



## Sports Instruction: A Toddler's Mental Capacity

Toddlers have short attention spans (surprise, surprise). They also focus excessive attention on single items no matter their importance (no kidding!). That is why Johnny may be so distracted by an odd looking bug or brightly colored flower that he is completely oblivious of a ball or player going by.

Periods of instruction should have as few surrounding distractions as possible and are usually most effective when given as show-and-tell. Youngsters require small amounts of information because the proverbial “too much information” can overload even the most interested toddler in the group. Young children are still concrete thinkers and have difficulty with abstract thinking or processing complex instructions.

### Application

Skills are acquired primarily through unstructured play, so active play such as tag should be encouraged. If there is any organized play, it should be very brief, with the majority of time spent having children just playing among themselves. Frequent changes of players should occur to expose children to different positions. Do not keep score. True competition offers no advantage and should be avoided during this age group.

The primary goals of sports activity for toddlers and young children should be playfulness, experimentation, exploration, and having *fun*. Shudder at the thought, I know, but face the facts. Children just begin to develop the intellectual and thinking skills necessary for next-level activities and safety at around ages 5 to 6 years. And if that did not make you gasp, this one will—research shows that participation in sports programs during the toddler years does not seem to give any long-term advantage for future sports performance. Uh-oh, does that mean that spending 3 hours a day practicing with your 4-year-old daughter won't make her a better kindergarten or grade-school athlete? That's right. Specific skills can be refined by repetitive practice only after the right level of motor development has been reached. Basic ground-level activities for children such as walking, running, swimming, tumbling activities in beginner dance and gymnastics, basic soccer, basic martial arts, and skating are suggested appropriate activities. In addition, walking, running, and swimming are activities that also develop fundamental skills that are important for safety throughout life.

These activities can form sturdy foundations for exercise and sports participation on which future skills can be building blocks for the Great Wall of Sports. A few words of caution, however—just because these activities can be started early in life does not mean that these sports should be aggressively pursued early in life. We have all seen Olympic moments showing the rise of sports stars who started their sport at age 3. But that does not mean they started training substantially or competing heavily at 3 years of age. These situations are often misinterpreted by other parents and young athletes because we don't always know the rest of the story. Those youth later became Olympians because of many more factors than an early start date, and research from the US Olympic Committee shows that most Olympians distinctly point out that they had support from their parents, were not pressured, and stayed in their sport because of the love of the sport and because they had fun. Sports activities may be started early if approached with a non-pressure attitude that focuses only on basic skills and not with the presumption that this is the beginning of an Olympic or professional debut.

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