

# Is Your Child Ready for Sports?

**S**ports readiness means that a child has the physical, mental, and social skills to meet the demands of the sport. While general guidelines can help you select a sport based on age, it's important to remember that children develop at different rates. Children are more likely to enjoy and succeed in sports when they have the physical, mental, and social skills required by the sport.

## Ages 2 to 5 years

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Before age 6 years, most children do not have the basic motor skills for organized sports. Balance and attention span are limited, and vision and ability to track moving objects are not fully mature. Instead, look for other sports activities that focus on basic skills such as running, swimming, tumbling, throwing, and catching. These skills can be improved through active play but do not require organized sports activities. Children at this age have a short attention span and learn best when they can explore, experiment, and copy others. Instruction should be limited, follow a show-and-tell format, and include playtime. Competition should be avoided. Parents can be good role models and should be encouraged to participate.

## Ages 6 to 9 years

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By age 6 years, most children have the basic motor skills for simple organized sports. However, they may still lack the hand-eye coordination needed to perform complex motor skills and may not yet be ready to understand and remember concepts like teamwork and strategies. Sports that can be adapted to be played at a basic level and focus on basic motor skills are the most appropriate. This includes running, swimming, soccer, baseball, tennis, gymnastics, martial arts, and skiing. Sports that require complex visual and motor skills, quick decision-making,

or detailed strategies or teamwork (football, basketball, hockey, volleyball) will be difficult unless modified for younger players. Rules should be flexible to promote success, action, and participation. The sport should focus on learning new skills rather than winning. The equipment and rules should also be appropriate for young children. For example, smaller balls, smaller fields, shorter game times and practices, fewer children playing at the same time, frequent changing of positions, and less focus on score keeping.

## Ages 10 to 12 years

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By ages 10 to 12 years, most children are ready for more complex sports. They have the motor skills and cognitive ability to play sports that require complex motor skills, teamwork, and strategies. Most experts believe that sports at this level should focus on skill development, fun, and participation, not competition. Most children would rather play more on a losing team than less on a winning team.

Some children in this age group may be starting puberty. During this time, the physical differences between children, particularly boys of the same age, can be dramatic. This can make a difference in what sport is best for your child. Boys who start puberty sooner will be temporarily taller, heavier, and stronger. This may give them a physical advantage, but it doesn't mean they are more talented and will continue to excel in sports. If possible, they should compete with boys with the same physical ability. Similarly, boys who mature later may experience a temporary physical disadvantage in sports. This should not be seen as a lack of talent or ability. These boys should be encouraged to play sports with less emphasis on physical size, such as racquet sports, swimming, martial arts, wrestling, and certain track events.

Also, growth spurts can temporarily affect coordination, balance, and the ability to perform a skill. Keep in mind that it can be frustrating if this is seen as a lack of talent or effort.

### Other guidelines

- **Get fit and learn a new skill.** Encourage your children to participate in activities that promote physical fitness as well as learning sports skills. The activities should be fun and right for their ages.
- **Focus on fun.** Choose sports programs that focus on personal involvement, variety, success, and fun rather than competition, strict rules, and winning. It may help them stay interested and want to keep playing.
- **Check out the rules.** Equipment and rules should be right for their ages. If not, they should be modified.
- **Make sure safety is a priority.** Appropriate setting, equipment, protective gear, program design, and rules of play are important.
- **Keep differences in mind.** Prior to puberty, there are very few differences between boys and girls in endurance, strength, height, or body mass, and they can compete together on an equal basis. During puberty, to make sure athletes are well matched in contact sports, consideration should be given to body size and physical maturity as well as chronological age.
- **Proceed with caution.** Early specialization in a single sport, intensive training, and year-round training should be undertaken with caution because of the risk of overuse injury, mental stress, and burnout. Playing only one sport may also prevent a child from developing a variety of motor skills that they would learn from participating in several different sports.
- **Wait until your children are ready.** Children should not play competitive win/lose sports until they understand that their self-worth is not based on the outcome of the game.
- **Find a good sports program.** Get feedback from other children and parents who are in the programs. Try to check out programs before you join them. A sign of a good program is children having fun.

### NOTES

The information contained in this publication should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your health care professional. There may be variations in treatment that your health care professional may recommend based on individual facts and circumstances.

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