

Creating Optimal Balance for Your Child Participating in Youth Sports

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Many years ago while studying people who I considered to be the happiest, healthiest, and most productive people I knew, I spent significant time trying to simplify their successes to a few basic similarities I saw amongst them. None of these people knew one another, as my models for this study included athletes, scholars, and successful business people, but I found that they all shared a common trait amongst one another: they all worked hard to keep a healthy balance in their lives and dedicated their time and energies to various things in life that made them happy and completed them as people.

I found that for the scholar, making sure to exercise regularly was vitally important; for the athlete, making regular time each week to volunteer in the community made him happy; and for the businessman, making time to play guitar on weekends made him feel complete. In essence, I came to learn that finding personal values and making sure to develop a lifestyle around those values actually enables us to become “peak performers” in all areas of our lives!

For your child it is no different – I believe allowing (or in some cases making) him or her specialize and play one sport, year-round at the expense of seeking how to help the child better understand all of his or her interests is a grave mistake. In situations where a child’s growth is stifled due to engaging only in one activity, the end result will almost always be burnout. On the other hand, helping your child explore who he or she is and the things that complete him or her can lead to greater happiness, personal health, and greater productivity – and in all areas of his or her life (even in sports, too!).

To help your child achieve Optimal Balance try doing the following:

- Take time out of your schedule and ask your child to talk about all the things he or she likes to do (or is interested in doing in the future). Listen closely without making any judgments, and take time to write notes as he or she speaks.
- Afterwards, take time to review the list by yourself away from your child and give yourself time to brainstorm as many ways as you can to help incorporate some of these ideas into your child’s life

- Next, take time to meet again with your child and talk about your new ideas. As you go down the list, ask your child for clarification to see if you heard him or her correctly the first time and revisit the reasons why he or she felt these things were important.
- Finally, work with your child to attach proportions to what is realistic for these ideas. For example, if your child says that school, soccer, basketball, drawing, and helping his grandparents are important things to him, try to see how you can develop a lifestyle that incorporates all these things in proportion (in other words, soccer practice might be everyday, but helping his grandparents might only be on the weekends).
- Help your child understand that this exercise for developing a healthy lifestyle has no “right or wrong” answers, as each person is an individual and what is important to one person might not be at all to another. Encourage your child to break down stereotypes whenever possible, too (for example, if your son likes to cook or participate in the theater try to find ways to help him feel comfortable doing these things).

I strongly believe by creating Optimal Balance for your child he or she will be a much happier and successful person, and by applying this strategy to sports, he or she will become a better athlete, too. When a child understands his or her values, only then can he or she can begin to live a life of conviction and not get burned out doing the same things over and over again. Optimal Balance requires self-exploration, and your child’s values will change over time so be sure to do this exercise with your child for many years to come!

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.

