

THE APPROPRIATE NUMBER OF PRACTICES

BY DANIEL GOULD, PHD, INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF YOUTH SPORTS-MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

Q: I sit on the board of our local soccer league and we are presently debating whether our youngest participants (ages 5 to 7) should be limited to one practice and one game per week. Some teams have been practicing 2 to 3 times per week and those teams win by a wide margin. However, a number of parents complain that with so many practices children have little time for other sports and activities such as music and scouts. What would the experts recommend regarding the appropriate number of practices and games for children of this age?

A: First off, it is not surprising that teams that are practicing two to three times per week are winning most of the games. Children just learning a sport have so many skills to develop, and, other things being equal, the more they practice a sport the better they will get. However, many experts would question whether we should be interested in winning and losing at this age. Studies have shown that most 5 to 7 year old children do not have the mental capacity to compete in the adult sense. Moreover, elite athlete research shows that in the early years, top athletes and their parents focused on having an active lifestyle, having fun and fundamentals in a variety of sports, and not winning or producing future champions. So, fun and involvement should be the primary focus.

We also know that it is important for children to participate in and sample a variety of sports and activities when they are young. For optimal motor development we want them to play different sports (and develop different skills—soccer for lower body coordination, baseball or softball for eye-hand coordination). In essence, they need to develop a base of what experts call “fundamental motor skills” such as jumping, running, throwing, and kicking. If they focus all of their attention on one sport (in this case soccer), they won’t have the chance to optimally develop.

Another reason we want children to sample a variety of sports is the fact that to pursue a sport further takes considerable internal or intrinsic motivation, so they must find the sport that is right for them. For example, one of my sons showed promise as a swimmer and had considerable success. However, he did not fall in love with swimming and did not pursue the sport beyond his early years. It was basketball that he fell in love with and pursued. If we focused all his attention on swimming instead of multiple sports, it would have been a mistake, as he did not have the intrinsic motivation to pursue it.

As parents, we also want to be careful not to over schedule our children’s lives either by having them participate in the same sport all the time or by doing multiple activities every night. Remember, kids not only need structured sport and recreational activities, but also free playtime. They (and probably you as a parent) are at risk of stress and burnout if they are overscheduled with little time off.

In summary, having one practice and game per week would be the policy most youth sports experts would suggest for 5 to 7 year old participants, with little emphasis on keeping score and league standings. The focus should be on fun and fundamentals in a variety of sports and increasing their physical activity levels, not keeping score and winning. Later, as the children mature and are developmentally ready, a more intense practice and game regimen is appropriate.