

What role do parents play in their children's sport success?

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A recent survey completed in America showed that 82% of parents (who had young children playing sport) believe that to achieve sporting success their children should specialize in one sport before the age of 13. Forty Five percent of these parents believed that one should specialize before the age of 9! What is driving this early specialization trend?

Before we answer this question it is important that we define what early specialization means. Early sport specialization can be defined as intense year round participation in a single sport. The word "intense" is used to highlight that the amount and intensity of training in one sport precludes the child from participating in any other sport. Early specialization in the South African context means that a child would specialize in one sport during their primary school years. Many parents see early specialization helping to ensure sporting success.

There are a number of reasons for this trend of early specialization (we will look at a few of them). The poster boy for this trend is Tiger Woods who at the age of 8 won the 9-10 year old world junior championship. His influence and other child prodigies cannot be underestimated. Are these isolated examples or is there scientific evidence to back early specialization? The scientific evidence shows that there is evidence to the contrary. Good studies conducted in Denmark, England and Germany in various sports show that those children specializing later have more chance of success. The evidence points towards early sampling (experiencing different sports) and late specialization as being the way to go. Early sampling means that children should be allowed to experience different sports activities from a young age (e.g. 5 years old) but only specialize in high school (when they specialize in high school will be sport dependent).

Another factor that has contributed to this trend is the rise of professionalism and business interests in sport. Many sports leagues and academies are now run as business units and they encourage kids to specialize early to increase revenue to ensure youth success. The problem is that kids mature at different rates and that youth success does not ensure adult success. We see so many kids burning out because they compete all year round in one sport with high training volumes from the age of 8/9 and by the age of 13 they are burnt out. The truth is that they will only reach their physiological peak when they are over 18 and therefore need to be managed accordingly.

The role of coaching should not be underestimated. Although early specialization is discouraged, the role of good coaching is critical to success. Children need good coaching from the age of 5 to ensure that they develop the required fundamental movement and sport specific skills. In South Africa we have a problem in that only well resourced schools can afford to employ good coaches. The reality is that physical education was taken out of schools years ago and these teachers were also the coaches for many of the sports activities. Although physical education is now part of life orientation, the reality is there is little

physical education is taking place in under resourced schools. To conclude the latest scientific evidence suggests that you should expose your child to a varied sample of sports from a young age and only specialize if needed in high school.