

## ***Sport Specialization: Is it the Right Choice for Your Child?***

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Have you ever stopped and wondered whatever happened to the three-sport letter winner? In the “old” days of athletics only just a few years ago, many young athletes successfully played multiple sports, leading to the achievement of earning multiple varsity letters in high school. Interestingly, a new trend has emerged today where the multiple varsity letter winner has become an image of the past, and instead been replaced with increasingly more kids specializing and playing only one sport.

Whether you like it or not, families today are faced with tough choices that often begin at a very early age - including questions around how early to allow a child to begin playing organized sports, what skill level to compete, and whether or not the child should dedicate all of his or her efforts toward one sport instead sampling several different sports throughout the year. It is the last concern, sport specialization, which I would like to explore in this months article.

As with just about every venture in life, the more you do something, the more skilled you are likely to become. Sport specialization allows children to play their chosen sport more frequently, and for longer periods of time, often resulting in faster and more advanced skill development. While the net result of how much a child specializing in one sport improves compared to other children playing multiple sports is certainly debatable, in most cases the child who specializes does advance with skill acquisition at a faster pace when compared to other children who do not specialize in one sport.

A few advantages of sport specialization include:

- more games and practices;
- different competition from diverse backgrounds and geographic regions;
- greater diversity in coaching;
- greater exposure to junior high, high school, and sometimes even college coaches;
- more opportunities to review and refine athletic skills so that they can become mastered at an earlier age.

On the other hand, sport specialization can also come with a cost. Probably the biggest concern with sport specialization is the increased risk for burnout and withdrawal, often resulting in poor coping skills in response to the increased pressure and stress. Keep in

mind that the number one reason kids play sports is to have fun, and in cases of sport specialization, it is easy to see that the enormous amount of time and energy devoted to one sport can easily offset the fun and instead make the sport look more like a job and a lot less like a recreational activity.

Other tradeoffs with sport specialization include:

- difficulties balancing the sport with school and other activities and social responsibilities;
- missing critical periods to develop skills needed for other sports should your child want to try different sports later;
- missing an opportunity to identify hidden talents your child might have for another sport;
- being required to spend enormous amounts of time committed to your child's sport schedule – often resulting in altered or missed family vacations.

Interestingly, some coaches think sport specialization actually *hinders* athletic development, and that kids would be far better off sampling several different sports throughout the year. The thinking is that different sports develop different skills, muscles, and abilities, all leading the child to become a better, more complete.

It is becoming common knowledge that kids who specialize in one sport early in life often end up having the inside track when it comes time to competing in junior high and high school. Still, it is vitally important that you think the decision of sport specialization through before making such a commitment.

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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](http://www.drstankovich.com) to learn more.

