

Forcing kids to participate in sports may cause them to quit

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My enthusiasm for playing basketball peaked somewhere around the age of seven or eight when I realized I sucked.

Still, it greatly outlasted any passion I may have held for baseball — I never could get bat and ball to connect. The only sport I could ever wrap my head around was golf, my zeal for

which was somehow not diminished the day I was nearly run over by a golf cart.

These were the three sports my parents encouraged me to dabble in as a child. I was lucky my parents didn't make a push for, say, soccer or something equally dreadful, and luckier still that they weren't the kind of people for whom athletic prowess was the be-all, end-all talent their child might possess.

But not all children can be so fortunate. A staggering amount of kids participate in some form of organized sports. Depending on which studies you believe, the number hovers somewhere between

21.5 million and 28.7 million, which doesn't count the millions more who participate in non-organized sports. According to a study published in "ESPN the Magazine" this summer, 60 percent of boys and 47 percent of girls play on a team by age 6.

Organized sports can serve a huge purpose in developing social skills in young children, and they promote the kind of healthy, active lifestyle which could combat rising childhood obesity statistics.

But when sports become a catch-all expectation for children, it becomes clear parents need to work closely with their kids to make sure the experience won't be damaging.

It can be difficult to match kids up with the activity they find most engaging. In the same study, 45 percent of the children surveyed had already quit the sport in which they were involved. More often than not, the same line of reasoning held sway for both boys and girls: "I was not having fun."

Combine the statistics for not getting along with other teammates and feeling inadequate in ability and these complaints come in at a pretty close second.

Sports can be monumentally stressful for young children. Their parents cast them out on to a field or an asphalt court in the sweltering heat to compete with a group of strangers. The coach divides them into teams, and suddenly one half of the group

puts pressure on them to win while the other taunts them, telling them they will surely lose. The parents, meanwhile, may be on the sideline getting belligerent, knowing trophies and medals make good currency for proving their parenting prowess.

That last part didn't hold true for me. My parents weren't the type to measure my worth in awards. They also recognized fear of public failure racked me with anxiety and made team sports a bad fit. When I was in the fourth grade, I gave golf lessons a shot, with their encouragement.

Not being tied to a team allowed me to develop my skills and recognize my flaws on my own time, separate from taunts and jeers or pressure from coaches and parents. More importantly, it let me have fun. When parents realize their children may not be right for the typical fare of basketball, baseball and soccer, they can guide them to other activities like golf, tennis or swimming which give them all the benefits of organized sports with none of the worries.

Sports have become more and more ubiquitous and more and more necessary as children find themselves enticed with the lures of the PlayStation 4 or the iPad. Kids need to find physical activity to balance out all the time spent on Angry Birds. But parents need to help their children find the right sport, lest they buckle under anxiety and reject the concept altogether.

DADDY

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"Oh, OK," she said. "I was just wondering."

I turned back around, my eyes widening in horror. While I remained busy confirming my relationship to him and trying to hide my embarrassment, my father drifted off the bleachers and onto the actual court. Although he stayed behind the line that denoted out of bounds and closer to the bleachers, he still removed himself from the "I'm a supportive parent" category and into the "I'm that parent. No wait, I'm the coach" fiasco.

I hung my head and watched the game through my fingers for the rest of the game. I felt worse for Brianna than I did for myself. She probably had to deal with this every game and I was just getting a taste of what she put up with every week.

After the game, we met my sister outside the gymnasium and she gave me the exact same look that my mother gave me.

"Did you hear him?" she asked me.

"How could you not?" I replied.

"Now you see what I have to deal with," she said.

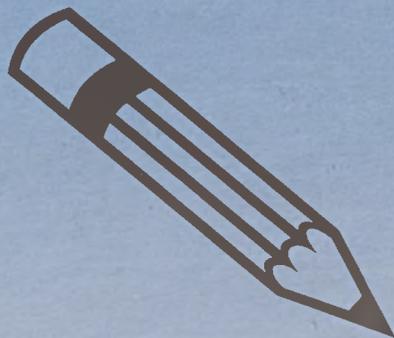
"Yeah, sorry about that."

For an hour or so, my dad thought he was Coach K., leading Michael Jordan to another record break-

ing championship. In reality, he was just a normal parent cheering on a normal child. She didn't play basketball to make it to the WNBA or the Olympics, but just because she loved the game. Shouldn't that be the reason we cheer?

Needless to say, my sister quit playing basketball a year later. Although she said her reasons stemmed from her teammates and coaches, which I believe, I also think she got tired of my father yelling at her and her teammates the entire game. I think the embarrassment just got too heavy to handle. And, to be honest, I don't blame her.

See, I love my dad, I really do. But that just ain't right.



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