

Burnout in Youth Sports: Warning Signs and What YOU Can Do About It!

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Recent studies show that over 30 million children are involved in competitive youth sports these days, and that number is expected to continue to grow in the years ahead. In fact, more children today are starting to play competitive sport at an earlier age, “specialize” in a particular sport, and play in competitive leagues year-round! These changes in youth sport participation are in dramatic contrast to only a few years ago where most kids started playing organized sports later in life, typically sampled several different sports, and routinely took significant time off from sports throughout the year.

As you might expect, these changes in youth sport participation bring both good and bad news with respect to the overall welfare of children involved in athletics. On the one hand, some research suggests that children involved in youth sports are less likely to be involved in antisocial behavior and gang involvement. Furthermore, children play sports often learn the importance of sportsmanship, develop leadership skills, and are often held accountable to meet minimum grade standards in order to remain eligible to play.

On the other hand, increased sport participation oftentimes leads to overtraining and burnout – very serious concerns clinicians are seeing nationwide as growing numbers of children essentially “hit the wall” and long to take a break from the time and energy required to play sports. Sadly, many adults lose sight of the life lessons and athletic transferable skills children learn by playing sports, and instead treat children as though they are mini-professional athletes. Making things even more difficult is the fact that many children, while obviously worn out and tired from playing sports, find it very difficult -if not impossible - to ask their parents for a break. For many kids they feel as though they are letting their parents down by asking for a break, especially when they see the oftentimes enormous time and money investment many parents make today in order to keep their kids involved in organized sports.

Burnout is a very serious condition that can potentially lead to a host of psychological concerns, including anxiety, depression, and even alcohol and drug use. Fortunately for parents, there are many warning signs that can be quickly detected (some are listed below):

- Trust your gut. In other words, if you think maybe your child is pushing too hard – or has been playing for extended periods of time- take a moment to simply ask him or her if a break in the action might be

welcomed. The key is to make sure your child feels as though you genuinely mean this offer *and* that you will still unconditionally accept him or her even if he or she wants to take a timeout from sports for awhile

- Look for major, dramatic mood swings, a flat or indifferent affect, or a lack of pride that was previously present but missing of late. Major changes in personality can also be a sign to take a break
- Pay attention to your child's interest level in sports. Does he or she still get excited to go to games and practices? Or is it becoming more of a struggle to get your child in the car to make it to these events? If it is obvious that *your* interest is significantly greater than your child's, you may want to talk to your child about needing a break.

Burnout is something that can be detected early and can usually be treated by simply taking time off from sports. For most kids, a short break is enough to recharge their engines and get them excited and motivated to play again soon. In other, more serious situations, especially where you think drugs and alcohol use may be involved, please consider seeking professional assistance as soon as possible.

Dr. Chris Stankovich, known as "The Sports Doc" for his segment on Ohio News Network and featured column in Columbus Parent magazine, is a national expert in the field of sport psychology and offers an entire line of peak performance educational training products for student athletes, coaches, and parents. Please visit www.drstankovich.com to learn more.

