

When SHOULD my Child Specialise?

Early Specialisation vs Multilateral Development

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The question that is posed to every parent in the modern day world of sport; when should my child start specialising in one sport. The answer however, is not as simple as giving an age but we need to delve not only into the science first but also the emotional consequences before we can understand this subject properly.

Physical Attributes:

All human beings have to master certain physical principles in order to be physically efficient in sport. The list of fundamental movements is quite vast and summed up in table 1.1. All sports have different fundamental aspects that we have to master in order to have a chance at success in that sport, however we need to make sure that we are always increasing our skill capability and aptitude in every aspect of sport. When we look at table 1.1. We see that there are a vast number of movements that we need to master to play sports. I like to look at table 1.1 as a list of necessary skills needed by all athletes to be successful at their sports. We need to have a look at how competent children are in all these movements and skills to make sure they increase their chances in being highly competitive in any sport. Although the need to be more proficient at some attributes will differ for each sport, the chances of success will be higher if we can tick all the boxes. Children need to have certain basic skills, like running and jumping, which are crucial in all sports, some sports need hand eye co-ordination and some foot eye co-ordination, as a general rule, the better you are at all skills, the more complete the sportsmen.

Once we look at table 1.1. It is obvious that there is a huge cross-over of skills in most sports, due to this phenomenon; we will improve our performance in a number of different sports by improving these fundamental skills. It is not necessary for us to start the specialisation process to early, as we can allow our children to train in a number of sports, increasing their exposure to more sports and more skills. This will help them improve their general aptitude for sports. If we increase their general aptitude, children will be able to start new sports and get to a competent level much faster. This means that we are improving the child's trainability which is crucial to their development. So by choosing the sports we play at an early age, we can make sure that we are helping our children become more trainable and increase their physical intelligence. Trainability refers to the faster adaptation to stimuli and the genetic endowment of athletes as they

respond individually to specific stimuli and adapt to it accordingly. In doing this, we allow our children to have more choices later on in life. E.g. If we allow our child to play, Cricket, Soccer, Gymnastics, we allow him/her the privilege of learning hand eye co-ordination (cricket), foot eye co-ordination (soccer) and body proprioception (gymnastics). We can see that by choosing such sports, the cross-over effect from soccer and cricket will allow him/her to play rugby and have improved skills in catching and throwing as well as kicking. The gymnastics will also improve his rugby due to the strengthen nature of the sport and improved proprioception that gymnasts need. So by choosing three sports that would appear to have no bearing on his ability to play rugby, we have actually given him/her more tools in his arsenal to actually play rugby and increased his exposure to different sports, without any damage to his rugby career.

Here is a simple table to explain the effects of early vs late specialisation

Early Specialisation	Multilateral programme
Quick performance improvement	Slower performance improvement
Best performance achieved at 15-16 years because of quick adaptation	Best performance at 18 and older, the age of physiological and psychological maturation
Inconsistency of performance in competition	Consistency of performance in competition
By age 18 athletes are burned out and quit the sport	Longer athletic life
Prone to injuries because of forced adaptation	Few injuries

Travelling Skills	Object Control Skills	Balance Movements
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Boosting • Climbing • Eggbeater • Galloping • Gliding • Hopping • Ice Picking • Jumping • Leaping • Poling • Running • Sculling • Skating • Skipping • Sliding • Swimming • Swinging • Wheeling 	<p>Sending:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kicking • Punting • Rolling (ball) • Strike (ball) • Throwing <p>Receiving:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Catching • Stopping • Trapping <p>Travelling with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dribbling (feet) • Dribbling (hands) • Dribbling (stick) <p>Receiving and Sending:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Striking (bat) • Striking (stick) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Balancing • Body Rolling • Dodging • Eggbeater • Floating • Landing • Ready position • Sinking/Falling • Spinning • Stopping • Stretching/Curling • Swinging • Twisting/Turning



Consequences of the Choice:

The biggest risk that we face when we decide to take the early specialisation route is that we have narrowed the child’s focus and their chance for change. What I mean by this is that we do not allow the child to develop and move in the direction of their interests. Once we have made the choice for early specialisation, there is very little wiggle room for the children.

Life changes and things happen that are out of our control and we need to make sure that as parents and coaches, we are doing the best for our children at all times. By pushing the children into early specialisation, we narrow their choices and do not allow them to be able to make any choice of value. Children at a young age are not always mature enough to understand their choices and especially the consequences of their choices. If we lead our children into certain choices, we could be closing windows to learning new skills. The LTAD programme shows us that their opportunity windows in which we learn skills and develop physically faster and we need to use these windows and make the most of them. Early specialisation can cause us to ignore these windows of development and cause them to be deficient in certain crucial developmental movements and inhibit the child’s development. We are not meant to be closing windows and doors for our children but rather open as many doors to increase their chances of success.

We need to educate ourselves in terms of the choices that will benefit our children in the long run and not only focus on the now. We need to be wary of the future and make sure that we are taking into account all the relevant information. Every decision needs to be weighed up carefully when we are dealing with individuals future 🌈

