

# Thoughts...

## FROM YOUR HEAD OF LOWER SCHOOL

### Sports and Young Children

As the mom of three boys and the wife of an athletic director, I have spent more than my fair share of time on the sidelines and in the stands of sporting events. I have seen firsthand the lifelong benefits of being a member of an athletic team. Beyond promoting physical wellness and healthy habits, teams provide opportunities for children to build relationships and learn valuable life-lessons in the context of fun and friends. Dr. David Nguyen, molecular biologist/endocrinologist at Cal Berkeley and educational consultant for Think Tank Learning, summarizes the social and emotional skills that team sports effortlessly build:

- how to perform under pressure
- when to lead and when to follow
- how to lose well
- non-verbal communication, also known as emotional intelligence
- how to make personal sacrifices for good of the team
- how to be reliable
- how to encourage people

As families we gather on evenings and weekends to cheer our children on in service to these goals -- and we have fun doing it!

Keeping these goals at the heart of the athletic arenas our children enter is essential. Many of us grew up playing kickball or baseball in the front yard or neighborhood park in the absence of adults. This is an experience that very few of our children have now. The opportunities for growth and development that sprang out of neighborhood games exist in only rare pockets, replaced by athletic practices and competitions planned, orchestrated, and refereed by adults. The experience of picking teams, agreeing upon a set of rules, and learning to resolve the conflicts that arise while playing has been relegated to the adult realm, instead of affording chances for children to learn how to do this well. Research shows that children who regularly engage in outdoor free play produces a higher level of lifelong physical activity and demonstrated ability to navigate the social and emotional challenges of adult life.

Parents often enter the youth sport industry with a naïveté about the developmentally-appropriate parameters that need to be put into place. Kid sports are not just tiny versions of adult athletics and simply shrinking the size of the field or replacing a full-sized ball with one that fits into smaller hands is insufficient. Small-sized, age-appropriate play includes a reasonable practice-to-game ratio, a practice schedule that makes way for family commitments, free play and fun, and adult spectators

who remember that a Kindergarten flag football game requires a different kind of cheering than what is heard at the Cowboys game!

When is the last time you came to one of your children's musicals in the Lower School theater and mid-way through a song shouted, 'SING LOUDER!' to your child? Athletics is the only area where parents (and sometimes other adults) publicly critique their child and those responsible for them. A study of spectators at sporting events for children ages six to eleven completed by Arizona State University noted alarming similarities between the conversations and admonitions shouted at professional sporting events and those shouted at youth sporting events. It is essential that we allow coaches to coach, children to play and, as spectators, adults to support the team with positivity.

As we look at the spring sport season before us there is a veritable smorgasbord of choices that includes flag football, soccer, lacrosse, baseball, t-ball, and softball just to name a few. Finding the right balance for your family is highly personal. It is difficult to answer general questions like, "How many sports should my child play at a time?", "What kind of a team should we join?", or "Is it ok to ONLY play soccer?" When confronted with an incredulous parent or coach who says, "What do you mean you aren't playing travel soccer?" it is essential that the values of your family guide that answer. When an enthusiastic coach says, "Your child is so good, we absolutely need her!" it is important for you to know your child, to know your family and to be clear about the reasons a child engages in sports: fun and fitness.

Research shows that our children are plagued with over-scheduling and the fear that our children will miss some crucial piece of development and thus not get to do XXXX is rampant. Grounding yourself and your family in your core values and faith combats this. Children feel adult stress whether they can articulate it or not. Rushing from activity to activity can contribute to familial stress. What is reasonable for your family given the schedules of each member? What does your child LOVE to do? An answer to this question must be informed by family schedules. Making time for a child to have down time, even when he or she wants to go play with friends, is a necessary component for individual and familial health.

The research on early specialization in a single sport, or playing a single position, is clear. A 2016 survey of Division I athletes noted that 88% of them played two or three sports throughout high school and a survey of high school athletes reports that only 2% of these play Division I sports. The American Academy of Pediatrics notes that delaying specialization (of sports AND positions) until adolescence (ages 12 - 14) increases future athletic success and reported that the average number of sports played by students, ages 6 - 17, has gone down every year, three years in a row. The burnout, risk of injury, and depression that stems from early specialization has been documented repeatedly. Your child's physical development, especially during the earliest years, benefits from a broad menu of movement that facilitates the growth of fine and gross motor muscles and hand-eye coordination. Remember, childhood is not a race. Take the time to listen to your child, his or her body, and make decisions rooted in the core values your family espouses.

In finding balance for your family's time and balance for your child's after-school options, it is also important to seek balance in the group of children with whom he or she plays. Learning to play with

a wide variety of personalities and young athletes with different strengths is an essential piece of team sports. The experience of playing with changing groups of children allows young athletes to try on different roles and perform within a team context in an array of capacities. Playing with a changing roster allows us to fully embrace the benefits of playing team sports noted at the start of this letter.

Finally, Brad Busman, The Ohio State University, "Basking in children's reflected glory, parents' feelings of regret and disappointment about their own lost opportunities may gradually resolve, and make way for pride and fulfillment." This is an admonition and a reflection point for us as parents. Of course we get excited when we see our children experience athletic success and build competencies! Of course we want to celebrate these successes! The key is to not connect a child's identity to his or her athletic performance AND to further disconnect those from our own parental identities. Geno Auriemma notes that team sports should "teach our children to be humble, to be hungry, and to be great teammates." Let us commit to remembering that the next time we come together on the sidelines.

Warmly,

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