

Children and team sports - are we erasing a valuable history?

TV, movies and videos, rock music, computers, and team sports like soccer have all come to be regarded as normal for elementary age children.

A lot could be said about these popular cultural hallmarks; instead, let's look at the many, many things childhood can be filled with, that are actually much better than these 'normal' activities. Early participation in team sports is often motivated by parental concern that children will not be ready for high school sports if they don't build specific skills long before the teenage years.

From my viewpoint, historically, children acquired the ability to play team sports by playing imaginative and age-related games that evolved as they grew. The traditional non-sport imaginative games made up by children contained ability building blocks that lead up to adult-designed rule-laden sports in due time.

As a gym teacher and a father of four boys, I've tried it both ways, and found that the play-builds-capacities method is more productive and more fun in the long run. This conclusion is also supported by a look at the history of play: one shelf of my gym teacher bookshelf at home is filled with books of competitive games played all over the world from 2000 B.C. to 1950 A.D. These are treasuries of games with names like Haley Over, Jackstones, Rounders, Venconmigo... Garrison Keillor in his book "Lake Wobegon Days" happily refers to playing "Pom Pom Pullaway" at recess in the sixth grade in 1954.

If you're interested in rediscovering games to play with or show your children, I highly recommend, for starters, the books "Moving Forward" (for younger ages) and "Games Children Play".

From play to team sport

Believe it or not, I actually think wrestling education has to start with a game like London Bridge in first grade. London Bridge teaches two key principles: (1) Someone will grab you and that will be okay; (2) Sooner or later you'll lose, and that will be okay too. From there, the sport can be built up through playful games like Bear Wrestling, Stork Wrestling, gymnastics, King of the Mountain, Oaken Doors, "Indian" Leg Wrestling, and a score of other games, so that by sixth grade, an introduction to the actual sport of

Collegiate Wrestling, for boys and for girls, is as natural as can be.

Top Ten Reasons I Don't Recommend Soccer for ages under 13

10. Children who play team sports in childhood may be less likely to play any sport during high school.

9. Competition is for teenagers. Soccer creates a "teenage mood" - it wakes children up before the right time.

8. Michael Jordan began playing basketball at 13; Dennis Rodman never played on a team until he was 21. What's the rush?

7. Some children who play soccer pick up a tendency to kick at other children during my gym class... and that's annoying!

6. Team sports, and perhaps especially soccer, bring out critical thinking; and children who play a lot of soccer are often ready to speak critically.

5. Soccer strongly brings children into the Side-to-Side plane of movement before they finish developmental mastery of Above-Below and Ahead-Behind.

4. Free and graceful use of arms and hands is one of the very most important developmental goals for ages 3 to 12. Soccer limits use of arms and hands.

3. Soccer skills encourage ambidexterity. Ambidexterity can be a significant academic burden.

2. Soccer leads to knee injuries.

1. Repeated head trauma and compression of vertebrae are integral parts of soccer.

Viewpoints on Play and Sport (adapted from Jackie Davis, High Mowing Waldorf School)

PLAY	TEAM SPORT
Created for children by children, or for children by adults	Created for adults by adults
Focuses on the needs and preferences of children.	All-star teams, medals, playoffs, trophies etc.
Anything can happen	Anything can happen within framework of hard and fast boundaries & rules
Anyone can play	Team members must be “good enough” and will be selected in order of skill level
Winning is very fleeting; or, everybody wins	Winning is the point; in order to win, someone must lose
Losing (i.e. becoming “It” in tag) may be desirable or is soon redeemed by a feature of the game	Losing is undesirable and must be accompanied by self criticism
Pictorial imaginative processes govern	Linear strategic processes govern
Rules are pliable and can be transformed by and for players	Rules are written, fixed and non-negotiable
Rule violations are viewed subjectively	Rule violations are viewed objectively
The player cannot yet distinguish between himself and the rules	The athlete sees him/herself as separate from the rules
Movements are created by the players and are spontaneous, free	Movements are dictated by the sport, repetitively practiced, carefully refined
Language and vocabulary are created by the players	Language and jargon are dictated by the sport
Developmentally appropriate for ages 2 to 12. This is the only window of time in the human lifespan in which true play occurs.	Developmentally appropriate for older-preneens and adolescents at the onset of puberty, at which time the window to true play closes.

Note that there is a bridge stage between play and sport: playing at sport, i.e., imagining oneself as Jim Kelly or Serena Williams while playing the sport.