

Let Kids Be Kids for as Long as Possible

by Victor R. Martinez of the El Paso Times

The other day I came across a sign-up requesting "experienced" five-year-old players for a competitive Tball team. Say that with me: "experienced 5-year-old players for a competitive T-ball team."

That request brought out a chuckle in me. Most 5-year-olds are still learning to tie their shoes correctly or even running in the right direction after hitting the ball. How much "experience" can a 5-year-old have?

Funny thing is, there are actually parents who are out there shopping their 5- and 6-year-old sons to the most competitive T-ball teams. As hilarious as that might sound, it's also scary and very sad. More often than not, these end up being the same parents who push their 5- or 6- or 7-year-old to go into a travel sports program when they're too young and not ready. These tiny tykes are not emotionally prepared to have some coach or parents on the sideline screaming and yelling at them because they haven't performed up to par.

Children need time for free play, time to explore the game on their own without structure. It's then when they learn creativity, problem solving, adaptability and conflict resolution. Some of the most creative and successful athletes didn't start playing organized sports until they were older, not 5 or 6.

Allow your children to play with their friends just for fun. The best part of basketball is watching little kids struggling to get the ball through the hoop. And when it does, it's not only exciting for the tiny player but for all the fans watching. It shouldn't matter that it takes a four-or five-step run up to gain enough momentum to make a basket. The look and smile on a little kid's face is priceless.

Playing for fun is when kids can use their imaginations by learning new moves without the constraints of a coach or a parent telling them what they are doing wrong. What they are really doing is having fun and there is absolutely nothing wrong with that.

Many youth sports teams are like machines where the coach is the brain and the children are like limbs exercising a well- practiced drill. Young athletes who engage in free play — like using broom handles as bats and beer caps as balls — learn skills (in this case, hand-eye coordination) that sometimes are not taught in organized drills. Growing up, I used to do that with my friends, unaware of the benefit it will have on hitting a baseball.

Some studies on youth sports show that 70 percent of young athletes quit sports by age 13. Some burn out, while others suffer lifelong injuries by pushing their bodies too hard, too soon. It's real easy for parents to chase that near-impossible dream of watching their child play professionally in their selected sport. It's a dream that could cost families thousands of dollars in fees, equipment and travel expenses. Parents of these "experienced 5-year-olds" need to encourage their young athletes and find the proper balance.

Don't get me wrong, I get it. It's exciting having our children play in competitive sports. As a parent of two boys who participated in high levels of youth basketball, baseball and track, there is nothing like watching them perform and succeeding. It's also exciting watching our kids being enthusiastic and eager to play their sport. But at the same time, we fail to realize we might be introducing the structure too soon and actually taking away what could be a joyful growing experience by putting too much pressure on them.

So why not let children be children and simply enjoy athletics just for the sake of participating? Why burden them with expectations of winning and being fundamentally sound at the age of five when most of them just want to hang out with their friends, worry-free of disappointing their coaches or parents?

Life is too short and our children don't stay children for too long, let's appreciate their innocence while we can.