

Are Competitive Sports Bad for Kids?

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Kids are involved in competitive sports now more than ever. Almost eight million teens are on high school sports teams. Millions more children are in sports clubs for all ages. But experts worry that this level of involvement in sports is leading to increased injuries, stress, and burnout. Changes are needed to bring youth sports back to the safe and fun learning activities they are meant to be.

Growth of Competitive Sports

According to Hilary Levey Friedman, author of “Playing to Win: Raising Children in a Competitive Culture,” competitive sports grew in the 1960s. College admissions became more competitive. Parents looked for a way to set their children apart in the application process. They also looked at the possibility of sports-related scholarships. The desire to help kids’ self-esteem played a role, and parents also felt a boost to their own egos from successful child athletes.

Injuries and Side Effects

Dr. Paul Stricker is a pediatric and adolescent sports-medicine specialist and member of the American Academy of Pediatrics Council on Sports Medicine & Fitness. He finds that today’s children athletes are suffering from injuries due to overuse and acute trauma which used to occur only in adults. Much of this is from focusing on a single sport which uses repetitive motions and from training too intensely at a young age. Many young athletes are also feeling stress and exhaustion. Others are burning out on favorite sports or even sports in general. High frustration levels can also be found in young children who are trying to play a sport for which they are not yet developmentally ready.

A New Look at the Game

Kept within reason, competitive sports are not all bad for kids, especially those eleven and older. Kids involved in sports usually do better in school. They are less likely to abuse drugs or alcohol. They have good relationships with peers and have better health.

Recommendations

Help your child enjoy the benefits and fun by allowing her to explore various sports while monitoring her health and stress levels. Keep your expectations realistic. Keep an eye on coaches’ demands, and talk to your child about her enjoyment of the game rather than just about winning.