

Suggestions about organized sports for children

“Is my child ready for team sports?” “Will my child be left behind if he or she doesn’t get going on a team?”

If you’re asking questions like this, here are five possible areas to be considered.

1. Developmental/physical readiness – e.g. children are not really ready to cross the vertical midline for batting or tennis until about age eight and a half, but then such sports will indeed provide a developmental boost. Other aspects to think about: is the activity primarily in the “upper triangle” of head, chest and arms, or in the “lower triangle” that relates to puberty? Is the activity one that places a value on physically stressful repetitive motions?

2. Emotional readiness – is the child ready for the degree of self-consciousness and self-criticism that the activity will entail? Will the child be pushed to specialize, and thereby limit his or her self-definition?

3. What parts of childhood might be sacrificed to make time – is so much time required by the team that there will be substantially less time for riding bikes, playing in the yard, etc.?

4. Parents’ time, time for dinner. Detroit Free Press columnist Mitch Albom recently weighed in on the importance of family dinner time, remarking: “Better to have your son know family stories than know how to throw a block; better to have your daughter have time to share her worries than to play a Bach fugue.”

5. Social aspects – for many elementary age students, organized team sports can be a very positive avenue to making and keeping friends outside of school, and to start friendships for the day when he or she enters a local high school.

One can find examples of great athletes who began quite early (John McEnroe) but also ones who started surprisingly late: Michael Jordan didn’t begin basketball until 13; Dennis Rodman didn’t start organized basketball until 21.



Keeping all of the above in mind, I would offer the following general suggestions:

1. Before you begin, I strongly recommend reading *Just Let the Kids Play: How to Stop Other Adults from Ruining Your Child’s Fun and Success in Youth Sports*, by former NBA player Bob Bigelow (ISBN 1558749276).

2. Baseball/Softball: throwing and catching, batting - anytime after 1st Grade; neighborhood games during 4th or 5th grade; organized team participation after 4th Grade at the earliest (6th Grade would be just as well).

3. Basketball: Throwing and catching a ball in 4th Grade; shooting baskets in 5th Grade (i.e. games like Horse or Around the World); no emphasis on dribbling until 6th Grade; no team play until 7th Grade.

4. Dance: Because of the degree of self-consciousness this activity brings, I strongly recommend waiting until 9th Grade.

Girls who become involved in dance at an earlier age often self-define themselves as dancers, to the exclusion of many additional athletic possibilities. There is an excellent short article on this topic in Kim Payne’s book “Games Children Play”.

5. Football: Throwing and catching in 3rd Grade; organized team play anytime after 5th Grade.

6. Gymnastics: Recreational gymnastics can be a wonderful developmental boost and athletic preparation (think snowboarding!) at any age; however, be sure the emphasis is on joyful skill building, not competition.

7. Hockey: Skating at any age; no organized team play until 6th grade.

8. Lacrosse: Because this sport encourages ambidexterity, which can be an academic hurdle, I recommend leaving this sport until after 6th Grade.

9. Martial Arts: All forms of martial arts are very decidedly “lower triangle” and in addition teach techniques which should only be placed in the hands of human beings whose egos have emerged; therefore, I strongly (make that vehemently) recommend that these wait until age 21. There

is also an excellent short article on this topic in “Games Children Play”.

10. Soccer: Because this sport is strongly “lower triangle” and somewhat one-dimensional, I recommend waiting until at least after 6th Grade. But adding in the factor of heading the ball, I don’t recommend this sport at all. (The intermural Grade 7 & 8 team at my school plays without ball heading.)

11. Swimming: Red Cross skill-building classes recommended in 3rd Grade and up; team participation after 5th Grade.

12. Tennis: The eye-hand coordination needed to bounce a ball with a racquet is a good developmental activity for 2nd Graders. Working across the vertical midline is a developmental step that we look for near the second half of 3rd Grade, and so playing with a parent or sibling could start after 3rd grade. Lessons or team play after 4th Grade would probably be beneficial for children who seem interested.

13. Weight lifting: Because students around ages 12 to 14 begin to be interested in their muscles, and because weightlifting can be a very beneficial “life sport” for adults, it’s nice to provide an introduction to this activity in 6th, 7th and 8th Grades. However, I don’t think physiologic readiness for weightlifting as a regular activity comes until mid-high school at the earliest; I suggest asking your child’s pediatrician.

14. Wrestling: We provide an introduction to this activity (one of my favorite sports, to be sure) in 6th, 7th and 8th Grades; if your child is interested and you can find a good program, I support participation from 6th Grade on.

15. Yoga: Because of the degree of self-consciousness this activity brings, I strongly recommend waiting until at least 9th Grade.

Again, the above is meant only as a general guide, based on personal experience and opinions. Please feel welcome to email me if you have further thoughts, questions or suggestions.