

HEALTH + DEVELOPMENT/SPORTS

The Benefits of Youth Sports Last Through the Years

Youth athletics can improve kids' mental, emotional and academic well-being

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PHOTO: Janeen Sorensen

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When children play sports, they're not just learning how to play a game. Studies have found that youth sports result in better physical and mental health as well as stronger social skills and even improved academic performance.

"They're building these skills — leadership, how to manage conflict, handle stress and anxiety. Children who learn these skills become a benefit to society as they apply them to the rest of their lives," says Chad Pohlman, athletic director at The Bear Creek School, an independent preschool through 12th grade school in Redmond. There are many ways to gain these skills, but few activities bring them all together like sports.

Physical benefits

As movement has been engineered out of modern life, and the time kids spend in front of screens continues to grow, organized sports have become ever more important to ensure children get a healthy level of activity.

"We know the benefits of physical activity appear at the very youngest age. We don't need to have serious sports when kids are 4 and 5 years old, but we still promote healthy activity, getting outside and running around, and playing with your friends," says Pohlman.

Michele Wyner, PE and advanced math teacher for K–4 students at The Bear Creek School, focuses on developmentally appropriate physical education. She explains, "For children before age 5, lots of free play is amazing for them. Running around the yard, walking on logs — just fun, free, joyful play. In kindergarten to grade four, we're working on building gross motor skills. We don't necessarily play 'sports' but we're building the techniques, the skills, the stamina and the words — 'this is called a racquet, here is how you hold it,'" she explains. For the early grades, Wyner especially likes dance, swimming and tumbling; whole-body activities without complex game play requiring cooperation or direct competition.

The benefits of physical activity are immediate, but they last a lifetime.

"Kids who participate in youth sports at a young age tend to keep playing as they get older, even participating in adult leagues. There's a direct correlation to a lower rate of obesity as they get older, as well," says Pohlman.

Social benefits

The Bear Creek School's formal sports program starts in the sixth grade, after children have learned the physical fundamentals in PE, but team sports build social skills at any age.

"In the early grades, a lot of the benefit of team sports is social: being together in community, cheering each other on, being a great teammate, being selfless, building self-discipline," says Pohlman. As kids grow older and begin to master elements of their sport, the social challenges become more complex. Students learn to communicate during play and outside of it, to develop a sense of sportsmanship and fair play, and start to make decisions about their own priorities and level of commitment as activities become more demanding.



Kids having fun shooting baskets at Bear Creek School. Photo: Janeen Sorensen

Emotional benefits

“Youth sports do help lower anxiety and stress. Study after study shows the significant psychological or mental health benefits of youth sports,” says Pohlman. Feeling healthy and having good friends is a solid foundation for emotional well-being. But there’s another major emotional benefit from sports – the confidence that comes from handling wins and losses.

“Self-confidence is a big one, especially for our youngest kids. It’s so great to see young kids find success, and success is just seeing oneself achieve something. Great coaching can help with that – having goals and celebrating everything. Not just the winning and losing, celebrating everything – that first goal, that first pass, whatever it is,” says Pohlman.

The self-confidence developed at an early age from those small, personal wins helps young people weather bigger challenges as they get older.

“As kids get older, there’s more anxiety added to their lives. There’s more stress, more doubts that creep in. A big benefit from sports is this idea that they can achieve things,” says Pohlman.

Academic benefits

Despite old stereotypes that pit athletics against academics, “Studies show that kids who participate in sports do have higher cognitive skills. They have higher GPAs, higher college attendance rates, and lower drug and alcohol use,” says Pohlman. Better academic outcomes can be tied in part to the physical benefits – healthy kids miss less school, and it’s easier to concentrate when you feel good.

“Our brains just need our bodies to move,” says Wyner. As someone who teaches both on the field and in the classroom, she notices that sports support academics.

“Kids who are active tend to have more core strength, and that helps students sit up straighter and focus better,” she says.

And there’s one more important connection.

“Sports teach kids a work ethic. They learn pretty quickly if you show up to practice, you get better. They realize there’s really a connection between the amount of work you put in and your improvement. This idea translates directly back to a classroom,” says Pohlman.



Spending positive time together and cheering each other on are just a few of the benefits of sports. Photo: Janeen Sorensen

Sports drawbacks

There can be too much of a good thing, though.

“We want well-rounded children. The physical side, the social side, the academic side, it’s all important and it all weaves together to create a happy, healthy child,” says Wyner. Losing sight of that balance explains the growing incidence of athletic injuries from overtraining and early specialization. “I think every PE teacher would recommend that their students participate in a variety of sports to build up their whole body and just to see what they like, rather than pigeonholing them when they’re very young.”

As someone who played basketball at the college level, PE teacher and varsity basketball coach Tyler Mendezona is all for playing competitively and training hard. But he also knows the importance of keeping perspective.

“There are no 9-year-olds who have ever signed a professional contract. There are no middle schoolers who are world-renowned all-star players. For any athlete, whether it’s a kiddo or a professional, understanding rest and recovery is super important,” he says.

When children are driven, it falls on the parents to maintain balance. “If they’re falling behind in school or maybe they’re doing great but they’re up every night until 2 a.m. doing homework because their sports go to 9 p.m., they’re not always going to like it. But as parents we can see when that stress is starting to bubble up or when it becomes an unhealthy obsession,” says Mendezona.

At the same time, the benefits of sports are too big to let kids opt out of athletics entirely. Modeling an active lifestyle is helpful, and “There’s nothing wrong with guiding and encouraging,” says Wyner. Kids may be reluctant to play because they are nervous or burned out, but they often find joy in the sport once they connect with their teammates or play with less pressure from themselves or adults.

Sometimes, it’s just the wrong sport. If a child isn’t enjoying it, it’s okay to let them quit (<https://www.parentmap.com/article/why-its-okay-let-your-kids-quit-sports-which-they-excel>). Kids can’t try lots of different sports without letting go of some of them.

“Leave space for something better ahead. If your child is not happy, let them find another passion,” says Wyner.

So when does a child need a nudge to continue, and when should we let them move on to something else? When is it okay to specialize and how much practice is too much? The answers are different for every child.

“We know our kids. If we just step back and read our kids, we’ll most likely be able to make the best decision for them regarding sports,” says Mendezona.

Playing safe

Good coaching can go a long way to preventing the pitfalls of high-pressure youth sports, so choosing your league and your coach is important. Wyner recommends, “Intentionally write out your family’s values and what you hope your child will get from the experience and then purposefully pick the activity and organization that matches those values.”

Whatever other values your family holds, Mendezona says it’s important to “Find an organization that invests in their coaches and find coaches that care more about your kid than winning or losing.” Coaches who know how to teach fundamental skills will help your child grow as an athlete and avoid injury. “If we’re doing all the things

that build character through the sport, then the wins will take care of themselves.”

Pohlman’s advice is even more basic. “Is my kid coming home happy and do they want to go back? We know that if kids don’t have fun they won’t want to play again. Even if we’ve won, we’ve lost if the kids don’t want to come back and play next year.”

All three agree about the most important thing that parents can do to contribute to their child’s success and enjoyment in youth sports: Tell them, “I love watching you play,” regardless of whether their team won or your child played well. Even if your child sat on the bench, you can say, “I loved watching you support your team.”

“Knowing that you love watching them do the thing that they do goes so much farther than any instruction that you can give,” says Mendezona. That unconditional support is part of what Pohlman describes as the biggest, most overlooked benefit of youth sports.

“Sports are fun. They bring so much joy to kids and families and communities.”

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