

## Institute for Marital Healing

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# Sports and the Catholic Family

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Participation in athletic activities and playing on sports teams has been viewed as contributing in positive manner to the character development of children. However, a remarkable change has occurred over the past 20 years in regard to the degree of involvement on sports teams by children. Today, many children are under extreme pressures from both coaches and parents to commit themselves to give an unprecedented amount of time and effort to participation in team sports, including those teams which travel regularly on weekends and during the summer.

One coach commented that some children now play up to 80 baseball games over the course of a summer, including playing in double headers and in repeated weekend tournaments. This significant change in regard to children's and families' relationship with sports has damaged marriages, family life and the ability of a large number of children to enjoy sports as a pleasant, relaxing childhood activity. Mark Hyman's book, *"Until It Hurts: America's Obsession with Youth Sports and How It Harms Our Kids"* and Michael Sokolove's book, *Warrior Girls: Protecting Our Daughters Against the Injury Epidemic in Women's Sports* are important contributions to understanding this serious problem.

### The development of the sports obsession

A review of Sokolove's book in the *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, August 2009, stated that he " provides a pertinent description of the changes in American lifestyle that set the stage for accelerating youth and collegiate sports into an adult-driven professionalized institution. As key factors in this transformation, Sokolove cites the rise of organized sports and decline of neighborhood play, higher rates of parental anxiety about their children's safety and happiness, and corporate greed. These pressures combine, Sokolove states, to lead parents and coaches to start children in sports too early in life, train them too hard, and push them to specialize prematurely in one sport. Sokolove describes girls who feel they must specialize in soccer before the age of 10 and play up to five full soccer games in weekend tournaments for their travel teams in their adolescence just to be in contention for college scholarships. He portrays the parents of children as helplessly seduced by the pressures of the youth sport culture and powerless to intervene on their children's behalf out of fear that they may interfere with their athletic potential and collegiate hopes. Sadly, as children train harder and more frequently, all youth sport athletes become

vulnerable to exhaustion and injury."

### **Benefits from sports**

There are numerous benefits for children as a result of participating in athletic activities and they include:

- health benefits from exercising 3 to 4 hours per week
- learning team play
- learning to sacrifice for others
- learning discipline and self-denial
- growth in numerous virtues
- positive experiences with a coach who can be good role models.

### **Damage to children from excessive focus on sports**

In our clinical work we are seeing serious emotional conflicts in children as a result of their parents obsession with their athletic activities. These include:

- sadness and anger
- a belief that sports is more important than the parents, siblings, the family
- growth in selfishness
- unhealthily focus upon the athlete as the primary role model
- belief that it is the major source of confidence
- the development of the distorted and inaccurate thinking that one's self-esteem is based primarily upon performance
- harm to relationships with siblings and friends
- excessive competitiveness leading to a lack of solidarity
- loss of a sense of sports as a pleasurable activity
- deprivation of the numerous psychological benefits of family dinners and vacations
- leads children to feel that the only way they can please/receive approval from parents is through success in sports
- lack of sensitive to siblings and friends
- orthopedic problems from overuse
- poor academic performance
- "burnout" from excessive athletic activities in grade school
- damage to the confidence of children who are not good athletes
- difficulty enjoying sports pick up games because peers are overly committed in planned sports.

## **Damage to marriages and families from excessive focus on sports and from traveling sports teams**

The increased excessive focus in family life upon children's athletic activities is creating a number of very serious conflicts in Catholic marriages. These include:

- **marital conflict because of lack of priorities and balance in married life**
- **lack of quality time for the marital friendship**
- **loneliness, depression and anger, particularly in the wife**
- **increase selfishness and a permissive parenting style in the sports obsessed parent**
- **excessive focus upon sports of children as a way to socialize with other adults and to find friendships**
- **too little time for the couple to be together on a weekend**
- **loss a sense of Sunday as a special day for the family and for the Lord.**

## **Parents' negative behaviors at sporting events**

Immature, overly critical and angry parental behaviors at children's athletic activities have been widely reported in the media and have even included acts of serious violence. These parental conflicts include:

- **excessive anger toward coaches and children**
- **belittling child's performance**
- **immature behaviors with cursing**
- **disruption of games**
- **use sports as a way to vent their anger.**

## **Parental actions to protect children, marriages and families**

Parents, particularly fathers, need to take steps to protect the culture from its present obsession with sports. These actions could include:

- **working as a couple to establish healthy family priorities with God first, the marriage second and then the children**
- **communicating to sons that male confidence is the result of developing a healthy personality primarily through growth in virtues**
- **establishing as a Sunday as a day for the family and for the Lord, not for sports (See John Paul II's apostolic exhortation, *Dies Domini*)**
- **the husband placing the protection of his wife from loneliness as being more important than a child's participation in team sports**
- **never permitting a child to play more than one game a day**
- **prohibiting early specialization and overtraining**
- **allowing participation in only one sports team at a time**

- **prohibiting participation in traveling sports teams**
- **warning children of the dangers of excessive competitiveness and its associated pride**
- **communicating to children how excessive sports can harm the family and the child**
- **acting in a mature and positive manner at sporting events**
- **explaining that the purpose of sports is for the child's enjoyment and for the development of character/virtue and that winning is not essential**
- **correcting coaches who are overly angry or aggressive**
- **presenting healthy role models to children**
- **not allowing coaches to intimate or control them**
- never criticizing a child's athletic performance
- letting go of a possible obsession with sports, body image and a craving for youthfulness
- **encouraging the development of creativity in children by setting aside a significant amount of down time for the kids**
- recognizing that one should not try to live out childhood dreams for athletic success through one's children.

## **Reasons for parental obsession with sports**

The reasons why parents enable the obsession with sports in the family include:

- **a father's preoccupation with sports as a major way to relax in his life**
- **excessive reliance upon sports as a source of happiness and strength, particularly in males**
- **avoidance of the home in men as the result of growing up with a controlling mother or divorce trauma**
- **insecurities in the father who was not as successful as he wanted to be in team sports when he was young**
- **excessive competitiveness and pride**
- **the false belief in fathers and children that success in sports is the major source of male strength and confidence**
- **the failure of parents to realize the importance of character development, self-giving and faith in building confidence in children**
- **loneliness with a reliance upon participation in a athletic activities in children to seek other adult friendships**
- **parental fears of correcting children and teaching them the benefits of prudence and self-denial as a result of only having two children**
- **hopes for a college scholarship**

- **weakness in confidence in dealing with pressure from coaches, schools or other parents**
- **a certain lack of fulfillment in fatherhood as the result of only having two children rather than at least four of five children which was the tradition in Catholic families prior to the contraceptive era**
- **a lack of fulfillment in fatherhood as a result of failing to be a strong and confident spiritual leader in the family**
- permissive, pleasure seeking parenting styles.

## **Coaches**

Coaches can play an important role in the overall athletic and character development of children and teenagers. Positive, mature male coaches have been particularly helpful to the development of confidence in young males who suffer from the absence of a father in the home or from a distant or critical father. However, an obsession with winning and emotional overreactions in coaches can be very harmful.

Coaches can help with excessive and damaging focus on sports in children and teenagers today in a number of ways including:

- **not being obsessed with winning but rather with developing good character**
- **discourage early specialization**
- **not using players for one's own goals**
- **not expecting kids to practice 12 months per year for a particular sport**
- **correcting selfishness**
- **discourage overtraining**
- **controlling one's anger and avoiding yelling at players**
- **demanding respect**
- **not depending on winning for one's confidence**
- **giving kids a reasonably balanced schedule**
- **setting reasonable schedules**
- **NEVER playing more than one game per day**
- **not scheduling practices or games at the dinner hour or on Sundays when possible**
- **not supporting the "anything to win" philosophy**
- **trying to be a mature role model.**

## **Boys who don't play sports**

Boys who do not play sports often experience significant peer rejection in a culture that places excessive emphasis upon athletic success as a sign of true masculinity. These boys often have strong feelings of loneliness and sadness, few male friends, weak male confidence and resentment toward males who were insensitive to them. These boys can develop same sex attractions in an unconscious attempt to gain the male acceptance that was missing in their male peer relationships.

These males benefit from special attention from their parents, especially their fathers. A challenge here is that fathers tend to be confident bonding with their sons primarily through athletic activities. Many fathers often have difficulty knowing how to be close to their sons who do not show an interest in sports. A common error fathers make with sons who lack eye hand coordination is to attempt to force them to play sports. Many boys simply lack the ability to learn the skills needed for baseball, basketball, soccer or football.

Fathers can bond with such sons in a number of ways including hiking, fishing, hunting, playing chess, and walking. They can also identify and discuss topics of interest to their sons. In addition, these boys also benefit from their fathers helping them to grow in an awareness of their special God-given gifts that is essential in building male confidence.

Fathers are often limited in their giving to boys who don't play sports for some of the following reasons:

- **lack of self-knowledge that they modeled after fathers who had difficulty in positive emotional self-giving**
- **a father's unresolved anger with his father which he misdirects at his son**
- **a father's obsession with sports as a way to strengthen his male confidence**
- **weak male confidence in the father**
- **selfishness in the father**
- **lack of balance in the father's life.**

Parents can help these boys and teenagers by criticizing the prevailing cultural view that sports and the body image are the most important measures of masculinity. They should present the traditional Western civilization opinion that healthy masculinity is the result of a daily commitment to grow in virtue so that one can develop a strong character or personality. Males in particular need to hear from their parents that the acquisition of virtues and faith will make you much stronger in your life than the muscle building.

We have found that the health and confidence of male who don't play sports can be protected by:

- improving the quality father-son time together in non athletic activities
- identifying with positive character traits of the father and other male family members
- working on good male friendships
- exercising to improve body image
- discussing the role of the male as being a protective spouse and father, not an athlete
- not being obsessed with one's body
- forgiving those who damaged male confidence
- downplay the importance of sports in regard to healthy masculinity
- not feminizing a boy or enabling excessive play with girls or girls' toys, such as dolls.

The role of faith can also be of benefit when appropriate in the following ways:

- recognizing that one is a child of God with a specific mission (see [The Purpose-Driven Life and The Virtue Driven Life](#))
- being thankful for one's God-given body and gifts.
- meditating upon asking the Lord to help one feel confident and safe in trustworthy male friendships
- meditating upon the Lord as a good friend
- asking the Lord to protect male confidence and to see oneself as God sees him
- thinking one is powerless over all the anger with those who rejected him and turning it over to God.

Many of these boys can act in an impulsive, angry or even explosive manner at times as a result of their peer rejection pain of sadness and insecurity. A number of these boys are surprised by the depth of their resentment, including at times anger with God for not giving them eye-hand coordination. Their resentment is often misdirected at siblings and the mother. Growth in forgiveness and in a greater appreciation of their special God-given gifts can diminish this anger. Also, the sacrament of reconciliation is helpful in resolving such strong resentment.

### **The Right Balance**

A father of a large, young Catholic family related to me, "I can assure you that classical team sports, in the most modern sense of the term, will not happen in our home. We value family over that amount of busyness and, at times, craziness and cannot bend our lives around a sports schedule. That said, we go to extra efforts to provide sports experiences with other likeminded families. Such efforts have included both team and

individual sports: a season of kickball, a season of baseball children of all ages can play, so the family is not segregated, and running."

There is every reason to be hopeful that Catholic families can grow in wisdom and in prudence so that their children can enjoy the numerous benefits of balanced athletic activities without becoming obsessed or controlled by them. However, parents need to be careful that excessive team sports participation in their children lives does not interfere with the time necessary to maintain healthy friendships, the marital friendship, a healthy family life and the healthy psychological and spiritual development of their children.

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