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Whole Child Sports Free Play Earns the Winning Score

by Luis Fernando Llosa

Many parents concerned that their children are getting engulfed by social media often turn to sports to spark physical activity. They scramble to sign their toddlers up for swimming and tennis lessons, T-ball and soccer practice, hoping these activities will teach their kids about motivation and leadership, while getting them off the couch and out the door. They hope that sports will be a conduit for their kids to learn what it takes to strive, drive toward a goal and succeed in later life.

As a result, more than 40 million kids across America are engaged in organized play. But youth sports are not a panacea; while parental intentions are good, they sometimes don't realize the potential for negative consequences. Those that have studied the phenom-

on the surface, appear to provide a perfect environment for children to learn life lessons and develop critical social and physical skills—might hamper our children's healthy physical, social, psychic and creative development.

Too Much Too Soon

It seems that many young kids playing on teams today are over-coached by controlling, command-oriented adults. As Jenny Levy, head coach of the University of North Carolina's 2013 NCAA champion women's lacrosse team at Chapel Hill puts it, "Kids are kind of like overbred dogs, mimicking the drills we run in practice. They aren't wired to think creatively. They do what they know. What's safe."

This kind of behavior can start at an early age, when kids should be

engaging in free play with minimal adult supervision in unstructured settings. Parenting expert Kim John Payne, author of *Simplicity Parenting* and *The Soul of Discipline*, says, "Parents are giving in to enormous societal pressure to push kids into high-performance sports settings several times a week. It's an 'arms race' of sorts, with the clear victims being the kids themselves that are robbed of their childhoods."

There's a much more holistic way kids can experience play, including sports. An American Academy of Pediatrics study attests that free and unstructured play is healthy and essential for helping children reach important social, emotional and cognitive developmental milestones, plus managing stress and becoming resilient.

Payne observes, "In free play, children have to actively problem solve and take one another's feelings into account if the play is to be successful. In sports, the social problem solving is largely extrinsic, facilitated by coaches, referees or parents. During a child's formative stages, between the ages of 5 and 12, having the freedom to develop, create and innovate is critical."

Creativity isn't limited to only younger children. How sports are taught in this country at all levels, right up through college, often inhibits athletic creativity and problem solving—as Levy has noticed year after year in the freshmen players she trains—rather than fostering these attributes.

A Better Alternative

It's crucial to consider the whole child, not just the budding athlete. To revive a child's imagination and create better conditions for developing creativity, resiliency and flexibility, contemplate the option of taking a child out of organized youth sports for a while to provide the time, space and opportunity to rediscover childhood play and games. Then support them in re-entering organized athletics when they're a bit older and more physically and emotionally ready.

Also, some kids that get heavily involved in highly structured youth sports too early may be prone to behavioral problems and serious physical injuries. The best thing a parent can do for a young child that is active and interested

in sports is roll up their sleeves and join in unscripted backyard or playground family play. Kids thrive in the attention offered from mom or dad, regardless of parental athletic skill levels. Also, organize play dates with other neighborhood kids of varying ages, because they love to learn from each other, including how to work out disagreements.

Once kids are socially, emotionally

and physically ready, organized sports can be an amazing platform for fun-filled learning. Having already experienced healthy free play, a child will be ready for and thrive in a more focused, competitive, organized and structured play environment. Fortified by a creative foundation in earlier years, a youngster is better able to identify and express their own mind, body and spirit.

Luis Fernando Llosa is the co-author of Beyond Winning: Smart Parenting in a Toxic Sports Environment and co-founder of WholeChildSports.com. A writer, speaker and former Sports Illustrated reporter, he lives in New York City, where he coaches his five kids. For more information, visit LuisFernandoLlosa.com.