

Youth Sport Diversification vs. Specialization

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Ask a few parents what sports their kids' play and its guaranteed there will be some that only play one sport and are "specializing." It's pretty obvious to many parents, coaches, and kids that a lot of people think it is necessary to play "their" sport all year round if they want to excel, maybe even earn a college scholarship (the likelihood of that is also an entire different topic). Soccer and Hockey come to my mind as some of the guiltiest parties. The question remains, is specialization what really enables kids to excel and if so at what expense?

Some people may be surprised to find out that those who specialize early actually spend less time at the top in the elite levels such as national teams and professional sport teams. This is either due to the fact they are no longer surpassing their peers and/or because they quit. Many research studies have been aimed at finding out why this is and in doing so have revealed the importance of diversification.

Diversification, or playing several different sports or participating in different activities, allows kids to learn, practice, and develop different motor patterns. Yes, many sports have similar motor patterns (for example a tennis serve and a baseball pitch require similar movement patterns), but by playing different sports and subjecting oneself to different situations these movement patterns are inherently varied and learned. Variation also increases a person's interest. This can prevent burnout and makes practicing these movement patterns and cognitive processes more fun and interesting. A student-athlete will work harder when they have more intrinsic motivation to do better and excel. Specialization does not offer them the same amount of opportunity and variation to continually have a high level of intrinsic motivation. Diversification also allows kids to figure out what sports they do like. It makes sense that some people do not realize what sports interest them until they are introduced to them and allowed to try them out.

Specialization can also lead to social and psychological maladaptations. Playing a variety of sports increases a kid's amount of interaction with other kids and puts them into more situations where they can figure out who they are as an individual. Teams, even individual sport teams like swimming or track, also provide an environment where teammates look to support each other and give each other a sense of importance not just as a player, but as a person.

Diversification can also help prevent injury because different movement patterns are required and muscles and joints are all moved in various ways helping to decrease the chances for muscle imbalances or overuse injuries. Also, when a person experiences an injury he or she can be less likely to engage in physical activity again because of fear or the negative feelings associated with sport because of the injury. This in turn leads to long term health problems, including but not limited to obesity.

Therefore, diversification seems to be physically, cognitively, and socially most beneficial for student-athletes at any level. Skill sets of all kinds are easily transferred over to other sports, which in turn aide student-athletes in achieving higher "success" rates and have more positive sport experiences. All activities do not need be organized sport teams either. Playing in the street or backyard can provide positive environments that encourage diversification as well. The number one reason to play sport at any age is because it is fun and diversification is what will keep it fun, enjoyable, and a positive life experience. And as a Coach

I can say that most of the time your best players are your best all around athletes because of these reasons and more.