



## **YOUNG CHILDREN AND SPORTS: THERE'S MORE TO IT THAN YOU THINK**

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Most parents believe that introducing their young children to sports will give the kids all sorts of benefits, from physical fitness to self esteem to social acceptance. As a society, our kids are pushed into organized sports at an early age since it's generally believed that the earlier they start, the better off they will be.

But skilled sports for young children – such as baseball and soccer – can actually do more harm than good. Why? Because if the child's body hasn't developed the critical physical and sensory systems for these sports, they'll be unable to learn the finer movements and skills required to master them. This is one of the main reasons that children get frustrated and turned off by organized sports.

### **A generation of kids unprepared for sports**

As early as the first year of life, our bodies begin to build the foundation to learn complex movements. But many children of today's generation aren't getting the necessary access to movement in the first year of life. There are a variety of reasons for this. These include children spending too much time on their backs vs. tummies; increased reliance on high chairs, bouncy seats and car seats that keep kids immobilized; and the growing tendency to try to minimize "risky" play by confining and restricting movements like crawling around and climbing. As these children grow, they continue to live low-activity lifestyles defined by too much sitting time with TV and gaming. They are less likely to engage in "freestyle" play in and outdoors, and they spend fewer hours of recess and gym time at school.

As a result, a surprising number of preschoolers and elementary-age children lack the upper body strength and coordination to learn skilled sports. The good news is that while we can't turn the clock back and redo that first year, we can help most children reclaim their full potential. It's actually very simple. We need to encourage them to do what kids do best – to play and move.

In other words: before baseball, soccer and basketball, we need to get kids jumping, spinning, rolling, climbing and developing their bodies' ability to learn where they are "in space." This will help build the necessary sensory systems and strength and eventually give them the confidence required for skilled sports. In addition, there are side benefits – improved handwriting, better focus and retention, and fewer behavioral problems.

So while skilled sports can deliver many wonderful benefits for children, there is a natural developmental process that must take place before they can learn to dribble, shoot and pass.

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