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Special Feature

Betting a Childhood on Sports

Ask children to draw pictures of themselves as adults and the odds are that you will get back a picture of someone in a sports uniform. Sports and the people who play them are powerful influences in the lives of children. The focus on sports as a recreational past time and as an adult profession is often encouraged by parent involvement at games and by the presents that kids ask for and receive at birthdays and holidays. Jerseys, equipment and trading cards often top many gift lists.

Though these fantasies and activities are normal, too much focus on sports can leave kids with a singular identity and at risk of serious difficulties in high school or college when their sports goals do not materialize. Kids who find acceptance and purpose with sports at young ages may find themselves completely lost and adrift when they, like 99.9% of all other student athletes, fail to find employment as a sports professional.

Dr. Shawn Byler, a sport psychology consultant in Atlanta, Georgia, often works with kids (9 and up) whose lives have become too entangled with sports activities. She observes, "Kids want approval from their parents. If early on they struggle with schoolwork but excel in sports, they will naturally spend more time in sports related activities and less in academic efforts. Unfortunately, many of these kids are then poorly prepared for life after high school."

Kids who identify themselves as athletes will have a difficult time when their time in sports comes to an end. Like adults who have a singular identity, the end of that identity can have disastrous consequences. Dr. Byler warns: "Like an adult who has spent a fair amount of his/her life saying 'I am a (fill in the blank)', a child who has grown up saying 'I am a baseball player' will have no clear sense of identity or self worth when that chapter comes to a close. Adults and kids are then at their most vulnerable when they lose their identity with much higher risks of problems with depression, drugs, alcohol and a whole host of other challenges."

How do parents know if their child is at risk of these problems later on? Dr. Byler counsels "Parents should be alert for kids whose lives are out of balance. Focusing on sports to the detriment of academics, family and other diversified activities are clear danger signs. If a child's friends and social standing derive in large part from their sports activities, then that child is at risk. Parents can ask themselves how often they are inquiring about their child's sport outside of practice or competition time. Allowing the child to leave the sport at the gym or field is a step in the right direction"

Some warning signs parent should be alert to are:

- Family schedules that are dominated by sports events
- College discussions focused on sports programs or possible athletic scholarships
- Academics and homework have a lower priority than athletic training
- All of a child's friends are also teammates
- Kids who focus on just one sport prior to the age of 14
- Kids who answer "I am a _____ player" to a question of who they are.

Parents can get ahead of the problem if they understand it and catch it early enough. Dr. Byler tells parents to help their child separate roles from identity. For example, kids always have several roles such as athlete, student, son/daughter, sibling, friend and citizen. Parents can help their child identify each of these roles and understand their plans for success in each. Then if their actions in one role are not successful, kids will still have other areas in which to feel positive. Parents can help kids transition to multiple roles by:

- Stressing schoolwork
- Exposing their child to more than just sports activities
- Encouraging friendships with non-athletes
- Helping children see themselves as successful in other areas

It is not necessary that parents crush the pro-athlete dreams of kids. However, it is important that parents talk to their children about how they would be proud of their child in other careers as well.

Helping kids identify their multiple roles can have immediate benefits Dr. Byler states. "When kids identify themselves in only one role, a failure can seem more catastrophic than it really is. For example, if children see themselves as a baseball player but then fail to catch a fly ball that costs the game, that error may hurt more than it should, impacting not only their non-baseball life but also interfering with their performance in future games. Failure is an important learning tool, but only if kids can get past those failures, and use them as building blocks to success"

Dr Byler goes on: "It is important with kids that they stay in the present. Too often, kids will punish themselves for days or weeks for a bad play. They may live in the memory of that mistake or the fear of making another one. Only when kids' lives are balanced are they able to handle mistakes and put them in the proper perspective."

Though youth sports offer tremendous advantages for kids, an overemphasis of sports can put kids at serious risk as they transition to adulthood. The odds are extremely slim that a child plays college or professional sports. When parents or kids bet a childhood on this unlikely outcome, they risk not only the loss of a career but also they lose the opportunity to develop a skill set for dealing with life.

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