

## Understanding Pipeline Safety

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### Finding a sport for your children

*Here are some questions to consider before getting your children involved in organized sports*

**By Amy Moritz - News Sports Reporter**

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The choices can be daunting. Should I put my child in gymnastics? Or soccer? Or hockey? What about a travel league? How do I know if the coaches are qualified? If there's enough supervision? If it's safe.

Those are the questions parents ponder when trying to figure out what sport is best for their child.

Add to their concerns headlines like the Wilson baseball team hazing incident, and parents can feel like they're sending their child into a future episode of "Law and Order."

So how do parents wade their way through the youth sports culture?

It all starts with asking questions — of yourself, your child and the directors of the recreational leagues.

Here's where to begin:

#### 1. How do you match your child with the right sport?

First, let him or her try a variety of sports at a young age. "It's best if parents expose their kids to as many different sports as possible to help give them a sense of all the wonderful options that are out there," said John Engh, chief operating officer for the National Alliance for Youth Sports.

"A 7-year-old may take a liking to soccer, or maybe they'll really love playing lacrosse, but if they don't get a chance to try these sports they'll never know.

Adds Engh: "One of the biggest problems in sports today is that parents push their child into one particular sport

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and make them play that one season after season, which leads to burnout and the epidemic of overuse injuries we're seeing today.

"Children should not focus on one sport before the age of 10." Parents should ask their child what sport he or she is interested in, and then consider what you both are looking to gain from the sport.

"We feel passionate about activities that allow us to experience enjoyment, learning, challenge, competency, control, freedom and value," said Dr. Caroline Silby, a sports psychologist and author on the subject of youth sports.

"Before signing your child up, ask yourself whether the sport will allow your child opportunities to feel some of these emotions. If not, then find another activity."

Children often want to play a sport because their friends do, and that's not necessarily a bad thing. Team sports offer friendship and fun, but if your child is easily frustrated, then putting him or her in a highly competitive sports league is not the best option.

## **2. Choosing the right level**

So you found the sport (or sports) that your child is eager to play. Do some investigation before completing the registration form.

Find out if the team has an equal playing time policy so that all kids, no matter how strong or weak in skill, get a chance to play.

Recreation leagues often have two tiers of play — house and travel leagues, with the latter geared more toward skilled players. Starting your child at the house or recreation level offers the young athlete a chance to decide if he or she wants to pursue further skill development at the more competitive travel level.

"It's just important that it's the decision of the child and not the parent pushing the youngster to a more competitive level that they're not ready for or not interested in being a part of," Engh said.

It's also important to make sure that skill and confidence levels match. A young athlete may be gifted with physical talent but lack the confidence to succeed.

"One of the greatest burdens children can bear is to be told they have potential and simultaneously feel as though they are consistently underachieving," Silby said.

## **3. Choosing the right coach**

While many coaches are volunteers, there are programs to teach them effective ways of teaching skills in a safe environment and also how to work with groups of children.

"Parents wouldn't enroll their child in a school that didn't have trained teachers, so it makes no sense to allow their child to play on a team with a volunteer coach who has no training in working with a group of children," Engh said.

He suggests that the best recreation programs are ones that conduct background checks on volunteer coaches, offer training programs and periodically evaluate performances.

Silby recommends that parents attend some practices, not to second-guess the coach but to understand and evaluate the environment the coach is creating.

"We do know that athletes who train in environments that reward effort, value all players on the team — not just the most talented — accept mistakes as part of the learning process and encourage collaborative learning show

greater enjoyment, less stress, higher levels of self-esteem and more positive body images,” Silby said.

“I would encourage parents to go to watch practices and observe whether the coach strives to create this type of motivational climate.”

#### 4. Safety concerns

There are two areas of concern when it comes to safety: physical and emotional.

The safety guidelines listed by the National Athletic Trainer’s Association suggest that parents should check to make sure that young athletes are wearing the appropriate safety gear and that the gear fits.

Facilities should be safe, including removing debris, water and rocks from outdoor playing areas, and athletes should be matched with children of similar skill level, weight and maturity.

Other health and safety issues include making sure kids stay properly hydrated, which means drinking water or sports drinks before during and after practice and games.

While bumps and bruises are the norm in sports, dealing with abusive coaches and teammates should never be part of the game.

Parents should not necessarily react to one-time events but should look for patterns in coaches’ behavior.

And as uncomfortable as it may be, parents should teach their children about the differences between appropriate and inappropriate touching and flirting.

“Children can be encouraged to trust their instincts and tell an adult ‘no’ when the adult suggests something she knows is wrong or unacceptable,” Silby said.

“It’s critical to children’s safety that they learn to trust their own feelings and if they feel unsafe, to remove themselves immediately.”

But parents should also understand that differences in motivational techniques or disagreements about playing time do not constitute abuse.

“Many people confuse differences in coaching philosophy with abuse,” Silby said. “There are coaches who have a philosophy that revolves around winning and producing champions.

“There are also coaches who encourage the physical, psychological and emotional development of the child. Parents have to decide upfront what type of philosophy will best meet their expectations and needs of their child.

However, Silby said, “trust your gut. If you feel it’s not a healthy environment for your child, it isn’t.”

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#### **The right choice***Questions to ask when choosing a competitive sport:*

- How many hours per week will practice require?
- How long is the season?
- How much travel is required?
- What are the parental responsibilities?
- How much playing time will my child get?
- What are the coaching philosophies at the next level?
- Are players of all capabilities treated fairly and equitably?
- Is it a win-at-all-cost environment or is improvement valued?
- How will this decision affect family life?

- How will this decision affect the relationship with my child?

*Source: Sports psychologist Dr. Caroline Silby*

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**Signs of trouble** *Warning signs of emotional and/or physical abuse:*

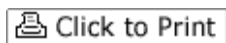
- Sudden aggressiveness
- Quitting the team or uncharacteristic lack of interest.
- Sleep problems
- Appetite changes
- Sliding grades
- Fear of washrooms, locker rooms, closed doors
- Running away
- Sudden and disproportionate interest in sex for their age
- Reluctance to talk
- Frequent vomiting
- Bruises, scratches, inflammation, lesions, bleeding, genital injuries, sexually transmitted disease, pregnancy

*Source: Sports psychologist Dr. Caroline Silby*

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