

Too Much, Too Soon

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Imagine for a second that you are a second grade teacher at Benjamin Washington Elementary School. It's the first day of school and one of the last students to filter into your classroom is a sandy-haired boy named Matthew.

Your immediate impressions of Matthew are very positive. When you stand in front of the classroom and speak to your students, he listens attentively. When a classmate named Gina drops a box of crayons on the floor right before lunch, Matthew quickly steps away from his desk and helps her pick them up. At the end of the day, he waves and says, "See you tomorrow!" as he heads out to his bus line.

The next three months confirm your initial impression. He's nowhere close to being the smartest student in your classroom, but he works hard and clearly loves coming to school. His parents seem very engaged in his performance at school— perhaps a little too engaged. It's rare that a week passes without an email or call from home. Still, all the inquiries are friendly and seem directed toward insuring Matthew is a good student.

Shortly after Halloween, Matthew's mom calls to ask if they can meet with you after school to discuss his progress in class. Matthew's mom and dad arrive a few minutes early for the meeting and after quickly exchanging pleasantries, his father shares a shocking piece of news. "We're moving Matthew up to the fourth grade" he says, "This Friday will be his last day here"

Your head is spinning. It's as if Matthew's dad has just told you that their family will be moving to Saturn with a caravan of vampires next week. "Fourth grade?" you stammer, "How did— why?"

“We’re transferring him to the Premier Learning Academy” he says, “Matthew has a friend in the fourth grade over there. He says he really wants to move up and learn with the big kids”

“I’m not sure this is a good deci—“ and then you stop yourself. Because you quickly realize that even though you’re the only teacher sitting at the table, Matthew’s parents aren’t looking for your opinion. The decision has already been made. Beginning next Monday, an 8-year-old boy with an average academic record will be placed in the same classroom with 10-year-old students.

This story sounds like science fiction, doesn’t it? No parent in their right mind would think it’s a good idea for an academically average child to skip most of the second grade and all of the third grade curriculum. No adult would ever think a child’s interest in “learning with the big kids” was an acceptable reason to skip two grade levels and enter the fourth grade. Even if we lived in a world in which parents and students could arbitrarily choose their own grade level, there’s no way a school would promote an average second grade student into a fourth grade classroom.

Yet I see this science fiction play out in real life dozens of times every year. The venue of my experience isn’t a second grade classroom, but gyms and playing fields all over Western New York.

Three weeks ago, I spoke to the mom of a very nice 8-year-old girl whose breadth of previous soccer experience is 5 days in KidsPlay Blue Division. Her daughter loves Blue Division so far and at least to this point, her skill level is below average. Next season, the mom has proudly registered her daughter for a U10 travel team. I love that little girl— she reminds me a bit of my own daughter— but there’s no doubt in my mind that she’ll be overwhelmed in U10 travel and drop out of soccer in a year or two. If her mom wasn’t listening to the siren song of travel soccer and gave her daughter an opportunity to build her skills and learn the game for a year or two in KidsPlay, that 8-year-old girl would be far more likely to be a lifelong soccer player.

Six days ago, I spoke to the dad of a talented young boy who just turned 8 a few weeks ago. His son has played in KidsPlay Blue for five or six seasons and his skills have improved dramatically over that time, but he weighs roughly 45 pounds soaking wet. There is a decent chance he will do fine in travel soccer, but experience tells me there is a stronger chance that he'll get beat up playing travel matches against players that are 30-50 pounds bigger and two years older than he is. A year to grow playing in KidsPlay Red Division with a coach that knows him would be a healthy option that would increase the chance he is one of the best players on his travel team in 18 months, but the dad can't wait to get his son fitted for his travel uniform.

Before anyone labels me a harsh critic of travel soccer programs, I should note that over the course of the past 7 years, KidsPlay has happily directed over one hundred travel-ready players to our good friends at the Kenmore Soccer Club. My son, Zac, and I have coached a team for Kenmore Soccer for roughly the same length of time. My belief isn't that travel soccer is a bad thing, it's that misguided adults often place children in travel-level environments far too early.

The predominant travel league in our region is called the Buffalo Western New York Junior Soccer League (BWNYSJSL). In 2014, a total of 114 boys and girls travel teams competed in the U10 age division in BWNYSJSL. At the U14 age level, there only 42 teams competing in the league. In other words, it's very likely that only 35-40% of U10 players who played in BWNYSJSL this past summer will still be playing travel soccer four years from now. Would you want to place your child in an educational environment that sees 60-65% of its students drop out within four years?

To be fair, a small percentage of those players quit playing travel soccer for great reasons. They become artists, musicians, writers, scientists, or simply develop an interest in another sport. A far smaller percentage continue playing travel soccer in "elite" or "premier" leagues.

But my experience tells me the strong majority of players quit playing soccer for reasons that are both shameful and completely avoidable. Many have been corralled into a highly competitive environment at the tender age of 7 or 8 and burn out before they enter middle school. Some have been

pushed into travel soccer before they have any proficiency in basic skills and tactics; they wind up being cast aside in favor of “travel ready” players. A surprising number of young players quit due to repetitive stress injuries suffered from playing the same sport ten months a year.

So when is a good time to transition your child up to travel level competition? Here are a handful of recommendations based on my experience as a coach and a dad:

- * Allow your child the opportunity to excel at instructional/recreational levels of soccer before you even think about moving up to travel levels of play. For a young player, there are tremendous benefits associated with being the best player on their team.
- * If you have any serious doubts about whether your child is ready to play travel soccer, wait a year. It is far more likely your child’s development will be hindered if you move them to a travel team one year too early vs. one year too late. Tom Brady didn’t start playing football until high school. Did his development suffer because he wasn’t playing Pop Warner in elementary school?
- * For spectators, travel soccer is much more exciting to watch compared to instructional/recreational soccer. But remember that your job as a parent is to steer your child to the most productive learning environment for your child, and the most productive learning environment might not be the most fun to watch. Be a parent first and a spectator second.
- * If you’re looking for a hard number to follow, my magic number is 9. Unless my child was running circles around everyone else on the field and scoring 27 goals a game, I wouldn’t consider moving them into a competitive travel program until they had reached their ninth birthday. I have worked with over 100,000 young athletes over the past 35 years, and my estimation is roughly 5% of those players were truly ready to play travel soccer at age 8.

