



National Association for
Sport and Physical Education

*an association of the American Alliance for Health,
Physical Education, Recreation and Dance*

NASPE Sets the Standard

POSITION STATEMENT

Guidelines for Participation in Youth Sport Programs: Specialization Versus Multiple-Sport Participation

Position Statement

For young people under age 15, year-round specialization in a single sport is more often associated with developmental risks than rewards. Positive physical, psychological and social development is most likely to occur when young people participate in multiple sports and informal physical activities throughout childhood and early adolescence.

Specializing in a single organized, competitive sport at an early age is a controversial issue. As adults turn to organized youth sports to foster positive development in children, they find that many programs encourage or require early specialization. As these programs have grown, it's become increasingly "normal" for young people to specialize year round in a single sport. This change has led parents, teachers and coaches to ask, "Should young people under age 15 specialize in a single sport year round or play multiple sports?" It also has inspired careful research by exercise and sport scientists. Based on research findings across multiple fields, it is NASPE's current position that:

- ✓ Participating regularly in a variety of sports and physical activities yields many documented physical, psychological and social benefits related to both short- and long-term development and to future participation in both recreational and competitive sports.
- ✓ Young people who specialize in a single sport year round encounter several documented risks, because overtraining and excessive time commitment to one activity are disruptive to overall development when a young person is not yet 15 years old and is not able to make informed decisions about life-influencing priorities.
- ✓ Positive development is most likely when young people have diverse opportunities to explore and develop a range of physical, psychological and social abilities across multiple activities and sports: some competitive and others focused on adventure and self-mastery under different social and environmental conditions.

Specialization Versus Multiple-Sport Participation (Cont.)

- ✓ Positive development is seldom achieved when adults encourage specialization by supporting programs with seasons longer than three months and when they verbalize expectations that young people should participate in associated camps and clinics, private lessons and practices throughout much of the year.
- ✓ Using intense and specialized sport participation as a strategy to win championships and scholarships, and to create athletic careers often is counterproductive because it frequently causes burnout and undermines overall personal development throughout childhood and adolescence.
- ✓ The motivation to achieve excellence is highest when young people have experiences in multiple sports and can make informed choices about the sports in which they want to specialize during adolescence.

Therefore, NASPE recommends that parents, teachers and coaches:

1. Encourage young people to try a range of sports so that they can discover what they enjoy and can develop the overall physical competence to maximize their success in the sports they choose to play after reaching age 15.
2. Ensure that young people have a wide range of experiences and relationships across many organized sports (structured play) and informal games that are organized and maintained by the young people themselves.
3. Evaluate youth sports programs in terms of how effectively they produce positive self-esteem, self-efficacy and perceptions of competence among young people.
4. Support and encourage young people to participate in sport programs that focus on developing fundamental movement skills that lead to increased skill and ability (e.g., proper technique for running, throwing, stopping and changing directions).
5. Inform young people about the sport participation options available to them, encourage them to diversify their experiences in sport and physical activities, and enable them to make participation choices based on knowledge of the risks associated with specialization, particularly for those younger than age 15.
6. Organize and support youth sports in which practices and competitions focus on learning new skills, gaining confidence in one's abilities and fostering a lifelong love of physical activities among all participants regardless of their level of physical development and training experience.
7. Reduce overuse injuries and increase overall physical competence and well-being by emphasizing the development of sport skills (agility, balance and speed), as well as aerobic fitness and flexibility, and muscle strength and power.
8. Reduce burnout, boredom and dropping out from sports, and maximize the probability of personal development and success in a chosen sport by discouraging specialization in one sport until a young person can make a fully informed decision, usually at about age 15.

9. Seek and support coaches who can explain how their sports improve overall physical fitness, and who also make it clear that athletic scholarships are not as plentiful or comprehensive as most people think, and that most scholarships cover only part of college expenses.
10. Emphasize enjoyment and the love of movement and physical challenges so that young people will integrate physical activity and sport participation into their lives and be motivated to maintain overall fitness and well-being throughout the course of their lives.

Those recommendations are based on research conducted primarily in the physical sciences, psychology and sociology. The most relevant and important findings from each of these fields are summarized here:

Research Findings on Physical Development

- Specializing in a single sport is associated with high rates of overuse injuries caused by consistently intense, repetitive physical movements that stress the bodies of young people unevenly, foster unbalanced muscle development and compromise bone development. Common manifestations of these injuries: Little League elbow, tendon and ligament damage, stress fractures, injuries to developing joints and joint surfaces, and injuries to the immature spine.
- Involving oneself across a range of sports — with breaks and needed recuperative time between sport seasons — is the most effective way to enhance long-term health and skill development, as well as to enable young people to meet the physical demands of competitive sport.
- The most effective sport development and training programs around the world discourage year-round specialization in a single organized sport and, generally, use cross-training methods to develop a full range of skills to prepare young people for specialization at age 15 and older. Exceptions occur only in sports with judging criteria that favor the flexibility and artistic lines of prepubescent bodies, even though those criteria encourage forms of training that jeopardize athletes' long-term health and well-being.

Research Summary: Physical Development

Participating in many sports and physical activities maximizes physiological development among young people. Growing bodies are predisposed physiologically to non-specialized physical activities; therefore, physical development and success in sports are enhanced by participating in multiple sports on a schedule that allows for periods of active rest and recuperation throughout the year. Specialization in a single sport is more likely to inhibit or distort balanced physical development, restrict skill-development opportunities and undermine the forms of sport participation that maximize lifelong fitness and well-being.

Research Findings Related to Psychological Development

- Participating in multiple and diverse physical activities promotes self-esteem, self-efficacy and perceptions of competence among young people and enables them to learn their full range of abilities and make informed choices about the sports in which they are most likely to succeed.
- Young people are most likely to develop a sense of self-mastery when they participate across multiple sports; whereas year-round specialization in a single sport prior to age 15 often restricts the experiences that young people require to make informed choices about sport participation.
- Developing positive identities requires a diversity of experiences and relationships during childhood and adolescence, and participating in multiple sports increases experiences and relationships with peers and authority figures in ways that prepare young people for lifelong enjoyment of sports and engaged citizenship.
- Burnout — stress-induced withdrawal from a sport that one enjoyed previously — is associated with a sense that one’s capabilities cannot meet increasingly demanding expectations and that intense, year-round participation in a single sport interferes with overall personal and social development.
- Young people under age 15 are most likely to develop the intrinsic motivation that sustains long-term sport participation — as well as a quest for excellence in particular sports — when they play multiple sports rather than specializing in a single sport.

Research Summary: Psychological Development

Learning a wide range of physical skills and being exposed to diverse experiences and relationships promotes psychological development among young people. Playing multiple sports expands their options and choices as they grow older, and it fosters the intrinsic motivation that sustains lifelong sports participation and leads to achieving excellence in particular sports.

Research Findings Related to Social Development

- When young people play organized, competitive sports and lack time or opportunities to participate in player-controlled informal games, they miss important learning experiences related to creativity, innovation, conflict resolution, decision-making, group skills and self-advocacy that are less likely to be learned in adult-controlled sports.
- When young people participate regularly in informal games and sports, they are less likely to drop out of organized sport programs than their peers who specialize in a single sport from a young age.
- Elite athlete development and lifelong motivation to play sports is promoted most effectively when young people play informal games during childhood and also play multiple sports until age 15.

- Intense and exclusive specialization in a sport usually occurs in youth sport programs that depend on year-round income to pay for facilities and coaches; such programs are seldom effective in promoting overall development among young people.
- Allowing young people to specialize intensely and year round in a single sport usually immerses their families in team cultures within which parental moral worth depends on investing so many family resources to the sport that the diversity of a young person's physical activities, experiences and relationships is compromised.

Research Summary: Social Development

Social development among young people is maximized when they play multiple sports before age 15. This expands their interests, identities and experiences, and provides a basis for informed sport participation choices beyond age 15. When a young person plays multiple sports, parents are less likely to be drawn into a specific sport culture in which their children's overall development is not the highest priority.

For more information on effective sport programs for youths, visit www.naspe.org/multisport.

Position Statement Task Force

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Note: These references provide recent and comprehensive research and research summaries related to specialization versus multiple-sport participation among young people.

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