



A sporting chance

Far from frivolous, a child's participation in team sports is a powerful way to help shape their physical, academic, emotional and social development, writes Karen Fontaine

There may be no 'i' in team but children who play team sports stand to gain so much more than the ability to bat, bowl, pitch, catch, kick and tackle – they're also honing their skills in the game of life.

Amid the development of fine and gross motor skills during sport, what is also going on is something far more powerful than a cultivation of mere sporting prowess, according to psychologists.

"Social learning is one of the most potent factors in a child's development and participating in team sports really encourages and enhances that," says Tracey Veivers, a registered sport and exercise psychologist based in Brisbane.

"As human beings, we learn by observation – not only in skill development but also social development. What's happening on the sporting field is a development of self-efficacy – that is, a child's sense of belonging and their ability to participate among peers. And what that feeds into is self-esteem, which is just crucial throughout life."

As Tracey points out, team sport has a powerful effect on helping to develop the all-important quality of resilience. "When you give children a different experience within a team environment it really can help them to gain a different sense of understanding around how relationships work beyond their small world at home," she says.

Indeed, experiencing the highs and lows of winning and losing can help to develop certain types of resilience that will support them in their education.

"Striving towards something, practicing it, and being prepared for those pressure environments are all the life skills of a resilient adult. Kids will use them when they have to do a presentation or a show and tell, then in dealing with the pressures around how they feel at exam times, in dealing with how they feel when they get a result they weren't expecting, in managing and in developing the ability to juggle multiple tasks," she says.

Not only that, playing sport can help children develop citizenship qualities they will retain throughout their lives, according to a 2011 study from Queen's University in Canada. The researchers found that kids who play team sports are more likely to show initiative and



be able to call on internal sources of motivation than those who don't.

But on the other side of the coin, team sports can present an emotional pressure cooker environment and depending on the level of skills of the coach and the culture they develop, children can be subject to negative experiences as well, including feelings of self-consciousness or potentially a sense of feeling excluded and/or inadequate.

"If a team sport is not right for a child, it can lead to a situation in which they feel they are lacking mastery, and that can lead to a sense of failure which of course affects their confidence," Tracey says.

"It is something parents and teachers need to bear in mind – sometimes a bit of experimentation pays. I hear parents say 'I started them in this sport, they have to see the term or the year through' – well, I think it's more about a child doing something and being a part of something, and you can also get that in individual,

non-ball or water sports – skateboarding or even martial arts, for example. It’s about being willing to put in the effort to help your child experiment and find their niche.”

If a child is completely non-sporty then that’s okay, too, says Tracey – there are pursuits such as art, music, chess and debating “but what I really do encourage is helping children work towards things like a concert if they’re in an orchestra, because that way they will experience being part of a group working towards a goal and how to manage their emotions”.

“This is where we are potentially falling short as parents,” she says. “We are not teaching our kids how to manage and self-regulate emotions – that working towards something that offers a little bit of pressure is not something to be avoided, particularly if they’re working with their peers. We need to prepare them for success but also disappointment and how to navigate any emotional consequences and still bounce back from that.”

What if your child isn’t sporty and shies away from participating in a team? Joey Toutounji, co-author of *Please Mum Don’t Supersize Me* and presenter/producer of Foxtel’s *Feel Good TV*, offers five alternatives that foster their development in a similar way.

1. “**Dancing** is a great way in which children can keep active and fit as well as express their creativity and learn skills. Dancing is a great way for children to socialise with other children who are part of the studio. Dancing can also include on-stage performances which are an excellent way for children to build their self-esteem and confidence.”
2. “**Indoor rock climbing** teaches children about problem solving. It is also a good activity to learn to work with others as they partner up with the person who is holding the rope at the bottom and helps guide them up to the top of the wall. It is great for building confidence and strength.”
3. “**Beach body boarding** is an individual fun activity and a great introduction to water sports such as surfing, and it involves children in being active, helping them improve fitness, strength and balance whilst also learning about safety awareness in the water and ocean.”
4. “**Scouts and Girl Guides** teach leadership, teamwork and confidence, and incorporate fun outdoor activities such as bushwalking and camping. They are also great ways for children to meet new friends, socialise with others and learn about community.”
5. “**Drama classes** and performances build children’s confidence and self-esteem. They promote movement in performances, creativity and socialisation with peers in their class. There may be drama activities that involve teamwork, working with others and cooperating in a group to brainstorm ideas for performances.”



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