



# Ready or Not!

## At what age are children prepared to deal with competition?

By Dave Richardson

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Readiness for competitive youth sport should be based on an evaluation of the compatibility between a child's level of growth, maturity and development ( i.e. social and psychological ) and the demands of the task. The concept of readiness is addressed in this article. Some guidelines for parents, coaches, teachers and scouts are presented in order to make an informed decision of a child's readiness for competitive sport participation.

Many parents, coaches and teachers assume that once a child meets the age requirement for participation in a given sport that he or she is ready for it. Children are becoming active participants in sport programs more frequently than ever before. Many children are forced into competitive sports. In some cases the child is as young as 3 - 4 years, but on average a child is exposed to competitive sports from the age of 6 - 8 years. These youngsters are expected to adapt to the pressures of a competitive environment. Children are not miniature adults, either physically, psychologically, intellectually or socially, and the transition from fun to serious competition does not take place easily.

### Social Comparison

Through sports participation, children seek a combination of four elements:

- Action
- Personal involvement in the action
- Close scores and challenges matching their skills
- Opportunities to reaffirm friendships

Competition is a process of social comparison. Children will compete in music, education and sport, allowing a natural opportunity for them to test, evaluate and establish their ability against other young-

sters (i.e. an assessment of personal competence). It is this desire for social comparison that is frequently identified as the catalyst for a child's interest in competition. This desire for social comparison begins to emerge in children from the age of 6 years and strengthens throughout the school years as participation in sport increases, peaking around the age of 13 years).

Competitive games present children with numerous demands. The potential for stress exists in youth sports because players may doubt their own physical and/or skill capabilities to meet the demands imposed. Fear of failure is a primary source of worry for young players in addition to the fear of social evaluation and not meeting the expected performance targets. Although the process of social comparison is witnessed in early childhood, most children under the age of 12 have a minimal concept of their role within competitive sports. This does not mean that they should not participate, but that game structures and adult expectations of performance should be modified to meet the developmental capabilities of the children. Implicit in the concept of readiness is that learning (and development) is more rapid and more enjoyable.

### Self Selection

Selection for a sport may be made by the child, the parents, the teacher, the coach or a combination of all. Self-selection is a critical factor in a child's sporting development. The child is the one who must practice, be receptive to coaching and, ultimately, compete. The motivation for a child to practice and compete is an essential prerequisite for successful performance. Without motivation, successful participation in the sport is unlikely.

The key to success in sports does not lie in how early a child is exposed to competitive sports, but that the child concerned in the sport is optimally ready to be involved. This optimization must also account for the readiness to accept failures within that particular sport as they arise.

### Key Points

- Competing to win games must be secondary to the goal of teaching the skills of the game, especially in children under 12 years.
- Children must be empowered to "self select."
- Children's sporting experience should not be restricted. The onset of optimal readiness will be greater if children are exposed to a variety of sporting activities. This may include various sports, as well as positional variations within each sport.
- Sports programs should provide an environment in which children want to participate (i.e., increasing the motivation to learn).
- Youth sports programs need to be closely linked to the concept of readiness (i.e., ready to learn, ready to compete, ready to accept failure and ready to continue to develop and improve performance).

These points should be considered by parents, coaches and teachers in order to make an informed decision as to whether a child is ready, or not, to cope with the demands of competitive youth sport. Given the demands of high-performance programs, the greatest threat to a child's overall development is the over-control and over-expectation of children, assumed by adults, for the sake of achievement within sport.

### Further Reading

Smoll, F.L., Magill, R.A. and Ash, M.J. (1988). *Children in Sport* (3rd Edition) (edited by F.L. Smoll, R.A. Magill, M.J. Ash). Human Kinetics: Champaign, IL.

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