

## Kids and Team Sports

A recent study by the Public Library of Science (PLOS) explored the association between participation in team sports and mental health difficulties among U.S. children and adolescents – using a sample of 11,235 children and adolescents aged 9 to 13 years. A brief summary of this study indicates that team sports do have a positive impact on a child’s mental health.

Many adults may wonder when their child should start a group sport or activity – or perhaps do not know where to begin. Ultimately, kids can begin participating in team sports early – even as they are toddlers. The team sports referenced in these studies are not necessarily about making your kid into a future NFL or MLB star, but to get them interacting with their peers at a young age.

“Team sports can be a great thing for a child’s mental health. There is a lot of camaraderie, a sense of belonging, and pride going to practice and really working with their teammates. So it can be something that’s really beneficial to a child’s mental health and that sense of belonging,” says Anne Orzechowski, an OSF HealthCare family medicine APRN.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, team sports across the country were put on hold in order to reduce the spread of the coronavirus. A study done by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) during the pandemic showed a strong association between social isolation and anxiety and depression in children and adolescents during this time.

Even prior to the pandemic, however, similar studies done over the years have indicated that camaraderie with peers is very beneficial for kids as they grow and develop. Team sports and other similar activities are actually quite different from being with classmates in school, as some kids may not come out of their shell in the classroom setting and may not have the opportunity to really explore their interests or learn to socialize properly outside of school. Team sports also help kids by creating routine and having something other than school that they can participate in and look forward to each day.

Orzechowski recommends getting your child involved in a team activity early on. The focus of these team sports should not be about skill and athleticism. Engaging in and learning about teamwork is the ultimate goal. Most importantly, find something that your child might be interested in.

“It has got to be something your kiddo wants to do, not something that you want your kiddo to do. It’s got to be a balance. If you can get your kid into it and get them engaged in something that they really like, they are going to want to show up and do it,” explains Orzechowski.

If you sign your child up for a sport and they begin to feel disengaged or stop showing interest in going to practices or games, Orzechowski recommends taking the time to sit down with your child to talk about what might really be going on. A bit of apprehension is normal, as starting something new can be daunting for a young child – especially if it is brand new to them.

“Sometimes kids are nervous when they show up to practice wondering if they are going to make friends or who they are going to talk to. So, try and find out if it is something about social anxiety or if they are not jiving with their coaches or if it just does not seem like they are having a good time. I think just being a really good partner with your kiddo and finding out if it is a good fit for them is important,” Orzechowski adds.

While Orzechowski does not recommend pulling your child out of the sport right away, she adds that if your child seems truly uninterested even after giving it a good shot, it may be time to look into another activity. And she adds that it does not necessarily have to be a sport. Keeping your child involved in an active and positive team or group activity of some sort is the key – regardless of what that may be.

“If you have a kiddo who just wants to get a hula hoop and you can get a bunch of kids together to hula hoop or they want to find a hula hoop club, have at it. It’s outside. It’s physical. It could even be inside. It doesn’t really matter what it is as long as it’s something your child enjoys. It does not necessarily need to be a conventional team sport in order to get some benefit from it,” advises Orzechowski.

If you are struggling to find a team activity that your child enjoys, if you are not sure where to begin, or if your child seems to be showing signs of anxiety or depression, make an appointment with your child’s pediatrician for guidance.