



Are our children specializing in a specific sport (s) too early?

Text: Mary Ann Dove - Performance Coach and Co-founder of Positive Sport Parent

We are seeing more and more children specialize in one or more sport at earlier and earlier ages. The myth is that to become a successful sportsman or woman you need to specialize at an early age. The professionalism of sport over the past few decades has resulted in many parents believing that their child can earn millions of rands from sport if they invest in the development of their child's talent at an early age. The reality is that a very small percentage of individuals are able to earn a decent living from professional sport. There are only 15 Springboks on the field at any one time compared to the number of schoolboy players. Despite all its advantages, Michaelhouse School in KZN took over 100 years to produce its first Springbok player in 2010.

Yes, it is not only about the money involved with being a successful sports person. Many individuals derive their sense of achievement from merely representing their school, club, province or country, but to get there takes many hours and years of hard work, sacrifice and dedication. In fact as Malcolm Gladwell in *Outliers* and Daniel Coyle in *The Talent Code* suggest it is 10,000 hours or 10

years. That would indicate that if your child specialises at the age of 10 they will reach their peak at 20 years of age and from a physiological, mental, cognitive and emotional perspective that is not their peak performance time. In the majority of sports, mid to late twenties is considered the peak performance period.

There has been much debate recently around the "10,000 hour rule". I think what is important to remember is not whether it is 8,000 hours or 12,000 hours, but the concept of deliberate practice. In addition, it should never be forgotten that sporting talent, performance and achievement is a complex interaction between genetic endowment, experiences, opportunities, environment, parental influence, coaching, physical conditional, technical skills, hard work, dedicated practice and mental ability.

So what is the best age to specialize in a specific sport? It is a difficult question, but let's consider some of the issues.

Children need to develop as athletes before they become specialized as players. This can be achieved by

teaching children the fundamental skills required as a foundation for more complex physical activities and sports. These basic skills form the basis of "physical literacy" - fundamental movement and fundamental sport skills which permit a child to move confidently and with control in a wide range of physical activities and sports. This will allow children to partake in sport without fear of failure and therefore increase the likelihood of them beginning a new sport or continuing with one, leading to an active healthy life. In addition, having good fundamental skills provides the basis from which sporting excellence can grow. Only once the basic athletic skills have been mastered, can an athlete begin to specialize in sport specific techniques and skills.

Physical literacy should be developed prior to the onset of the adolescent growth spurt.

These fundamental skills include the ABCs of athleticism, (agility, balance, co-ordination and speed), the ABCs of athletics, (running, jumping, wheeling/rotation and throwing) as well as swimming, sliding/skating, sending and receiving an object, dribbling,

striking and rhythmic skills. Different sports and activities are better at developing one or more of the ABCs than others.

“Learning fundamental sports skills before mastering related fundamental movement skills reduces performance ability later on” (Canadian Sport for Life)

Sports can be classified as either early or late specialization sports. Early specialization sports include gymnastics, diving and figure skating, whilst late specialization sports are sports such as soccer, rugby, basketball, hockey and cricket. The reason for these sports being early specialization is that the complex skills required for them need to be mastered before puberty otherwise they are difficult to learn after physical maturation. One of the reasons being that the rate of increasing flexibility decreases after puberty. In late specialization sports the levels required for international competition can still be achieved if specialisation takes place between 12 and 15 years of age as long as physical literacy has been achieved before adolescence. As a parent it is important to make sure that your child is not being pushed too hard too early to specialise by a coach. Another factor to consider is whether or not your child is an early or late developer. Each sporting code also needs to determine the best time of specialization for optimal success. Different studies conducted around the world report that the more successful Olympic sportsmen and women tended to specialize after the age of 15.

“Participating in a variety of sports will help a child develop other athletic skills that they would not develop if they specialised in one sport too early. Athletic skills such as speed, balance, mental focus, jumping and reacting are all stressed differently in different sports. These skills will later transfer to the child’s primary activity, so everything a child does to become a better all-round athlete will make the child a better soccer player, for instance.” (Jennifer VanSickle, assistant professor of Sport Management, University of Indianapolis)



Some guidelines for parents to follow

- Boys, aged 6-9 and girls, aged 6-8 should participate in a wide variety of activities to develop the basic skills of agility, balance, co-ordination and rhythmic movement. The activities should be land and water based and where possible include ice/snow. There should be no specialisation in a single sport.
- From ages 8-11 in girls and 9-12 in boys (i.e. the approximate onset of the growth spurt) is the important stage for developing sport specific skills, but by playing at least 2-3 sports in different seasons. Parents should discourage focusing on only one sport throughout the year. Children should also not specialize in one specific position, stroke or technique for example batting or bowling in cricket.
- Between ages 11 and 15 in girls and 12 and 16 in boys (i.e. the onset and end of the growth spurt) adolescents are ready to consolidate their sport-specific skills and begin to specialize in a single sport should they wish.

GUIDELINES

There are a number of challenges that parents and athletes face should specialisation in late specialisation sports commence prior to age 10.

- Physical and psychological burn-out
- One-sided, sport specific preparation
- Loss of diverse social contacts
- Loss of transferable athletic skills
- Greater risk of overuse and repetitive stress injuries
- Higher levels of pre-competition anxiety which can lead to emotional trauma
- Difficulty coping with athletic failure later if they experience success at too early an age

CHALLENGES

Should your child insist on specialising early or for those early specialisation sports here are some tips for reducing injury or burnout:

- Focus on improving overall performance and developing new skills, not on winning
- Make sure your child uses proper training techniques and qualified coaches
- Avoid overtraining
- Watch for overuse injuries, schedule regular doctor's appointments
- Never tell your child to "play/work through the pain"
- Let your child choose the sports and level of participation
- Make sure your child has an off season to avoid burnout

TIPS

Let your child explore a variety of different physical activities and sports so that he/she can develop the necessary skills to sustain a long-term sporting life either as a participant or a competitive athlete. By doing this your child will make the decisions that are right for him/her at the right time. Support them in their development and ultimate choice of a sport.

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