



# Beyond Winning

Whole Child Sports

## Ten Tenets of a Whole Youth Sports Experience

### TEN TENETS OF A WHOLE YOUTH SPORTS EXPERIENCE

Consider these ten principles to provide an ideal balance of active and educational play and foster a healthy mix of mental and physical development in your young athlete each year.

#### 1. **PLAY ONE SPORT PER SEASON**

When a kid plays more than one sport, she often ends up with little free time. Kids need downtime to exhale, regroup, and recharge emotionally. They also need to rest and recover physically from training, and, of course, they need time to properly focus on schoolwork. Furthermore, a cluttered athletic schedule impinges on all-important family time, essential to the development of healthy, supportive family ties. The bottom line: A kid should be able to fully enjoy one particular sport rather than be overcommitted and harried. Fun, not frenzy, is the key.

#### 2. **PLAY DIFFERENT SPORTS DURING DIFFERENT SEASONS**

Avoid specialization at an early age, or at any age, for that matter; it is problematic both physically and mentally. Kids need a variety of athletic experiences to develop better motor skills and limit burnout. Playing different sports also helps prevent wear-and-tear injuries (seen surprisingly frequently nowadays in children as young as nine or ten) and, most importantly, keeps them passionate about playing well into adolescence and beyond. Forcing kids to develop one sport at the expense of others can turn training into a grind and playing into a perpetual performance review, rather than what it should be: fun and invigorating.

**3. PLAY COMPETITIVE SPORTS A MAXIMUM OF THREE SEASONS PER YEAR**

Take one or two seasons off to discover and explore other activities that are challenging, but not necessarily team oriented. This expands an athlete's skill set and broadens his perspective. After consecutive seasons of soccer, basketball, and lacrosse, for example, the stress of competition can wear on a youth. Relaxing or trying something different like surfing, kayaking, hiking, or even fishing is a great way to learn, achieve balance, and rest mind and body for next year's athletic endeavors.

**4. ENGAGE IN AT LEAST ONE ACTIVITY PER YEAR THAT INVOLVES THE DEVELOPMENT AND MASTERY OF BALANCE**

Balance is an often overlooked, yet vital, cornerstone of athletic development. Most sports require young athletes to find or maintain balance during the flow of competition while attempting to execute other actions, such as making a hockey slap shot, completing a golf shot, rebounding a basketball, or completing an infield play. Work on improving balance helps a child develop core strength and rotational force, which is vital for optimal performance in sports. Incorporating a balancing activity that is both fun and challenging (like skateboarding, mountain biking, skiing, or snowboarding) is a great way to improve a young athlete's capabilities in a favorite team sport.

**5. STUDY THE HISTORY OF THE SPORTS YOU PLAY**

Kids should not miss the opportunity to get to know the colorful background of their favorite sports. Learning about how, when, and where the sport was invented and how it has evolved will give them a great historical perspective and deeper appreciation for the sport. This is also a great way to get them excited about reading in general.

**6. LEARN ALL THE RULES OF YOUR SPORT**

Many athletes have found that a thorough knowledge of rules of the sport they play deepens their understanding and can give them a distinct competitive advantage. For example, even at the elite professional level, PGA golfers have learned the hard way what can happen when you make decisions midtournament without a proper grasp of

the rules. Such errors have cost them strokes and thousands if not hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Raymond Berry, retired NFL New England Patriots head football coach, was famous for quizzing his players and carefully reviewing the rules with them at least once a week. Berry believed that with a thorough, frequently refreshed grasp of the rules, his players would have a better understanding of how the game is played and therefore make fewer mental mistakes and have a distinct advantage over their opponents.

#### 7. **ARRANGE FOR YOUR YOUNG ATHLETE TO HELP COACH**

If you've ever had to teach, you understand the amount of preparation that goes into doing a good job. Teaching also provides you with a great learning experience. The very fact that you are required to explain something to someone else forces you to think through the entire process and understand it much more clearly. Providing a young athlete with the opportunity to coach (or assistant coach) a younger child or team is a great training experience for him or her: Learning through teaching can translate directly into deeper understanding and improved performance on the field.

#### 8. **PROVIDE PRACTICES THAT CHALLENGE AND ENGAGE THE KIDS**

This suggestion applies to both parents in their backyards and youth sports coaches. We often hear that kids don't want to attend practice or learn a new skill, complaining that practice is boring, it's not fun, and the kids aren't seeing any improvement in their own skills. Many youth sports coaches have little time to prepare, or they lack the knowledge to run a practice that teaches the fundamentals but is also dynamic enough to engage every kid. Practices often devolve into scrimmages, where coaches teach very little and groups of kids are forced to sit, watch, and wait. Whether you are at home or at a team practice, you should do your homework, consult the experts, and set up a circuit to engage and challenge kids as you teach them fundamentals and technique. Kids should be rotated frequently between drill stations to keep them physically active and mentally engaged. Parents and coaches should make sure to spend as little time as possible explaining things verbally to players. It's better to show them what you want

them to learn. If you do need to talk with them, engage them in conversation rather than lecture them. Elicit observations from your kid or the team. They will surprise you with their acute insights on what they are doing well and what they need to focus on more to improve.

#### 9. **TEACH KIDS HOW THEIR BODIES WORK**

The best way to get youth athletes to understand why you're doing a particular exercise is to educate them on how the body works, including what muscles and joints are involved in sports activities and why it's important that they be developed to increase strength and avoid injury. Introducing your youth athlete to the body's anatomy is an important first step in understanding how the body works.

#### 10. **TRAIN THE BRAIN: BUILD / CREATE / PROBLEM-SOLVE**

An important, often overlooked element of athletic development is cognitive development. When kids play in their backyards or at the park with friends, making up games, building tree forts, or designing obstacle courses, they are actively learning how to think and problem-solve. When engaged in novel tasks, they have to learn to make adjustments and work out solutions. In organized sports, kids are often given too much instruction before, during, and after games, and are not allowed to figure things out for themselves. Coaches bark orders about playing in position rather than allowing kids to learn from their mistakes and adjust on the fly. Challenge your kids at home, and then find a coach who does the same on the field. Start by setting up areas in your house for creative play and experimentation (see chapter 6 of *Beyond Winning*). Introduce new things they can build in the living room or backyard. Change their environment: Take your kid for an exploration hike or bike ride. These varied experiences help them develop creativity and adaptivity, critical building blocks of cognitive development that will complement their physical and emotional growth.