

Setting Realistic Expectations Depends on Age of Youth Athlete

(Under and Over 12)

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Rider:

Puberty Is Developmental Dividing Line

The explosion of highly competitive sports programs for kids under twelve (e.g. travel soccer, hockey, etc.) would have you believe that your pre-teen is ready, indeed eager for intense competition. Parents need to remember that children under the age of eleven or twelve are *not always emotionally and cognitively ready to compete* because they have not yet developed a mature understanding of what competition is all about. Before this age, most kids really don't care all that much about winning and losing. As is often said, and has been found in numerous surveys, they would rather play on a losing team than sit on the bench of a winning team.

Twelve & under

In developing realistic expectations for children under the age of twelve, keep in mind that before that age, child development experts say, most children:

- **Have not yet fully developed a sense of what athletic talent means.** Because they tend to think that high effort is an indication of high *ability*, they tend to define success, whether it is in sports or any other area, in terms of learning and effort, and don't understand that someone who tries hard and achieves little likely has less ability than someone who tries little and achieves a lot.
- **Will often have a difficult time telling you if and when they are under competitive stress** - in other words, that their sports experience has stopped being fun. It is therefore important to be on the lookout for signs that your child isn't having fun.
- **May have difficulty understanding the team concept**, that a team is "made up of a set of interdependent positions whose relationships to one another change as the game is played." For example, typical seven-and eight-year-olds play soccer like an exuberant pack of puppies more interested in falling all over one another, with all the players on both teams chasing the ball without regard to position or assignment (a/k/a "bee hive soccer").
- **Have difficulty understanding and following instructions.** All too often, parents and coaches speak to kids as if they are adults and fail to adjust the way they communicate to the child's level of development. When adults have unrealistic expectations of children's cognitive abilities, they may erroneously accuse a player of not paying enough attention or not trying hard enough or, worse, get so angry or frustrated that they [emotionally abuse](#) [1]the child.

- **Don't see the big picture.** They lack the ability to see sports in a larger perspective. As a parent, you need to teach your child that sports have many dimensions, that they aren't just about winning and losing.
- **May not know when to ask for help** in becoming technically proficient in a sport (learning to kick a soccer ball correctly, or how to bunt a baseball because they don't know they are doing it incorrectly).
- **May not tell you if they have a physical problem** (need glasses, knee hurts, shoes don't fit, are wheezing, etc.) that is adversely affecting their performance or enjoyment. Be on the lookout for these kinds of performance issues. If you suspect that our child has a physical problem, ask direct questions like 'Are you seeing the ball clearly?'
- **Can be easily hurt.** They can be easily hurt [1]if those from whom they seek approval (you and their coach) label them or generalize about them in a negative way ("Stevie doesn't have the speed to be a forward, "Trisha's throwing arm isn't strong enough for he to play third base."
- **Will overwhelmingly identify athletic ability as determining social status among their peers** (this is truly more for boys than for girls; girls tend to focus more on appearance for peer acceptance). Because sports ability has long been deemed an important factor in a youth's popularity and peer acceptance, especially for boys, coaches who erroneously conclude that a child lacks innate ability, which is then reflected in reduced playing time or, worse, the athlete being cut from the program altogether [2], can lead them and their peers to having a low perception of their abilities, which can negatively affect self-esteem.
- **Socially immature.** Kids, particularly if they are under age ten, may need help understanding how people feel in certain situations. When you take the mystery out of strong emotions, like the jealousy that prompts sibling rivalry, children are reassured that what they are feeling is normal. When they feel understood, they are better able to control their emotions.
- **Look up and take their cues from their parents.**
- **Less able to see intrinsic rewards of success.** Most are unable to feel pride purely based on accomplishment and effort, and benefit from receiving external rewards (e.g., trophies) that help trigger positive internal feelings.
- **Have a hard time multi-tasking.** Kids before age 11 or 12 often have a difficult time performing multiple skills at the same time (like dribbling a basketball while looking for the open player to whom to pass the ball). This is why the emphasis in this stage should be on learning basic skills, rules, and strategies in a non-competitive environment and why coaches need to be more educated about child development so as not to place unrealistic expectations on athletes.
- **Need coaches who provide positive feedback.** They benefit most from coaches who provide the appropriate degree of feedback tailored to the degree of skill acquisition.

Over twelve

In setting expectations for the older child, understand that, in general, they:

- **Are better able to handle the pressure of competitive sports** because they have more experience handling competition in general, but are also much more inclined to drop out of sports because of the pressure of and emphasis on competition (especially girls)
- **Crave social acceptance.** Peer pressure starts to be more of an issue and can add to the child's stress playing sports.
- **Too embarrassed to ask for help.** They are reluctant to ask for help on technical aspects of a sport out of embarrassment.
- **Sports performance can affect all areas of life.** Teenagers' lives are in flux, and performance issues in sports are more likely to have spillover into other areas of their lives (school, peers, home life).
- **Have an increased capability to self-advocate with their coach** (by high school, they should be able to self-advocate without any parental help).
- **Get intrinsic pleasure instead of needing external rewards.** They are better able to base their sense of self-worth on their own efforts and accomplishments instead of on external rewards (e.g., trophies). They are also now able to understand that trophies in sports aren't given to everyone, but are based on accomplishment and given only to the kids who are on the team that wins the championship.
- **Need extra parental support** to deal with the painful realities of adolescence (changing bodies, awkwardness, peer pressure, etc.).