



## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### THE RISKS OF INTRODUCING CHILDREN TO SPORTS

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#### ABSTRACT

Getting children involved in sports is a common practice around the world as many people believe that it is a great way for children and young adults to get their physical activity. Often, the negatives aspects of the sports world at a young age are overlooked because of how beneficial sports can be. It is important to note that a child involved in sports are at risk for conditions such as burnout and eating disorder, which can lead to serious detriments in their overall health. Additionally, adolescents in sports have increased exposure to substances like alcohol and drugs, which can induce significant mental health concerns in a young individual. Many athletes often have to deal with abuse from coaches and their peers, which results in many young individuals accepting abuse and having fewer social abilities. Parental pressures and overinvolvement in the sport cause fractured relationships between the child athlete and the parent. Overall, there are significant negative aspects associated with introducing an individual to sports at a young age, which parents should keep in mind while deciding for their child. This review compiles and investigates sources from literary research done regarding children and sports.

#### INTRODUCTION

Sports play a prominent role in many cultures around the world. The most popular sport varies by location as in North America, American football, baseball, hockey, and basketball are the most prominent while in Europe, football (also known as soccer) is the most widely followed. There is this notion in society that parents need to get their children involved in sports at the earliest age possible and put them into as many sports as they can. In Canada, 76.4% of youth participate in extra-curricular sports while about 45 million youth aged 6-18 in the United States participate in organized sports (Bean *et al.*, 2014). Although being involved in sports provides a significant opportunity for physical activity that young adults need to develop, often times the negatives are overlooked. At times, many children enter sports due to the influence of their parents and remain in them due to parental pressure. Even without the pressure, being involved in sports can often lead to a range of issues such as poor physical and mental health, hazardous behaviours, as well as injuries which leave long-term impacts. It is important to acknowledge what consequences could come as a result of organized sports to truly assess whether a child should be exposed to them.

**Personal Health:** Being an athlete requires hours of dedication and hard work, which can lead to burnout. Burnout in sports is something that damages a child's wellbeing and is often a result of a buildup of circumstances involving overreaching and overtraining, and covers behaviours such as emotional exhaustion, depersonalizing oneself, and less performance accomplishments (Bean *et al.*, 2014). When an athlete trains too hard or set high expectations for themselves, not reaching those goals and minor obstacles can make them vulnerable, as in the case of burnout and its adverse effects. Although it may seem simple to avoid, factors such as seeking perfection and extensive focus on athletics are some personal causes for burnout (Gould, 2010). Dealing with a problem like this could make a young athlete lose all passion towards a sport, and possibly towards other activities in their life as well. Tracking the incidence of burnout in youth sports is difficult, but it is believed to occur in 1-9% of adolescent athletes (Gustafsson *et al.*, 2017). Such a high incidence of burnout suggests that many athletes are never satisfied with their accomplishments and always want more, which can be detrimental to their growth. The chances of a child athlete suffering from burnout can be reduced with adequate support from coaches and parents, which is concerning because it is not always present. Additionally, another major health concern with younger athletes is related to their diet at an early age. In a study by Chircop *et al.*, it was found that increased participation in sports leads to greater consumption of fast food (Chircop *et al.*,

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2015). The correlation exists because there seems to a greater emphasis on physical activity which leads to time constraints for families, hence the easy solution of fast food. Not only that, but many young athletes also have the potential to develop an eating disorder. Various athletes feel that their eating disorders are a part of the sport and it is something that must be done for optimal performance, and personally have no issue with the decision (Martinsen & Sundgot-Borgen, 2012). As most of them do not realize that they have a problem, many do not report any disordered eating (Martinsen & Sundgot-Borgen, 2012). Eating disorders at any age are not healthy, which is why there are substantial effects on the mental health of young adults dealing with the issue. Adolescent who struggle with disordered eating are at increased risk for anxiety disorders, depressive disorders, insomnia, and suicide attempts during early adulthood (Johnson *et al.*, 2002). Dealing with mental health issues at a young age is not the most helpful situation for a child and can cause major changes in their development.

**Hazardous Behaviours:** Within the world of athletics, there are many hazardous behaviours that an individual can learn that could lead to long-term effects on an individual's physical and mental health, with the first being substance abuse. Studies have found that increased alcohol use in high school is related to sports participation, and this relation is stronger for those living in higher socioeconomic neighbourhoods (Kwan *et al.*, 2014). Not only alcohol, but male adolescent athletes are more likely to be prescribed opiate medication and have a greater chance of abusing it compared to young males who do not participate in organized sports (Veliz *et al.*, 2014). Being exposed to substances at an early age can be very detrimental to the development of a child, and it might even potentially impact their life in parts other than sports. It is not fully understood why alcohol and drug use is high among young athletes, but the current research suggests that alcohol and drug consumption may be a sign of power compared to others their age. These are traditionally adult activities, so many would feel like an adult while indulging in them, hence the perceived power. The substance use is not the only concern as the athletic environment in general can make an individual feel negatively about themselves. About half of the children that participate in organized sports report that they have dealt with verbal misconduct by coaches (Shields *et al.*, 2005). Even without the intention, many coaches often push their athletes very hard, and can easily cross that line between coaching and verbal abuse. Many young athletes may not comprehend the situation, and will accept it as normal, which normalizes abuse. Aside from coaches, many athletes get harassed by their peers for reasons related disabilities, sexual orientation, and gender orientation (Evans *et al.*, 2016). These victims have reported to have a weaker connection to their peers, while the ones doing the bullying tend to not have a strong connection to their coaches (Evans *et al.*, 2016). Victimization by peers and adults around an athlete might results in a lack of social skills, which can often make individuals feel isolated from the world. Regardless, these situations put a young individual in difficult situations where they might not know what to do, and they develop an unhealthy habit of accepting any behaviour.

**Parental Role:** Family plays a major role in the life of many individuals, and often times heavily influence how a young athlete performs in a sport. Parental involvement and support are necessary to push an athlete forward in their field, yet over involvement causes increased pressure on an individual. Some examples of overinvolvement include coaching from the

sidelines, becoming too emotional at games, and living through their child's experiences. Overinvolvement of a parent is a common experience that many child athletes have to deal with, and it becomes problematic as competitions as tension between the athlete and the parent is created due to heightened pressure (Bremer, 2012). Young athletes feel that they are not matching the expectations that their parents have set, which causes reduced enjoyment of the sport itself (Bremer, 2012). When that passion for a sport is gone, the young adult may loathe the sport, or even the parents, which is not the greatest for strong family relations. Deteriorating relations with family may make an individual feel isolated from others, which can lead to trust issues. Additionally, derogatory comments towards the athlete and controlling behaviour from parents were also seen to fracture parent-child relationships, leading to the lack of bidirectional communication (Bremer, 2012). The controlling behaviour has also been linked to higher performance anxiety in young athletes (Sebire *et al.*, 2009). Overall, it is recognized that a parent should be involved and supportive, but when that support becomes stressful, it impacts a child both on the field and in their personal life, which is something to be mindful about.

## Conclusion

Overall, sports are a massive part of many lives and will continue to be so in the future as well as they do have numerous benefits. For children, they provide an outlet to get their required physical activity, and an opportunity to create many lifelong friends and relationships. Despite all these positive associations, some of the negative aspects of introducing and coercing children to sports cannot be ignored. Adolescent sports have the potential to being on the onset of injuries, eating disorders, as well as concerns about overall wellbeing. While participating in many organized sports, individuals can pick up many behaviours at an early age, such as substance abuse, while will negatively impact them in the later stages of life. Children often face abuse from coaches and peers, as well as difficulties with parents, which can severely affect their behaviours in life. Shutting down sports and stopping children from playing them is not a feasible option. Rather, it would be more beneficial to address some of these issues within the athletic community, and then working towards a better environment for many young athletes. Parents should keep all of these consequences of sports on a growing child at an early age to determine the right decision about how they should approach their child and sports.

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