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Sports and Your Children's Feet: Advice From Dr. O'Connor Children and Sports

All parents know that children take to sports like ducks to water. Almost as soon as they start to walk, they're chasing balls, swinging sticks, and running races against nobody in particular. Children's sports used to mean baseball, basketball, or football. That's changed. Soccer has leapt onto the youth sports scene, as have wrestling, tennis, and lacrosse with older children. The starting age for training in individual sports such as swimming, skating, track, and gymnastics grows younger every year. Children active in sports programs will improve their cardiovascular and musculoskeletal systems, coordination, and state of mind. Participation in sports develops a sense of self discipline, teamwork, and recognition of the importance of a healthy body -- good habits that last a lifetime.

Training Emphasis

Every child physically matures at his or her own rate, and has a different degree of athletic ability. No amount of training can improve a child's natural athletic ability, but training helps improve coordination, and therefore performance.

Early training should emphasize proper technique and basic movement skills in all sports, especially in children younger than 10. Podiatric physicians, specialists in treating the lower extremities, say children who concentrate on a single sport at too young an age are more likely to develop injuries of the foot and ankle. Save specialization in sports for the late teens, they advise.

Warming up before participating in sports is more important for adults than children, but it helps loosen the muscles and prevent injuries in athletes of all ages. Light jogging and smooth stretching exercises (be sure not to bounce when stretching) are all that's necessary for young athletes. Learning to stretch at an early age will set a good pattern for sports activities as the body develops.

Footwear

Whether parents like it or not, part of a child's image revolves around footwear. Expensive sneakers have become fashion statements as much as athletic equipment. But for good foot health, the condition of the shoe is more important than the price tag or brand name.

Podiatric physicians agree it's often better to buy a child two \$50 pairs of shoes than a single \$100 pair, so the shoes can be rotated, to avoid rapid wear deterioration. Excessive wearing of the outsole, loss of shoe counter support, or wearing out in the midsole indicates it's time to replace the shoes.

Because a child's feet are constantly growing, it is important to allow at least one finger's width from the end of the longest toe when buying shoes. Remember, proper fit is very important. You can have the best shoe in the world, but if it doesn't fit right, it doesn't do its job. In the shoe store, children should put on both shoes, with their athletic socks and the laces tied tight, for several minutes to properly check the shoes' fit. Shop for shoes in the afternoon, when the feet are naturally slightly swollen.

In young children, an "all purpose" sports shoe works well for most sports. A running-specific shoe is not suitable as an all purpose shoe; moving laterally in a running shoe is more difficult and presents greater risk of injury for children. After the age of 10, sport-specific shoes can help improve performance and protect the feet. With the exception of the running shoe, a degree of crossover between sporting shoes is usually not harmful to the feet of a child athlete.

Rubber cleats are not usually necessary for children under 10, though they pose little potential harm for them. They are most useful on a soft-field sport such as soccer. Podiatric physicians recommend molded shoe rubber cleats rather than the screw-on variety. Metal baseball spikes can be dangerous and should not be used until the teenage years.

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