

For kids, it's more than just a game

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A cohesive team environment, assessing one's own performance rather than comparing with others, and involvement in enjoyably challenging practices are the main conditions needed for children to have a positive developmental experience playing team sports.

"There's a lot more to sport than the idea of winning and losing and developing physical skills," explains Jean Côté, head of the School of Kinesiology and Health Studies and a youth sport and coaching expert. "Under the right conditions, youth sport can help children develop transferrable personal and social skills—citizenship qualities that they'll retain throughout their lives."

Dr. Côté found that for children between the ages of nine and 19, positive experiences were associated with coaches who created an inclusive, cohesive team environment where the team engaged in social activities outside of sport and all participants were equally valued on the field.

Coaches who were able to help children improve against their own benchmarks rather than focusing on comparison with others, and who provided challenging, innovative practices also helped foster an environment in which young players displayed initiative and motivation.

Athletes who compete in sports where they peak at a young age, such as diving and gymnastics, tend to have a more demanding, structured form of coaching, a higher rate of injury, and a higher rate of drop-out. These also tend to be sports that people rarely continue to enjoy recreationally

into adulthood.

Other sports, such as soccer, baseball and hockey, don't require athletes to specialize early on since they continue to develop and reach their peak in adulthood.

"Other research we've conducted suggests that kids don't necessarily need lots of pressure early on to become elite," explains Dr. Côté. "If you create a coaching environment where the kids are happy and passionate they'll continue to be involved and develop their skills. If you burn kids out at a very early age, you might be left with a small group of technically gifted [kids](#), but you may also waste talent in the process."

Provided by Queen's University

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