



Beyond Winning

Whole Child Sports

Four Stages of Play

No one can know what a child's potential is at an early age. You can't trust a coach who claims that your child has all the talent and tools to become a superstar just because he can shoot ten baskets in a row and clearly outshines his peers. Such a notion is absurd. Children mature physically and athletically at different paces. What you can ensure is that your child has the opportunity to develop a strong athletic foundation in an age-appropriate setting.

THE FOUR STAGES BY AGES:

- Stage One: five to eight-year-olds
- Stage Two: nine to eleven-year olds
- Stage Three: twelve to fifteen-year-olds
- Stage Four: sixteen to eighteen-year-olds

STAGE ONE: Balance and Coordination

In this stage, children ages five to eight are taught engaging games that help develop their movement skills (e.g., running and jumping), balance, and coordination, and are given ample time and space to continue to play freely. Sport-specific skills are not taught at this stage. Once or twice a week a mini-Olympics comprised of games that encourage movement, experimentation, and creativity can be set up. These are not outcome-oriented games. The emphasis is on fun and skill development. We strongly recommend home sports schooling for this age group. In chapter 6 of ***Beyond Winning*** we offer specifics, providing examples of backyard and park activities that help develop balance and movement skills, and creative thinking (also see activities in chapter 4).

STAGES TWO: Fundamental Skills

During the nine to eleven-year-old stage, sport-specific skills like catching, throwing, and kicking are incorporated into movement and balance training. Self-measuring competitions can help keep kids excited and engaged as they practice fundamental skills. We find that they enjoy measuring and tracking their own progress. Traditional sports games, which are the norm at this age level, often take up too much time and detract from the development of fundamental skills. Kids should be engaged, not milling about on the sidelines waiting for their turn to play.

We recommend that traditional sports games be introduced at a later age, after the fundamentals have been taught and practiced for several years. Basic introduction to team play begins with games that are adapted to suit the age group. For example, football is introduced as flag football; soccer is presented in three vs. three format; ice hockey and lacrosse are taught in smaller playing areas (not full-size arenas or fields), with rules adapted to suit the space configuration and age group (see activities in chapters 4 and 6 of *Beyond Winning*).

STAGE THREE: Sport-Specific Techniques

At the twelve to fifteen-year-old stage, children are taught more complex sport-specific techniques like turning a double play, executing a corner kick, or blocking and tackling. They experiment at different positions, work on the interpretation of rules, and are introduced to game strategy. They also continue to take part in short-sided, small-space games and self-measuring skill competitions. Children should play a different sport each season at this stage, as it is still too early to introduce year-round specialization, which is detrimental to well-rounded athletic development. The negative effects of early specialization far outweigh any perceived advantages, as is poignantly underscored in *Until It Hurts*, Mark Hyman's study of pushy sports parents and their physically and emotionally damaged children (see activities in chapters 7 and 8 of *Beyond Winning*).

STAGE FOUR: Training and Competing

The final stage—ages sixteen to eighteen—is an exciting time for the well-rounded athlete. She now has well-developed movement skills, experience playing multiple sports, and a high level of proficiency in sport-specific skills (like skating, passing, and shooting in hockey). With such a strong, basic physical and cognitive foundation, she can adapt her athletic skills to any sport(s) and is ready to train and compete in regulation-size playing spaces (fields, courts, rinks) in full-size games. The training focus should continue to be on developing sport- and position-specific techniques through drills and small-sided, small-space games. Then she can be tested and hone her skills in regulation-size competitive team play (see activities in chapters 7 and 8 of ***Beyond Winning***).