



A Parent's Guide to

Family Functioning in the Specialization Environment

The changing culture of youth sports aimed at elite level skill development has created an era of sports specialization. As a result, parents are sacrificing family money, time, and relationships with the hopes of their child making it big.

BY Amanda R. Aguilar , Ed.D.

The landscape of youth sports has changed significantly in the last 20 years with the emergence of club sports and more athletes focused on developing elite level skill rather than sport enjoyment. This increased focus on performance has many athletes and parents choosing to forego multi-sport participation to focus on a single main sport as early as elementary school. While specializing in a single sport may benefit some athletes in the form of enhanced skill and performance resulting in high-level playing opportunities, it can also lead to negative consequences for the athlete as well as the family. Participation in select sports can foster the development of important life skills while providing families with an opportunity to spend a significant amount of quality time together. What can families do to support their athletes and reduce possible negative family impacts?

Making the Choice to Specialize

Sports specialization is a path to athletic development that can be described as focused year-round training in a single sport at the exclusion of other sports (Jayanthi et al., 2015). Does this sound familiar to you? Would you say that your child is a specialist? Let's find out. Does your athlete focus on a single main sport above all others? Does he/she participate in one sport for more than eight months of the year? Has your athlete quit all other sports to focus on one sport? Your answers to these questions will determine your child's degree of specialization. Answering yes to all three categorizes them as highly specialized, two as moderately specialized and ≤ 1 as a low specializer. Research has shown that highly specialized athletes have the greatest risk for injury (Jayanthi et al., 2015). In addition, athletes who specialize may be at an increased risk of dropout, burnout, and social isolation (Bell et al., 2019; Horn, 2015; Malina, 2010). Moderate specializers are at a lower risk of injury and negative effects compared to highly specialized athletes. To reduce the risk of injury due to youth sport specialization, current researchers have established a list of recommendations aimed at addressing the health and well-being of youth and adolescent athletes. Let's explore those.



Specialization

Delay specializing in a single sport for as long as possible: Adolescents and young athletes should strive to participate in a variety of sports and avoid specializing until middle or late adolescence (14-16 years of age).

Take a break: Adolescents and young athletes should not compete in a single sport for more than eight months of the year.

Implement a day of rest: A minimum of at least one day off per week from training and competitions for rest and recovery should be implemented.

No more hours per week than age in years: Adolescents and youth athletes should keep their total hours of organized sports per week less than their age to prevent overuse injury.

One team at a time: Avoid competing in multiple sports or on multiple teams at the same time.

It is important for parents to understand that your athlete is not the only family member who will be experiencing elite sport participation. The entire family including parents, siblings, and extended family will experience indirect effects of the athlete's participation. Various aspects of family life may be tested with possible economic, social, and relational costs linked to the athlete's specialization. However, the specialization environment can be a place to develop strong family and friend connections while the level of commitment required may foster the growth of skills regarded as essential in adulthood.

When you sign your child up for that travel team, you expect late night practices, weekend travel, fewer date nights, and less spending money in your pocket at the end of the month. So, what can you do to ensure your family continues to thrive through this season of life?

Marriage

The time and financial demands of select sports may affect the parents' relationship. Parents should work together to ensure smooth operation of the family system. Consider the following tips:

Prioritize weekly alone time: Scheduling a lunch date or date night throughout the week will help to ensure you stay connected.

Open Communication: It is important for parents to be honest regarding the sport participation. Both parents should understand the cost of participation, athlete behavior and performance expectations, parental behavior expectations, and each parent's expected contribution.

Be Intentional: It is the little things that count. Find small ways to show your spouse you love them and are there to help make this process smoother. Some ideas might be bringing home dinner, volunteering to take the athlete to practice, cleaning up the house, scheduling a date night, telling them how much you appreciate their hard work, and more. Acknowledge your partner's contribution to the marriage and their role as parent.

Shared Interest: Both parents have a shared interest in supporting their athlete (s). Use the sport participation as an opportunity to come together as a "team" to support your athlete's interest and develop new friendships and relationships with other parents who are sharing a similar experience.



Time

Elite sport participation can place a significant time commitment on the family. The demands of weekly practices, weekend tournaments, and travel time, coupled with work and school commitments can challenge the typical family life pattern. Dinner time is pushed back, and sibling and parent schedules must be rearranged. Parents of multiple children also face additional challenges when you add in other children's extracurricular activities. The extreme time commitment can also cause stress in other areas that may be neglected such as time with other children, weekend visits with extended family, athlete's academic performance, and weekend religious services. On a positive note those weekend tournaments and drives to practices and competitions allow families to spend quality time together possibly fostering stronger connections. This is a great opportunity to include extended family in the fun. Inviting them to tournaments and games is a great way to foster strong bonds while supporting them in the sport (s) they love. Consider the following tips to ensure your family is thriving in all areas of family life.

Managing the schedule

- Prepare dinner the night before so it can just be reheated.
- Have a Sunday family meeting to lay out the week's schedule and delegate responsibilities.
- Set up a carpool schedule with other families if possible.
- Enlist the help of grandparents to shuttle to practice. This will also allow for some quality time.
- Have the athlete pack their sports bag the night before and place them in the car. This should include all gear as well as water and healthy snacks to eat on the

Religious Services

- If you are out of town for a tournament, find a local worship center.
- Stream worship services from your home church if possible.
- Prioritize a morning devotional or worship time with your family.

Academics

- Promote good time management skills with your children.
- Encourage them to take advantage of small pockets of time to study such as travel time to and from practices.
- Implement no pass no play rules and prioritize academics over athletics.
- Discuss academic expectations with your athlete and the consequences for not meeting them.

Extended Family

- Invite extended family to watch competitions and even travel together if possible.
- Plan a trip to visit on a weekend with no sport commitment.
- Be intentional about talking or video calling throughout the week to check in.



Balancing time spent with other children

- Be intentional about spending time with kids who are not participating in select sports.
- Enroll them in something they have been wanting to do.
- Be creative with available time by taking them for ice cream during practice or helping you cook dinner.

Finances

Many parents believe that their children's sport participation is an important component to their childhood and an investment in their future. A significant part of that investment is the financial cost. When considering registration fees, equipment, and travel costs, it does not take long to realize that this can be an expensive endeavor with cost varying among teams and sports. Consider the following tips:

Know the hidden costs: Most parents are aware of the most common costs associated with select sports: registration fees, uniform and equipment cost, and travel cost (gas, hotel, food). However, some hidden costs such as entry fees, entertainment, and additional tournaments may arise. When budgeting, prepare for the unexpected.

Do not prioritize sport over your family's present or future wellbeing: It can be tempting to prioritize sports spending instead of saving for college, retirement, or funding your emergency savings with the reasoning that you will get a return on your investment when your child gets a college scholarship. Unfortunately, the odds are not in your favor. According to the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), only 2% of high school athletes will obtain a scholarship. Contrary to popular thinking, there is no evidence that specialization increases your chances of being offered a scholarship.

Budget, Budget, Budget: Make a plan. Budget for sport expenses by estimating how much the participation will cost your family and how much you can afford to set aside monthly for the sport. Keep in mind other family and sibling financial obligations.

Conclusion

Parents and families play an important role in the sport careers of their athletes. As elite sport participation continues to increase within the youth sport environment, it is important for parents to understand how this participation will affect all aspects of family life. Following these recommendations, which are based on research and families' experiences, will help reduce negative family outcomes.



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