

Give Children Variety and Time Off

By David Geier

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As adults, we should want our kids to play sports. They not only provide exercise but also promote mental well-being and social development. Some studies even suggest that sports and exercise can lead to greater academic success.

More kids are playing sports than ever before and with that injuries have skyrocketed. The injuries that used to only occur in professionals, like a torn elbow ligament, now afflict school-aged athletes.

Maybe the increasing importance of sports in today's society is to blame. The dreams of college scholarships and multimillion dollar pro contracts are certainly enticing. What most people don't realize is that less than 1 percent of athletes aged 6 to 17 ever achieve elite status.

Most youth sports injuries are caused by overuse, and as adults, we are largely to blame. Parents and coaches are pushing kids to play a single sport at younger and younger ages. In addition, kids train and compete year-round, participating in showcase events for scouts despite games and practices all week.

Most kids' bodies are not capable of withstanding the demands of playing one sport day after day, city after city, for years on end. Those physical stresses lead to bone and joint injuries. Worse yet, they can create emotional burnout, causing kids to quit sports all together.

Instead of focusing on future glory and winning at all costs, parents and coaches should make youth sports fun by letting kids play a variety of sports of their choosing; giving them a season off each year, or letting them play sports that stress different parts of the body; teaching proper techniques; and not pushing them to play through the pain.

Youth sports should be a key part of every child's life, but it shouldn't be everything.

Note: David Geier is the chairman of the American Orthopedic Society for Sports Medicine Public Relations Committee and a member of the STOP Sports Injuries Outreach and Education Committee.