

Organized Sports and Young Children



Parents often wonder if organized sports offer a safe way for their preschoolers to be active. Some doctors and psychologists feel that young children can benefit from well-planned sports classes offered by park districts and other groups. Others think that it's healthier for a child to have a lot of active free play and "family time" instead—hiking, sledding, playing catch. Here are some questions to ask before you enroll your preschooler in a sports program.

Is the program a good match for my child?

- Consider your child's interests and abilities. Does he enjoy playing games with large groups of children? Does he show any interest in sports? Can he run, kick, or throw yet?
- Look for a class that promotes skill development, safety, and fun rather than rules and competition: "Everyone plays. Everyone is a winner."
- See if instructors use a "show and tell and try it" approach: modeling what to do, telling when and how to do it, then letting children practice. Doctors suggest a format with up to 15-20 minutes of structured activity and 30 minutes of playtime to explore a wide range of movements.
- Keep in mind that a child won't excel in a sport just because she learns its skills and rules early in life. Her bones and muscles may not be ready for what a sport demands. She may become seriously injured if she plays sports by rules meant for older children.

Is the program committed to safety?

- Find out if staff members are trained in first aid and CPR. Accidents can happen any time children are physically active.
- Notice whether instructors have children warm up, keep moving, and cool down. Uneven activity—waiting a long time to run, catch, or kick a ball, and then exerting a lot of energy all at once—can lead to cramps or muscle strains. Be sure children are allowed plenty of water to avoid dehydration, especially in hot weather.
- Keep in mind that contact sports are dangerous for young children. Safety gear cannot give enough protection against injuries when children play adult-style basketball, football, soccer, or hockey.

Do the adult leaders know children as well as they know sports?

- Ask program leaders about their philosophy, training, and credentials. Do they seem to be aware of preschoolers' physical development and abilities?
- Watch the staff in action. Are they patient with the children? Do they keep children engaged while waiting for a turn?
- Notice if instructors model ways to encourage without pushing a child too hard. Scolding and yelling take the fun out of games and will not make a child learn faster or play better!

For related Web resources, see "Organized Sports and Young Children" at <http://illinoisearlylearning.org/tips.htm>.

Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this tip sheet are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Illinois State Board of Education.



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