand in hand. Inappropriate equipment and facilities lead to player frustrations. If your children are not doing well or are avoiding activities, see what you can modify to better suit the players’ age, size and skill level. They will come out to play when they can be successful and it is enjoyable. When in doubt, change it.

Intent Or Rules Of The Game

The nature of the game is based on what the rules deny and permit. The object of traditional sport is something that is available to only a limited number of players. This may be an object, a base, a victory or championship, or to be the only one remaining. This need not be the case for all games. In exploratory activities, called movement exploration by elementary school physical education teachers, the goal is to try a variety of movements with the equipment in use. In some cases, no rules or values are placed on the action. In other words, there is no right or wrong action. Generally, it is right if you try it.

In low organized games, the intent is simple and activity may be continuous. Here is an example. Start with a group of 20 children. Determine a person to be IT. Now play tag. Players stoop when tagged. Players can return to being chased when someone “leap frogs” over them. The nature of this game is continuous action rather than elimination and inactivity. Make two or three people IT and see how the game changes.

In another game, place two groups of players on either side of a tennis, badminton or volleyball net. Each group has a large towel or blanket that they can stretch out like a fireman’s net. The object of the game is to pass the volleyball or playground ball back and forth over the net. The ball should not hit the floor, but it can be caught on the bounce and returned across the net. The nature of this game is to develop cooperative action among players on the same side of the net and among all players.

We generally play games that put one person or team in the position of failure and another in the success position. These are called Zero Sum Games. Winter, noting this situation, said that players need to make a distinction between playing to win and playing to defeat another person. (Winter, 1980:23) She inferred, with the quotation, that the former is healthier than the latter. Games can be played with other than a win-lose intent. In new games, alternative games, far out games and other types of games that are unlike the Revenue Sports activities, cooperation is stressed. They do not rule out competition entirely. Playing games like keep the beachball in the air or flying discs non-stop can be as competitive as is playing against yourself in golf or bowling. For more specific information on these types of games, follow up through these sources:

- More New Games (Fluegelman, 1981)
- How To Change The Games Children Play (Morris, 1980)
- The Cooperative Sports & Games Book (Orlick, 1978)
- The Second Cooperative Sports & Games Book (Orlick, 1981)
- Follow Me (Torbert, 1980)
- Playfair (Weinstein and Goodman, 1980)

Through alternative games, we can look at the traditional sport activities, make both major and minor modifications, and change the nature of the game. For instance, there is no need for baseball or softball to be played three outs per side, and then change sides. Kids play kickball and everyone gets a turn before they change sides. This is done successfully in many baseball and softball programs. We can play also that everyone has to hit safely or players rotate to a new position with every new batter.

In basketball, try these changes. Shoot all free throws at the start of the game, in rotation. Then mark them off and count them up as needed throughout the game. Another option is to let the younger players shoot their free throws from any spot in front of the basket.

During the game, give each team one or two “muffs” each time they come down the floor. This allows them to make mistakes, but come right back and try to get it right immediately.

In football or soccer, do not count any scores when the lead team goes ahead by two or three scores. Reduce the number of players to six per side and eliminate the goalkeeper in soccer.

The rules of our sporting activities have evolved over years. Few are stable. The strike zone changes and the court dimensions vary depending on the level at which one plays. Therefore, there would appear to be no good reason to force youngsters to play games under rigid rules they can neither understand nor follow. When in doubt, change the rules. See Table 3-1, page 66, for some changes in current use.

Conditions

The games which kids play can be altered just by changing the conditions under which the activities exist. For example, games can be played under the lights before a packed house. The same game can be played on a weekday morning or afternoon. Will each game be the same? Probably not. Both the players and the adult leaders will treat each game differently. We know that certain outcomes can be expected depending on when and where the games are played, or how they were organized. Compare these situations yourself and study how player and adult differences might occur.

Situation A	versus	Situation B
fans present	or	fans absent, players only
a coach for each team	or	one league leader/supervisor
under the lights	or	day game
score board working	or	no score board
public address system working	or	no PA system in operation
league scorekeeper working	or	no score book
uniformed referees	or	players call their own fouls
warm up suits and capes	or	jeans
double knit uniforms	or	T-shirts
long overnight trips	or	short walk or ride to the center
daily two hour practices	or	play games every day
bleachers packed	or	bleachers empty, pushed back
10 playing, 10 substitutes	or	20 playing on two courts

These are just some of the varied conditions under which youth programs might occur. As the games take on more appearances of the Revenue Sports Model, elimination occurs, fun is harder to find. Everything gets more serious, the selection process eliminates many players, expenses climb, and participation levels may drop.

Table 3-1
CHANGING GAMES

- All bat before changing sides.
- All players go to the field, rotate positions on schedule.
- Everyone hits safely.
- Play to a tie score (any sport), players are permitted to change teams.
- Every player must touch the ball before a shot can be taken.
- Each player must score one basket before any player can score a second time.
- The ball must be passed three times before it can cross the net (volleyball).
- Batter calls the type of pitch wanted - - underhand, overhand, slow, fast.
- Free throw shooter can stand any place in front of the goal to shoot.
- Award points for surpassing your own performance rather than beating another (swimming, bowling, golf, running).
- Alternate male and female players (volleyball, basketball, softball).
- Players referee, players coach their own teams.
- Coaches coach the other team.
- Keep score by quarters as in bowling, rather than total score; this gives more points to be won and lost per contest.
- Play shorter games but more games, play five games to five points.
- Change positions regularly, every two weeks, game, five minutes, batter.
- Reshuffle the team roster every two weeks, every week.
- Rotate coaches to a new team every two weeks, every week.
- Put only enough players on a team so everyone plays all of the time.
- Eliminate goalkeepers
- Lower the goals, enlarge goals, more goals.
- Use standard offenses and defenses for all teams from a common play book.
- Allow only so much team height (basketball) or weight (football) on the field or court at one time.
- Count no scores, or count no scores by the leading team until the point difference goes below a certain level.

How teams, leagues and programs are formed will determine how players or clients react to your offerings. Permanent teams, dynasties, serious coaches, and a ready stockpile of players (e.g., substitutes, waiting list) give the participants one view of the program. Morning games, T-shirts, one expert leader, reliance on peer interactions, neighborhood facilities, and learning new skills tell the participants that they can be involved in relative safety, without stress, and have fun.

Forming Balanced Teams And Leagues

The conditions under which games occur include how teams are formed. One of the positive steps that league directors can take to make their sport offerings more enjoyable for youngsters is to create even or balanced teams. A very satisfying aspect of sport is playing against another person or team without knowing the outcome. If players know they are going to lose or win beforehand, interest drops. This occurs when leagues allow coaches to form permanent teams that can become dynasties. Here is a procedure that will equalize the “talent” so that winning and losing is determined on game day rather than at pre-season league meetings. (Hutslar, 1979)

1. Register everyone and print an evaluation card for each player.
2. Divide the players into one-year age groups.
3. Hold three to 10 hours of pre-season camps, clinics or training sessions for the players. Sessions are conducted by all coaches plus other area sport authorities.
4. Identify four or five basic sport skills for each sport. See Table 3-2, page 68.
5. Rate or evaluate each player at the conclusion of the pre-season training sessions. This may be done by league officials and coaches or a panel of experts.
6. The rating scale need not be complex. Simply rate each player on a one to five, one to 10, or zero to 100 scale using subjective judgment. Be sure everyone knows that 5, 10, or 100 are the highest scores. If there are too many players for every coach to rate every player or skill, try this. Divide the coaches into teams. Assign a different skill to each team. Then parade the players by each panel. Incidentally, a subjective rating system is as good as are your raters. Many sport skill tests are validated on the judgment of a panel of experts. If your judges “know their stuff,” you can feel confident that your players will be rated accurately. If you wish to use standardized sport skills tests rather than subjective ratings, check sources of information like these, under tests and measurements in library card catalogs.

Barrow, Harold M. and Rosemary McGee, *A Practical Approach to Measurement in Physical Education*, 2d ed., Philadelphia: Lea and Febiger, 1971

Baumgartner, Ted A. and Andrew S. Jackson, *Measurement For Evaluation in Physical Education*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1975 (text, instructor’s manual, review and resource manual. Ask for the review and resource manual)

7. Total the points accumulated by each player and divide by the number of raters. Use the rating cards provided at registration.
8. League officials and coaches meet and ASSIGN, NOT DRAFT, the players to teams based on rated scores. For best results, assign one or two players more than can play at one time. When all assignments are completed, each team should have about the same total average score. If not, shuffle players to achieve this balance.
9. Now, assign or draw coaches for the teams. Do not assign coaches until the teams are set. This will encourage the league planners, some of whom may be coaches, to make the teams as even or as balanced as possible. No one wants another to have an edge. Smile!
10. If certain coaches need to have their children on their team, make those changes after all assignments are completed. Now, re-shuffle as necessary to regain arithmetic balance. Assume that parents can coach their children without trauma until proven otherwise.
11. During the season, coaches may rotate to other teams one, two or three times.
12. During the season, player rosters may be re-assigned. NOTE: Plan and agree to make both of the “moves” before the season begins. This will prevent “league trauma.”
13. Conduct at least one mid-season rating session as was done in preseason. Use those results to re-plan teams or to identify players who need more assistance.
14. At the conclusion of the season, re-evaluate the players again on the same standards used in pre-season and mid-season ratings. Keep these records to evaluate individual, team and coach performance.

In implementing these “radical” ideas, it is critical that pre-season parent orientation meetings occur. At this time, explain the purposes of the program and what is going to happen. You are asking for trouble if you neglect to inform parents of your plans.

Table 3-2
BASIC SPORT SKILLS

Baseball, Softball
- batting
- bunting
- throwing

- accuracy
- distance
- catching
- fielding
 - ground balls
 - fly balls
- running speed
- base running
- general ability

Ice Hockey, In-line Hockey, Field Hockey

- skating
 - speed
 - obstacles
 - change direction
 - skate checking
- puck handling
- advancing
 - passing
 - receiving
- shooting
- general ability

Basketball

- shooting
- lay up
- free throw
- dribbling
 - each hand
 - speed
 - obstacles
- guarding
- passing
- rebounding
- jumping
- general ability

Soccer

- dribbling
 - speed
 - obstacles
- passing
 - long
 - short
- marking or guarding
- trapping

- heading
- running
 - speed
 - endurance
- juggling
- general ability

Football (American)

- blocking
- tackling
- passing
- catching
- hand-offs
- running
 - speed
 - obstacles
- kicking
- punting
- kick off
- general ability

Swimming

- breathing
- floating & treading
- propulsion
 - crawl
- breaststroke
- backstroke
- butterfly
- sidestroke
- diving
 - surface
 - springboard

Review

Those who are trained in education and recreation have always changed and modified activities for the younger children. Evans (1980:13) wrote:

“the conclusion drawn by those who have studied the nature of junior sport in some depth, has been that the adult rules and game structure are quite inappropriate for young children and, as a consequence, there is a need to modify or adapt the game so that it more closely caters for [to] the physical capacities of the children.”

It seems prudent, both for the kids and for the future of sport, that our young children be allowed to play at their level of play, rather than at the adult level of play. In doing this they can have more fun and learn more easily the basic skills. They will progress to the adult level when they are ready. So, when in doubt, change the game to fit the kids.

Summary

Infants and young pre-school children develop activity patterns from parents who are active with them. Active children become active adults. The health benefits associated with physical activity, both biological and psychological, are well known. As parents, we can do much to help our children learn and participate in movement activities in the home, around the house, or in community programs. It is most important, particularly at these early ages, that kids be allowed to play according to their age, size, skill level, and conceptual ability to understand the activity. Parents should either let the kids play their own games or modify their sport activities properly so that the activities fit the kids. It may be that free, unstructured play by youngsters is far superior to poorly conducted youth programs run by adults. Some might say that a poor, adult-run program is better than nothing. We would counter this by saying that nothing may be better. Do it right if you are going to do it at all.

It is not correct to assume that the sport preferences of the parents will be the preferences of their children. In fact, the sport preferences of youngsters may have nothing to do with family experiences or desirable body type -- sport match-ups. Kids play what appeals to their own individual tastes. Forcing your children to play your sport may be like mixing alcohol and gasoline. It may also be like potatoes and gravy. Parents must recognize where matches and mismatches exist. To force your children into the wrong activity can lead to years of stress and frustration. Do not do it. Provide your children with opportunities to participate in a variety of sport activities. Then, if they must, allow them to specialize after puberty, but continue to make opportunities for them to participate in other sport activities.

As the seasons change, so do our games. Most kids go from one sport to the next with the seasons. This seems to be the natural way of kids, and it is a good approach for most adults. Sport participation can be enjoyed throughout life, when you get off to a good start.