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Youth Athlete Success Starts with Free Play

By Katie Santos, with Claudia Moose, Certified Pilates Instructor, Athletic Trainer

When we play as children, we establish the basic neural connections needed to teach our muscles stability, reactivity, co-ordination, control, and most important, deceleration. High-level and even weekend athletes are injuries waiting to happen without this basic learning.

As a society our movement has changed drastically in the last 20 years. Those of us who are adults now, grew up, for the most part, playing outdoors, riding our bikes and playing games. During such free, unstructured play without regimented competition, we learn "proprioception," the ability to know where we are in space.

When we are young, that free play allows us to learn how to fall, recover or arrest a fall. When we feel free to just move, we connect with our bodies not only on a physical level, but we learn to trust those bodies on an emotional level as well. We find out what movement is comfortable in our bodies and it may not necessarily be the sport that is available or that parents feel we should play.

Learning to trust that innate intuition builds self-esteem that we need. Awareness of movement response brings a lifelong connection with our bodies that promotes health and physical longevity. Without that connection, however, movement can become dysfunctional and we may become injured.

Athletics in general discourage that connection. Athletes, invited to work through the pain, often come back too soon and "take one" for the team. When that happens, our identity as an athlete is compromised; fear and uncertainty can creep in.

We live in a fairly enlightened community as far as health and fitness are concerned. Many families have resources that allow children to participate in high-level sports. But often parent perception of child exercise requirements seem to involve only organized sports. We are doing our children a great disservice when this occurs.

We as parents and coaches need to make fundamental changes in the way we encourage our kids to move, starting with the following:

1. Encourage what we call "free play" by doing what we did as kids. Set up your yard to play games like hopscotch, red light - green light, freeze tag, dodge ball, jump rope, Hula Hoop, and others. Don't sell these games short. This is a cost effective way to teach a child movement.

2. Be mindful of year-round single sports. A "periodization" method of conditioning -- a year-round plan that focuses training development in phases -- should be incorporated in all athletic conditioning. A well-rounded periodization training includes scheduled rest and "off season" activities that are different but complimentary to the athlete's sport. Use basic conditioning including the games mentioned above during "off" season.

3. Be careful of specialized sport acceleration programs as they often foster more and more ballistic and unsafe movements, and increase the likelihood of injury.

4. Be aware of your child's coach's abilities. The lowest level athlete often gets the same level coach. While coaches generally mean well, a lack of education, expertise and awareness coupled with a competitive spirit, can put your child at tremendous risk of injury. Look for high-level programs with educated coaches who know that they don't know it all.

These recommendations are an essential part of a child's health, and critical to

safe participation in youth sports.

About the authors --

Santos and Moose, along with Louise McMenamin, co-own Absolute Center, a Lafayette-based fitness studio that focuses on "Reconditioning," an integration of resistance, Pilates, yoga, and other modalities to return your body to a balanced and fully-functioning system.

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