

PREVENTING BURN OUT

For young athletes, too much pressure to succeed, disappointment or failure in performance, or pushy parents or coaches can drive children right out of a sport. Energy ebbs, desire dwindles, motivation just stops.

Usually the burnout victim, even a young one, is committed to perfection in his or her sport. He or she cares too much, becomes overworked or over-practiced, then exhausted and overwhelmed by responsibility, or frustrated by the lack of authority or reward. In the end, the young athlete loses his or her desire.

The biggest steps in avoiding burnout are prevention and recognition. All athletes must understand that pacing yourself physically, emotionally and psychologically is critical. Limit goals, workouts and performance drive to levels the young athlete can handle. If athletes beat themselves up physically, beat themselves down emotionally or find that the activity is becoming a negative factor in life, the athletes are prime candidates for burnout.

Recognizing early symptoms can help in preventing burnout from greatly impacting your child's athletic pursuits. Symptoms can be loss of energy, irritability, poor performance, sleeplessness, worrying, loss of enthusiasm and/or confidence and uncontrolled anger.

If these symptoms occur, analyze the problem:

- Is pressure ruining the enjoyment?
- Is physical pain or fatigue making the activity work instead of fun?
- Is a lack of satisfaction with performance leading to disillusionment?

In the past, it was quite common to see young athletes participating in various sports throughout the year. In the fall young male athletes participated in football; they would move to basketball during the winter and baseball during the spring season. It was not uncommon to have time off between seasons and a considerable amount of free time during the summer. Summer in those days was often given to self-directed sporting activities with some limited scheduled summer leagues.

Today, however, athletes are asked to participate almost on a year-round basis and frequently specialize in one sport. It is not uncommon to see a 13-year-old soccer player participating at the club level and school level 11 months of the year.

With the changing times, there has been a significant increase in athletic injuries to young athletes. The vast majority of these are from overuse. Swimmer's shoulder, tennis elbow, and jumper's knee are common clinical conditions, which by their very name reflect overuse.

Common sense, ironically something not seen commonly, should dictate young athletes' activity. Kids should have time for free play away from the rigors of directed practice,

and from referees, timers, coaches and parents. Activity on the regimented side should be limited to 4-5 times a week, allowing a couple days of rest. This would significantly decrease the incidence of overuse injuries now commonly seen in orthopedic practices.

Certainly protective bracing and appropriate gear can protect youngsters from acute injuries. It is, however, regulation of the parameters of frequency, intensity and duration that will make the big difference in terms of the recurrence of chronic overuse problems.

Ultimately, it is up to parents to listen to and closely watch their children. If performance begins to lag or they are not eager to get to practice, this may indicate general overuse. Make sure the child has a couple weeks of doing nothing between seasons (and this should be more than one two-week period per year). The young athlete should be looking forward to practice with an eagerness for activity and participation. Listen to their complaints and react quickly.

Not everyone quits a sport because of burnout. Changing interests, new activities or greater time commitments elsewhere actually are far more common reasons for quitting an activity. All of these are, of course, fine. Just make sure your young athlete isn't moving on because a parent or coach overworked them, put too much pressure on performance or let something a child once loved become drudgery.