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Developmental Readiness and Sports Success

REDUCING PRESSURE IN YOUTH SPORTS BY UNDERSTANDING SPORTS SKILL DEVELOPMENT

If winning isn't everything, why do they keep score? Vince Lombardi.

You are listening to ReachMD XM 157, the channel for medical professionals. Welcome to a special segment on sports medicine. I am Dr. Bill Rutenberg, your host and with me today is Dr. Paul Stricker.

Dr. Stricker practices sports medicine at the Scripts Clinic in San Diego, California. He is the past president of the American Medical Society for Sports Medicine and is a member of the American Academy of Pediatrics Council and Sports Medicine and Fitness. Dr. Stricker was an all American swimmer in college and served as a team physician for the United States Olympic team at the Sydney Olympics. He is the author of the book "Sports Success Rx! Your Child's Prescription for the Best Experience."

Today, we are discussing reducing pressure in youth sports by understanding sports skill development.

Dr. RUTENBERG:

Hi Dr. Stricker. Thanks for joining us on this special segment on sports medicine.

Dr. STRICKER:

Thanks for having me on the show.

Dr. RUTENBERG:

So tell me, how did sports get so out of hand?

Dr. STRICKER:

Oh! I think it is a combination of many years of a change in society plus media plus hype and reality TV where, you know, everybody thinks to have one shot and that is it and so we are kind of distorted what used to be a wonderful definition of success, which was more personal achievement and personal accomplishment and now success really in only the gold medal or first place, which obviously will severely limit most people into very small percentage or category. So what I always challenge people is just how do you define success because too often how we define success may be how we end up defining our children.

Dr. RUTENBERG:

And how would you define success, isn't it like Vince Lombardi said, winning is everything?

Dr. STRICKER:

I think winning is important. We all need to feel that sense of, you know, self achievement, but there is so many ways that you can achieve and accomplish and if you improve on yourself that always a personal winning, but winning is not always a personal success and think we need to remember that. You can have kids who clearly get first place without much effort and then there are kids, who do the best they have ever done in their entire life and still come in 6th place, that is the kid, who still has won and so I think we have to remember winning is a very personal thing and how you define it.

Dr. RUTENBERG:

Which is your decisive moment, was there something that just really made you nuts that you are still going on youth sports that prompted you to write this book?

Dr. STRICKER:

Yeah, I think it was, it was more of an accumulation of things, but it was one of those things where I finally got to the boiling point and would literally lay awake at night going, why do people keep talking about unrealistic expectations and all the pressure on these kids, but nobody is really understanding where it's coming from besides just may be, you know, parents wanting to finish their unfinished business and I started to realize that so many of these kids are pushed and pressured because people think that after potty training, they can just do something if you practice it hard enough and long enough and people know when their kids can sit up and rollover, but they think after that you just practice, practice, practice. So, they are being pushed and I realized that if they don't understand that some of these things are still developing years after that, that they understood that better, may be they would relieve some of the pressure off these kids and themselves.

Dr. RUTENBERG:

You mean there are some developmental milestones when it comes to sports readiness.

Dr. STRICKER:

Yeah, there actually is.

Dr. RUTENBERG:

Could you go through some of those?

Dr. STRICKER:

Sure, I would love to. We always kind of try to do it by general age clusters, so to speak because of course, we all know that there is group of kids that fall within the average range and then there are outliers, who are truly extraordinary and I think what is important is that parents cannot try to make every child like that extraordinary child because that is the one that is just going to be kind of off the scale and if you try too early to put them in that category, it may be a real mistake we try to over push them, so in general the way we try to approach this in that early 2 to 5-year-old group, they really just still learning how to standup without falling down and they don't have a lot of visual maturity and so things like T-Ball are really great because they don't have to move a lot and they can focus on a stationary object. A lot of our mature running scales reach adult levels more by about age 7, where they don't have to think about so much about standing upright and then our mental development, for instance, for complex decision sports really improves after about age 10 and then our aerobic development really takes off after puberty, so we need to think about that there are tracks of developing physically, emotionally, chemically, etc. and those are all things that happen on a sequential basis over time and they can't really be pushed too quickly.

Dr. RUTENBERG:

On my way home from work, I am a pediatrician, I passed the athletic field in my local community and the coaches are out there and they are blowing their whistles and the kids are in their uniforms and everybody is dressed to the hilt, but what kind of parent do or they test of readiness that either the athletic coaches should be administrating or parents may be should be administrating, just like to have some realistic expectations of what their child can actually do?

Dr. STRICKER:

It is an excellent question and I think you know a lot of Eastern European countries have been trying to do that for years and where they will, you know, select out children at shows, certain amounts of promise and talent at early ages and then try to refine that. In the United States, I think part of our way to help is to kind of allow your kids to be exposed to multiple different activities, one just so that they can be well rounded and not super specialized too early, but also so that they can really kind of gravitate towards something that they do find comes relatively easy and most importantly that they enjoy and have fun with, so rather than trying to find the test that, you know, every kid can do and every parent can do to try to find that little needle in the haystack is exposing to lot of activities, let them gravitate towards what they are doing well with and feel that personal self accomplishment with.

Dr. RUTENBERG:

I would like to welcome those who are just joining us on this special segment on sports medicine on ReachMD XM 157, the channel for medical professionals. I am Dr. Bill Rutenberg, your host and with me today is Dr. Paul Stricker, past president of the American Medical Society for Sports Medicine. We are discussing Dr. Stricker's book, "Sports Success Rx! Your Child's Prescription For The Best Experience."

Dr. RUTENBERG:

I was only thinking more in terms of, you know, so a parent does not have an unrealistic expectation or your kid gets up and he strikes out every time, but you know, may be his visual motor integration hasn't developed yet, there is some way that a parent can say, you know, he is ready for this level or say to a coach, you know, you are pushing my child too hard. He has just not reached this point. I remember my kid couldn't build legos until about 6 months after his friends and all of a sudden, he knew how to put them together and it was just developmental.

Dr. STRICKER:

Right, absolutely, and some of that I think will come as more and more people truly understand this kind of sequential development and so when you look at visual development, for instance, if you are trying to work on hitting moving balls or catching moving balls or kicking or whatever, those are things that occur really within its own kind of round visually, then so, you know, 5-year-old, they can focus on that stationary ball, but there and as they move forward, when they are kind of in at 7 or so age range, they do better about moving objects if they are coming right towards them or if they are going right towards it versus may be 8 and a half, 9 years old, when they really mature that ability to finally track a moving object and need it at a different point and so, in that general scheme of thing, that is kind of how kids are going to fall. Now, you are going to have kids obviously who are before that and after that, but in general if you are a 5-year-old and they are trying to have them catch fly balls out in the field and they are missing every time, it is truly not that the kid is a total < ____ > or that he will never be able to catch a ball, but is just the developmentally that is not the time period for that skill. Now, will that kid then once he reaches that be able to catch every ball perfectly, may be or may be not, that is just again part of your genetics.

Dr. RUTENBERG:

Now, again say that child, should a coach find another position for him, I mean a great story when my daughter was playing softball and she was about 10 years old and a girl dropped the fly ball in the outfield and the coach started screaming and a friend of mine, who coached kids for years came out of the stand, put his arm around the coach and said, tell me coach do you think she really tried to drop the ball. Again, some of these coaches who forget that they are 8 or 10 or 12 years old, what approach would you recommend a parent take to the coach, who seems to be getting down on their kid and spoiling that child's fun?

Dr. STRICKER:

Well, it's always a tough thing because a lot of them they have their own particular reason why they are pressured themselves, sometimes they are under the gun, you know, to make sure that their team is winning or they have gotten pressure from other parents to make sure that every kid is playing or that they played their kid all the time, there are some of the problems that are not necessarily from the coach themselves, but usually am I have to go off to the coaches who really focus their efforts on how can I best improve this child life and performance regardless of the outcome because that is what the best we can help the parents realize that hey, if it is really not always about whether you are coming first place or not and I think what happens to this if we do that too much and these people really put a lot of pressure of these kids is that the kids start to identify their self worth with how they have performed instead of on just who they are and now becomes a very, very dangerous issue as they grow up because they should never have self worth threatened by the outcome of an event, so we really want to encourage both the parents and the coaches from both sides to say hey, we are all about our kids doing the best effort and knowing that sure sometimes they are going to win, sometimes they are going to lose, but that teaches them values that they can carry over into their long-term life.

Dr. RUTENBERG:

So, I guess if I would a coach, advice you might give me is at the end of each game, to tell each kid what you did better this time to find something that child improved upon?

Dr. STRICKER:

No, I agree what I understand, you did definitely struck a cord with me and that I have seen instances that I got worked in camps like that where, you know, you are not allowed to say anything negative and after a while, it really becomes easier and easier, were so used to kind of picking at things, instead of really looking at what did I personally do better or what that person do better and it really changes your outlook on a lot of different things, so I agree that there are wonderful tactic to be able to use.

Dr. RUTENBERG:

In your book, you make a point that children shouldn't focus on a single sport, but if a kid has a real aptitude, I mean if it is something just does really well, do you still feel they should try a bunch of different things.

Dr. STRICKER:

That comment is again for the general population of children. Overall, the American Academy of Pediatrics does not support super early specialization for multiple reasons, you know, socialization, overuse injuries, and a lot of pressure and burnout, all that stuff. There are absolutely kids who excel early on. They just absolutely fall in love with their activity and that sport and they enjoy it. They are completely joyful to have a great time they can't wait to go back to their activity. In those particular cases, it is perfectly fine for that child to be focussed on that one activity. What happens is we then want the adult counterpart to then say judge them based on adult data then we need to push them more because they are already eager to do what is required of them and if you kind of turn it around and then say, well no need to push them more because they are already good at the sport, they may still risk making it an unpleasant situation where they don't look forward to it.

Dr. RUTENBERG:

You are an all American swimmer. I got to ask you, would you have reached that pinnacle if you would have followed your own advice, as written in the book?

Dr. STRICKER:

I was kind of fortunate and that I was lucky. I tried all the other sports and I was really pathetic at anything that had moving objects, tennis, basketball, or football, or baseball, etc. plus I was really, really small, I was very underdeveloped, so for me swimming really did come pretty naturally and so I got a late start though, I didn't really start swimming until I was 10, which, you know, by today's standards is about 5 or 6 years too late, so I think today's world, yes, I probably would have been self selected out because I was a late bloomer, but fortunately I did have a coach, who excelled good at rights and I had parents who were very supportive and just wanted me to enjoy myself and do the best I could and then I became one of those kids like you were talking about where I really couldn't get enough of swimming, I tried everything else, couldn't do it, this was great, I felt self accomplishment and so I think I went beyond kind of what I was even potential for that sport, because I loved it so much and I had a lot of really positive reinforcement.

Dr. RUTENBERG:

I would like to thank Dr. Paul Stricker, who has been my guest. We have been discussing Dr. Stricker's book, "Sports Success Rx! Your Child's Prescription for the Best Experience," how to maximize potential and minimize pressure. You have been listening to a special segment on sports medicine on ReachMD XM 157, the channel for medical professionals. I am Dr. Bill Rutenberg and I leave you with the sports tip from Yogi Berra. You can't think and hit at the same time. I invite you to listen to our on-demand library by visiting us at reachmd.com, register with promo code radio and receive 6 months of free streaming audio. If you have comments or suggestions, call us at 888 MD XM 157. Thanks for listening. Until next time, I wish you good day and good health.

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