Avoidance of Burnout in the Young Athlete

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CASE SCENARIO

The patient is a 12-year-old male whose chief complaint is fatigue. The dad, also his son’s coach, tells you that his son is only tired before baseball practice and just wants to “sit on the bench.” He seems to have boundless energy to play video games with his friends on the weekends and is doing well in school. The patient has been playing baseball since he was 5 years old. He is on a year-round select team and practices are 3 days per week for 90 minutes each. On questioning the patient alone, he tells you that he hates baseball and wants to quit but is afraid his dad will be angry with him.

THE RIGHT SPORT

Finding an appropriate physical activity for a child can be difficult, as the sport must not only fit the developmental skill set of the child, but also the child’s readiness to play, and ability to be coached. If a child begins to play a sport that is beyond his or her developmental ability they can become frustrated and quit the sport.

Pediatricians are in an excellent position to monitor and support the child as they enter into the world of sports. This article reviews potential stressors for the young athlete and provides recommendations for preventing “burnout.”

Each year, 35% of children who participate in organized sports drop out. Current data reveal that by age 15 years,
75% of youth no longer play organized sports.

In an early study of 50 children who had stopped swimming competitively, among the major reasons cited for stopping were that they were “not as good as I wanted to be;” the activity was “not enough fun;” they “didn’t like the pressure;” and the “training was too hard.”! Approximately 30% cited negative factors to do with parents and coaches having influenced their decision to quit.

In a more recent study of swimmers, those who had dropped out were involved in fewer extracurricular activities, had less unstructured swim time, and had less one-on-one coaching. They tended to reach higher technical milestones yet were the youngest in their training group, had parents who had been high-level athletes, and were less likely to have a “best” friend in their swimming group.2

**READINESS FOR SPORT**

Although every child is different, there are general guidelines that can help a pediatrician steer the child/family toward a sport best suited to a child’s cognitive and physical abilities. Sports can be tailored to the developmental level of the child by simply modifying equipment, duration of practices and games, making frequent changes to the position a child plays, and, most importantly, focusing on fun rather than on winning.3

By preschool age, most children have acquired basic motor and coordination skills, but it is not until 6 years of age that sufficient combinations of the two make it possible for them to play any organized sports that involve running, throwing, and jumping.

Although physical growth is not as rapid during middle childhood, posture and balance become more automatic along with an ability to acquire two skills at once, such as kicking between goal posts and throwing further. A child’s attention span is still short at this age, however, so the emphasis should remain on having a good time, trying out new things, and continuing to work on fundamental skill acquisition.3 By ages 11 to 12 years, kids can learn more about strategy and team work and how to focus and stay on task.5

During adolescence, there is a noticeable increase in muscle mass/strength and cardiopulmonary endurance.3 Muscle mass increases are more dramatic in boys whereas increases in fat mass are noted in girls.3 During early adolescence, there may be a short-lived decline in coordination, balance, and flexibility. For this reason, specialization in one particular sport should not occur until later adolescence. Parents and coaches must provide positive sport experiences for children that match the child’s desires and physical abilities.4

**MOTIVATION FOR PARTICIPATION**

In one small survey, youths were asked to rank, in order of importance, why they participated in sports.3 Girls involved in nonschool sports reported participating to have fun, stay in shape, excel at something, learn new skills, and have the excitement and challenge of competition. Boys reported the same reasons, except they rated the excitement and challenge of competition higher.

In another pilot study, volunteer youth coaches were asked why they coached young athletes. The majority responded “to have fun” and reflected that winning was the objective rated as least important.6

**BURNOUT DEFINED**

What happens when kids seem to “burn out” — when they no longer perform well in a sport they used to enjoy? With the growing emphasis in our nation on improving peak physical performance in youth sports, frequently the mental aspect is ignored. Yet, child’s psychological development is as important as their physical development when determining readiness for a particular sport.3 Children may turn away from sports because of the pressure to win and continue to play despite suffering from overuse injuries. They may drift away from peers due to the need to prioritize sport.7 On the other hand, many children have significant stressors at home and involvement in sports is a good coping mechanism. However, over-pressure to perform well may add to their insecurities and anxiety. Factors that can lead to burnout are listed in Sidebar 1.

**PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS OF SPORTS INJURIES**

Inexperienced or unqualified coaches may put youth athletes at risk for acute traumatic injuries as well as overuse injuries due to inappropriate and excessive training. Additionally, competitive stress lessens the enjoyment of sports, which can lead to impaired performance and subsequent dropout. This stress may also interfere with sleep, putting the child at greater risk for sustaining athletic injuries.8

An injury that prevents a young athlete from competing can trigger a loss of identity if he or she is accustomed to defining themselves by involvement in a sport. Slow recovery from the injury can

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**SIDEBAR 1.**

**Factors Associated with Burnout in Young Athletes**

- Very high self- and external expectations
- A “win-at-all-costs” attitude
- Parental pressure
- Long practices with little variety
- Inconsistent coaching practices
- Overuse injuries
- Excessive time demands
- High travel demands
- Love from others determined by winning and losing
- Perfectionism

lead to a heightened state of anxiety or depression usually mitigated by the sport in which the child was injured.9 Being replaced in a team’s line up may cause an injured youth athlete to experience depression and withdrawal.9 Athletes can lose confidence in their ability to play a sport if they haven’t been able to play due to injury. Unfortunately, many young athletes think that they can return to play at the same level of performance as they did before their injury, but this only puts them at risk for further injury, followed by the risk for further mental distress. Athletes who are put on the bench can become angry and confused, withdrawn, have rapid mood swings, and experience guilt about letting other teammates down.10,11 Athletes who respond well to their own internal motivation for improvement and are compliant with the prescribed rehabilitation have the quickest recovery with the least psychological impairment from the injury.3

Coping with setbacks in sports typically follows the five stages of grief, including denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.12 The order of experiencing these coping stages can vary. As pediatricians, we know that even the most well-adjusted young athlete should be allowed to experience all of the emotions and be supported through this process. Setting guidelines that are not punitive can help. A young athlete may need to withdraw temporarily, or reduce their practice time, but if possible, they should not be terminated from the team due to injury.3 Unfortunately, because there may be pressure to compete, or the coach/parent may encourage “playing through” the pain, some athletes return to play despite not being fully rehabilitated.

**STRATEGIES TO REDUCE BURNOUT**

**Mind–Body Interventions**

Progressive muscle relaxation, breathing exercises, mental imagery, systematic desensitization and biofeedback are effective tools for helping injured young athletes keep a positive and constructive attitude, which in turn promotes a full recovery from injury.13 Distraction techniques such as listening to music and positive self-talk are also effective.14

These are some techniques which can be used by the athlete to relax each day — either prior to or after practices or games. These techniques include the following: 1) guided imagery; 2) affirmations; 3) deep abdominal breathing exercises; 4) progressive muscle relaxation; and 5) total body relaxation.

**Guided Imagery**

Guided imagery, which is like active daydreaming, can help the athlete relax and live life to the fullest. The athlete begins by clearing the mind and calming the body, and then call on imagination to travel to a place that is peaceful, calm, quiet and rejuvenating. They may like some images or thoughts more than others. They can just let go of the ones you aren’t drawn to. They may find that practicing imagery becomes more helpful over time. If their mind starts to wander, just gently remind them to bring it back.

**Affirmations**

Affirmations are more helpful for some people than imagery. Ask the athlete to repeat certain phrases each day while in the shower, taking a break from their studies, in the car, or just before falling asleep. See Sidebar 2 for examples of helpful affirmations.

**Deep Abdominal Breathing Exercises**

This technique is also known as square breathing, because the patient uses a breathing pattern of 2 × 3 × 3 × 2. The patient inhales for 2 counts, holds the breath for 3 counts, exhales for 3 counts, and pauses for 2 counts before inhaling the next breath.

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**SIDEBAR 2.**

**Helpful Affirmations for the Youth Athlete**

- I let any stress just flow over or past me, without absorbing it into my body.
- I can do my work quickly and well, while staying physically relaxed.
- I am able to deal well with stress, extra work, or excitement, without triggering any uncomfortable symptoms.
- I have the power to choose how I respond to everything in my life.
- I handle any problems with a calm mind and relaxed body.
- I am able to change anything in my life.
- All my old habits and thoughts are just memories. I can replace them at any time with new habits of positive thoughts and peacefulness.

*Source: Breen C.C.*

**Progressive Muscle Relaxation**

The athlete can sit in a comfortable position, eyes either open or closed, trying not to focus too hard. They can tighten and relax their muscles, beginning with their toes, feet and ankles, feeling that tightness, holding for a count of 5. Then, they relax feet and ankles with deep abdominal breathing. They can switch to calves and knees, thighs and hips, and lower back. Following this they can make a tight fist and hold for 5 counts, then relax. They can then tighten shoulders, the neck and end with jaw and eyes and forehead.

**Total Body Relaxation**

Total body relaxation involves the athlete taking a couple of slow, deep breaths, imagining breathing in relaxation and peace, and breathing out any tightness, tension, and/or pain. They can let all sounds around them fade into the distance, and as they fade, their body relaxes more and more. They concentrate on relaxing and smoothing all muscles in their head forehead, and temples. With each breath their neck muscles
Teams coached by individuals who have been trained to build self-esteem and cooperation have lower dropout rates and better peer relationships, with the same win/loss record as other teams. Some of these techniques for constructive play include acknowledging and praising athletes for their efforts. The importance of acknowledging that a child is trying their best is priceless. We know that after a mistake, a child should not be punished, yelled at or humiliated. A mistake can be corrected gently by explaining to the child how to do it a different way. Clear expectations can lead to positive results. Running laps or punishing the team may result in chaos and dropout. Coaches can be an instrument to help the young athlete become the best that they can be. Instruction should be given by demonstration and in a positive manner. Sportsmanship/teamwork are the main ingredient, and coaches should support attempts at running the ball down the field rather than putting the entire focus on results. A good coach inherently knows that the timing of praise is crucial and can be meaningless if effusive. See Sidebar 4 for the “YES YOU CAN!” coaching strategy.

**Parental Involvement**

A positive, supportive parent solidly links to a high level of enjoyment and success in the sport by a child. Parental involvement in sports flows on a continuum from “not involved at all” to “over-involved.” To the child, the experience can be positive or negative at either extreme. Under-involved parents do not provide enough support to facilitate a child’s desire to participate. Over-involved parents can be too forceful, critical, and pressuring, which may lead to a lack of the child’s enjoyment in the sport. Parents can be supportive without being directive, and can provide verbal praise and recognition.

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**SIDEBAR 3.**

**Autogenetic Phrases to Assist with Total Body Relaxation**

- I feel quite quiet.
- I’m beginning to feel quite relaxed.
- My feet feel heavy and relaxed.
- My ankles, my knees and my hips feel heavy, relaxed and comfortable.
- My stomach, and the whole central part of my body, feels relaxed and quiet.
- My hands, my arms and my shoulders feel heavy, relaxed and comfortable.
- My neck, my jaws and my forehead feel relaxed. They feel comfortable and smooth.
- My whole body feels quiet, heavy, comfortable and relaxed.
- I’m feeling more relaxed now.
- My arms and hands are heavy and warm.
- I’m feeling quieter now.
- My whole body is relaxed, and my hands are warm, relaxed and warm.
- My hands are feeling warmer now.
- Warmth is flowing into my hands; they are getting warmer and warmer.
- I can feel the heat flowing down my arms into the end of my fingertips.
- My hands are warm; relaxed and warm.
- As my hands continue to get warmer, my heartbeat is calm and regular.
- My breathing is smooth, and slow, and easy.
- My mind is quiet and at ease, while my hands get warmer and warmer.
- I am able to create warmth in my hands at any time, by relaxing and quieting myself.
- I feel comfortable, peaceful and warm, and completely relaxed.

*Source: Breuner CC*

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**SIDEBAR 4.**

**Effective and Affective Coaching Practices: “YES YOU CAN!”**

- Y. Yes you were great! Praise and encourage kids often. Focus on giving positive feedback rather than reminding them of errors.
- E. Expectations should be realistic and should be appropriate to the child’s age and ability. It is okay to acknowledge a less than optimal performance with words like “stick with it, it’s hard out there.”
- S. Praise should be sincere. Insincere praise ruins the credibility of the coach. It is okay to have expectations, but make them realistic.
- Y. Young people make mistakes — this is how they learn. Don’t discredit that youth are able to brush it off and move on.
- O. Be optimistic for effort, not outcome. Praise the proper technique. If a basket is made with an off-balance shot and the player is rewarded for this, the player has learned nothing except that making a basket is the most important thing. Instead proper shooting technique should be praised (even if a basket is not made).
- U. Use all of the players. Each practice should maximize the participation of all of the players, all of the equipment, all of the talent. Respect for all team mates starts with the coach.
- C. Change and modify skills and activities so that the players will learn at an age-appropriate level. Different size balls, batting tees, lower baskets all can enhance performance successes. The purpose of this is to increase safety and minimize personal injuries.
- A. Add innovative rules. Be creative so that everyone gets to play and have fun. This is especially important with younger children and non-elite teams. Coaches can pitch to their own teams, scores do not need to be kept, and fouls should not be called unless they are obvious.
- N. Negative remarks should be sandwiched between positive comments.
- I. Be a cheerleader. Kids love being told they are wonderful and that they are appreciated.

*Source: Breuner CC*
encouragement rather than criticism and shame. If a parent shows up to the game and helps their child deal with a loss or a win, huge rewards can be reaped that can last a lifetime for their child.\(^2\)

Letting a child make his or her own decisions about what sport to participate in is crucial for success. Parents can provide financial support and allow access to other resources that give their kids a chance to participate in activities not necessarily tied to the parents’ expectations.\(^1\)

**CASE SCENARIO OUTCOME**

You asked the patient if you could speak to the dad with the patient together. He agreed. You told the dad the concerns the patient had about his sport, his performance and how he wanted to stop playing. Then the three of you discussed other options for the patient – he mentioned he really wanted to run on the track team and maybe even throw the shot put. When the dad realized what his son really wanted to do, he, while obviously disappointed, was supportive of his son’s decision. □

**CONCLUSION**

Youth sports are an essential and integral part of any educational program, particularly with the growing obesity epidemic in our nation. Sports can help develop a healthy relationship with physical activity, confidence, and self esteem.\(^3\)

In spite of stress-induced problems associated with some aspects of youth athletics, psychological growth can be fostered through sport. If the athlete learns effective stress management techniques with the help of sports psychologists, pediatricians, family practitioners, and other primary care providers, they can be taught to handle failure, overcome adversity, and endure frustration. □

**REFERENCES**


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