

The Hazards of Organized Activities for Children Under 12 Years Old

By P. Donohue Shortridge

Let me share with you a few observations about organized activities and the young child. Study after study shows that young children learn best through free, spontaneous play. Organized activities and organized sports have a place in a child's life, but timing is everything. Later is better, especially for organized sports.

Consider the following:

There is a finite amount of time in the day; time spent in an organized activity is time lost to free play. Ask yourself, what percentage of his day does my child spend in freely chosen, *open-ended play*?

The rules for organized activities are set by adults; children are relegated to performing specific acts at designated times according to adult rules. The child, in essence, becomes the actor in the adult's game.

Spontaneity is not valued in organized activities; indeed it is often frowned upon.

Parents schedule, orchestrate, pay for and transport the child to an organized activity resulting in many more family members becoming involved than just the child doing the activity. That's a lot of pressure on everyone.

Children under six years old are still forming their personal identities. Group sports, by their nature subordinate the child's individual development pattern to the need to conform to the group. The child must socialize to the group before he or she has a fully formed personal identity. Later, an autonomous child gladly enters this social milieu. But this development cannot be rushed.

Too many adults in the child's day telling him or her what to do engenders in the child the tendency to look outside him or herself for direction; it inhibits the emergence of self-direction, or internal locus of control.

For children ages 6 – 12 years old, one of the essential tasks is learning how to socialize, to find my place in the group of peers and learn the rules of social organization among peers. This age child does this in made-up games, what we used to call pick-up games, where more time is often spent in negotiations over rules than in playing the game itself. In organized sports, particularly, the adults lay down the rules. Again, ask yourself what percentage of my child's day does he or she spend in free association with peers to make up the rules? Video games do not count.

One of the skills children ages 6-12 years old work on is learning to evaluate, choose and judge; things, circumstances and people. For example, they evaluate and are judged by their peers for qualities of fairness and good ideas, for who will lead and who will follow in the group; children can do this very well themselves through the games they play with their peers, originated by them. Do they get time to do this?

Young children's bodies are not geared to the repetition and physical impact of organized sports and further, young children do not yet possess the self-knowledge to know when enough is enough. Prompted by parents and coaches, they may push themselves to injury. What they need more of are activities that develop physical self-knowledge and judgment informed by their own emerging inner forces. Individual sports and games facilitate this skill; think skateboards, roller blades, tree climbing, swimming, pick-up basketball and baseball games, bicycle riding, hiking, camping, hunting and fishing.

If young children start organized sports too early, by the time their bodies are strong enough in adolescence and at the very time they most need to test themselves, to compete in the wider world, and need a mentor beyond their father (or mother), coincidentally often becomes the time they want to quit organized sports if they've already done it for so many years. Two points here; adolescents need to physically test themselves so they will find a way to test themselves. Where do you want them to test themselves as a teenager: On the football field or on the street corner? Also, a new study led by researchers at Johns Hopkins found that adolescents who played in organized sports were the least likely to be overweight as adults. No matter how much you nag, you cannot talk a teenager into competitive sports if he's had enough already.

If parents spend much of their time driving children to organized activities and attending their sporting events, tournaments, recitals and performances, such that there is not much time left for down time together, children learn the lesson that my parents love me when

I perform, so therefore to be loved, I must continue to participate in, and excel at performing.

Children absorb their parents' urgency to perform and participate in an organized activity, no matter if the parent says the child can opt out. If your child feels that **you need** him to do this activity, he will subordinate his will to yours and conform to your desires. Your will will prevail, perhaps at the expense of him developing his will.

There is a season for everything. For example, free, spontaneous music and dancing in your home from the start will perhaps engender a love of music and dance generally in your child. If it takes hold in your child, drill, specialization and performance will naturally flow in its own season. Between the ages of 6 and 12 years old, you can **slowly** over the next six years introduce your child to the world of baseball, piano playing and every other endeavor that takes practice. You plant the seed and see where it takes root in your child. He will let you know if and when he is interested.

P.S. Parents: Every child is not destined for Harvard, Julliard or USC football; millions of Americans succeed in their lives quite well without ever having gone there. Your child will do best in life if he follows his own path, not yours. Do not fear for his future; do not substitute his dreams for yours.

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