



OC Pros on Misdiagnosing ADHD, Cyber Bullying and Balancing Sports & Academics

Sports + Academics = Balancing Act

Q: My daughter has always been a talented athlete, and she loves gymnastics. My husband and I have supported her going to the gym because the focus is on fitness, strength and having a fun time. Our concern is with her competing in organized cheer, which we have been encouraged to consider. We really want to support our daughter in sports, but we're not sure if cheer will hurt or help her academics, I want to lay a strong foundation down this year, (it's her first year in high school). What are the risks to making the switch for Jessica, and how do we know if this is the right move for her? - *In Limbo, Rancho Santa Margarita*

A: You are not alone with this concern. Research suggests that children who participate in sports are more likely to have higher self-esteem and confidence, in addition to better overall physical health. These are very worthwhile benefits, especially given the epidemic of overweight adolescents throughout the United States. However, parents regularly ask me how to maintain focus on these healthy aspects of sports play when their child becomes a competitive athlete. The rules DO change, as do the perceived expectations and pressure, and risk of injury.

Here are some important questions to guide this type of difficult decision:

1. Where is the drive to train and compete coming from?

If a parent or coach is more responsible for generating the desire to take sports to the next level, you may want to proceed with caution. Maintaining a training, and competition schedule, in addition to academics and other social engagements, can become extremely stressful for your family and child. If interest in sports declines, it is

possible that they are responding to a sense of being “forced” to play. This will likely take the fun out of sports altogether.

2. Does your child’s expectations match the physical and financial realities of the situation?

Sports participation is becoming more and more competitive, with entry level requirements to proceed getting more rigorous every year. Check with your child’s coach or trainer if you have any doubts in your child’s goals within sports. If they appear unrealistic, they could be setting themselves up for a harsh fall. Also, financial commitments in many sports are quite significant. Be sure that you have researched the costs and your family’s ability to pay before you consent to your child investing emotional and physical energy to a team or club.

3. Does the value system and philosophy of the coaches and training facility that you are considering support your family’s sporting goals?

Maintaining a balanced family unit can be extremely difficult if your child is receiving contradictory examples during athletic participation. Given the amount of time and influence that an admired figure within sports can have with your child, this is a very critical part of a sports participation decision. Ask other parents who have been involved with the program previously what type of life lessons their child has learned from their training and competition, and are they comfortable with the program’s style of mentoring.

4. When should you seek support?

No one knows your child’s needs as well as you do. If you notice perfectionist tendencies (unrealistic demands, negative thinking), fears of failure in sports or school, performance anxiety, improper weight maintenance, or other issues that cause you concern, contact a mental health professional for consultation. Check to see that the therapist you are accessing is registered with the appropriate Board in California, and that he or she specializes in supporting athletes and teams.

Balance, even when competing at elite levels is challenging, and is very important to achieving success in athletics and life. If you make an informed decision utilizing these questions as a family, your child may be more likely to enjoy their life as a student-athlete. – Dr. Casey Cooper