

Organized Sports and Young Children



Parents often wonder if organized sports offer a safe way for their preschoolers to be active. Some doctors and psychologists feel that young children can benefit from well-planned sports classes offered by park districts and other groups. Others think that it's healthier for a child to have a lot of active free play and "family time" instead—hiking, sledding, playing catch. Here are some questions to ask before you enroll your preschooler in a sports program.

Is the program a good match for my child?

- Consider your child's interests and abilities. Does he enjoy playing games with large groups of children? Does he show any interest in sports? Can he run, kick, or throw yet?
- Look for a class that promotes skill development, safety, and fun rather than rules and competition: "Everyone plays. Everyone is a winner."
- See if instructors use a "show and tell and try it" approach: modeling what to do, telling when and how to do it, then letting children practice.
- Keep in mind that a child won't excel in a sport just because she learns its skills and rules early in life. Her bones and muscles may not be ready for what a sport demands. She may become seriously injured if she plays sports by rules meant for older children.

Is the program committed to safety?

- Find out if staff members are trained in first aid and CPR. Accidents can happen any time children are physically active.
- Notice whether instructors have children warm up, keep moving, and cool down. Uneven activity—waiting a long time to run, catch, or kick a ball, and then exerting a lot of energy all at once—can lead to cramps or muscle strains. Be sure children are allowed plenty of water to avoid dehydration, especially in hot weather.
- Keep in mind that contact sports are dangerous for young children. Safety gear cannot give enough protection against injuries when children play adult-style basketball, football, soccer, or hockey.

Do the adult leaders know children as well as they know sports?

- Ask program leaders about their philosophy, training, and credentials. Do they seem to be aware of preschoolers' physical development and abilities?
- Watch the staff in action. Are they patient with the children? Do they keep children engaged while waiting for a turn?
- Notice if instructors model ways to encourage without pushing a child too hard. Scolding and yelling take the fun out of games and will not make a child learn faster or play better!

Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this tip sheet are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Illinois State Board of Education.



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