

# Sports talent programs could be harmful for children's long-term psychological wellbeing

January 8 2021, by Richard Buscombe

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Credit: Budgeron Bach from Pexels

Given the profit top sportspeople can make from being successful, it's no wonder significant time, research, and money continues to be invested in programs that aim to [identify and develop future elite athletes](#). These

talent programs seek to discover young people who have an aptitude for sport by having them complete a series of physical, technical and psychological tests. But the young age of people who start these programs has raised concerns about the potential long-term impact they could have on the [children's psychological wellbeing](#).

It's thought by some coaches, parents and sports administrators that specializing in a specific sport [early in childhood](#) is necessary to achieve elite levels of success. This is why some talent identification programs have a child specialize in a specific sport at a young age—sometimes as young as six or seven years old.

Depending on how early an intense commitment needs to be made, programs are split into "early" or "late" specialization. In many sports such as rugby, peak performance normally occurs [between 20 and 30](#). In sports such as gymnastics and diving, the age an [athlete peaks occurs earlier](#) (usually late-teens or early 20s), so athletes may need to specialize in these sports at a very young age.

However, the choice to specialize in one sport is seldom decided solely by the child. Often, it's influenced by parents and coaches who encourage the child to specialize early in the belief that this is the best route to success.

Early specialization carries [greater risk for athletes](#), with links to burnout, injury and dropout. An intense investment in sport at an early age may also impact on a child's identity development, which is a key part of psychological development as they grow up. For example, if a child doesn't have other hobbies or doesn't try new activities, it can make them feel like their identity is solely tied to the sport they specialize in.

If an young person's identity is tied to a single, narrow perception of themselves, they also run the risk of having their sense of self disrupted

when this identity is challenged—say through injury, underperformance, or retirement. This could have significant consequences on their confidence, mental health and wellbeing.

In short, having a child specialize in one sport early can limit their identity development—subsequently leading to poor psychological wellbeing. This is why there have been recent calls for talent identification programs to either be suspended outright or at least [delayed until adolescence](#).

This delay will give a young [athlete](#) more time to develop identities outside of their sport. It's also thought that a delayed, varied approach—where young athletes can try a range of different sports—is more likely to [produce elite performers](#) in the long run.

## **Duty of care**

Currently, the Rugby Football Union has set out tight controls limiting how much time players can spend on the pitch depending on their age—and when seasons start and end. These stipulations are laid out to ensure young players don't over-train or over-compete at an early. This control measure gives players the summer months and more time in a week to engage in other activities. But more sports need to follow suit.

The 2017 [Duty of Care in Sport](#) report commissioned by the UK government called for all national governing bodies to adopt a duty of care policy. The report set out recommendations to ensure that athletes are supported during and after their career. These include providing athletes of all ages with greater mental health support during their career and leading in to retirement.

But the report doesn't make specific mention of the ethics around these talent identification programs. Nor does the report discuss the need to

encourage young athletes to sample multiple sports rather than specialize, and the importance of allowing them to transfer out of the sport if they wish. This is where national governing bodies need to do more work in educating people about the potential harm of early specialization programs.

Parents and coaches will also play an important role in the future to ensure children aren't being coerced into specializing, and that they have the space to explore other hobbies, talents and identities.

Despite the significant investment in these programs, we remain no closer to agreeing on a set of criteria that might predict talent—such as which body type or psychological characteristics might predict success. If these programs are to continue, more needs to be done by national governing bodies, coaches and parents to ensure children are able to explore more than just one [identity](#) as they grow up to promote long-term psychological wellbeing.

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