

Avoid Playing Up

Main article by Dr. Richard D. Ginsburg, Ph.D., Co-Director, MGH Sports Psychology Program and Paces Institute

Your daughter just turned eight. She's been playing lacrosse for a year now and every time she plays, she is the best player on the field. The U11 coach suggests that she moves up to play for her team. Your son is a very tall and strong 12-year-old boy who plays midfield. The coach from the travel team says that if your son wants to be serious about lacrosse, he should strongly consider playing at the U15 level where he can play with more talented players and experienced coaches.

When we hear that our child is "special" or "talented," it can stir a broad range of emotions. "Wow, my kid is really special! ... of course she is; we've got great genes!" "Maybe my child really has the potential to play at the college level." These thoughts and ambitions for our children can be very powerful and even seductive at times. Our child's sport success can validate us as parents in some primal fashion while also offer for child an even brighter and more accomplished career in sports than we had, from which we take pleasure. And, it can be simply a joy to see our children embrace their sport accomplishments.

Playing up can also generate concerns such as: "I worry that she or he might get hurt." Or, "I worry that he is not ready to be exposed to older kids? Maybe the older kids will invite my son to parties where there is alcohol, and he's not ready for that." Based on these various perspectives, how do we decide what is right for our child?

As a general rule, particularly for prepubescent, elementary school kids, it is extremely important that they develop friendships. As we have discussed in previous newsletters, friendships and competency development (skills of learning the game, etc) are the two most critical objectives of latency (ages 6-12). Playing up often places our children into new groups of older kids. They may see their friends less and feel less connected to what may have been a very supportive social network. In effect, the new and allegedly improved schedule and atmosphere can potentially alienate our kids from their long-standing, critically important friendships.

There are other risks such as burnout and injury. More serious and competitive play for a young athlete has the potential to transform the game from fun to a job. With less fun, there is a risk for burnout. Practice times and game schedules are likely longer and more intense. When our children play with bigger, stronger and faster kids, they are placing greater stress on their developing bodies, increasing the risk for injury. In particular, youth have more growth cartilage than adults, making them more vulnerable for injury. Fusion of bones in the elbows and shoulders can occur in later adolescence, making playing up at a young age, a greater risk for fractures or potential growth impediments.

All of this said, there are still arguments made for playing up. "My child is so big that he might hurt the other kids on his team if he isn't playing up." Or, "I worry my child may quit the game of lacrosse because she is so much better than everyone else, that she is getting bored." Or, "Why wouldn't you give your child a chance to see how good they can be and play for a more demanding program and knowledgeable coach?"

These are compelling statements and may be true for a select few, but given the risks mentioned above, it is generally a safer course to avoid playing up. For those bigger, more talented athletes, staying with their peers and learning how to be the best player and a leader can be a life-long asset for a developing

young person. They can learn how to make others around them better, so that when they are surrounded by better players as they grow older, they are well prepared to be a versatile, team player.

Developing talent is a delicate balance of meeting athletic demands within a strong and supportive environment. In our culture that celebrates a win-at-all cost mentality and the drive for immediate gratification, we may actually be positioning our children to be better and more balanced athletes over time if we keep them engaged in their own peer groups until they reach the high school age when their bodies and minds are more able to handle the greater demands of more competitive play.