

Put me in, coach

Back-to-school season means enrolling kids in sports and activities. Parents should know the ins and outs so the child can get the most out of it.

A former college athlete and mother of a youth sportster, Emily Isom knows all about long nights at the ballpark.

But by day, Isom is a certified medical assistant in pediatrics at OSF HealthCare. She's combining her life experiences to give parents a roadmap during back-to-school season: What sport or activity is right for my child? How can they get the most out of it?

The benefits of kids getting active

- Physical: Isom says sports help kids strengthen muscles, speed, endurance and balance.

"They'll be able to run further and faster," Isom says, noting that improves lung and heart health.

- Social and emotional: Sports can teach kids social skills like teamwork, communication and self-esteem.

"It helps them become who they are as a person," Isom says. "It helps them take ownership of their communication. They can build that communication within a team.

"When you win, it feels great. But when you lose, some kids can take it really hard. They think they're a failure and they're not good at the sport. It becomes mental," Isom adds, commenting on how sports can build skills to overcome stress, conflict and adversity. "But that feeling of being a failure is not true. You win and lose. That's how it goes. But the key is to get better. They can work on kicking, running, hitting, catching or whatever it is."

Plus, you never know when a teammate will turn into a lifelong friend.

Navigating the season

Isom says a parent should never pressure a child into a certain sport or activity. They won't enjoy it, she says. Instead, keep the conversation light and open ended. For example: is there a sport you've seen on TV that you'd like to try? Or, show them videos of different sports. And parents should not be upset if their child chooses an activity out of the norm. Maybe a boy from a family of football players wants to do dance or theater instead. That's OK, Isom says.

"Kids look for support from their parents in anything they do. It doesn't matter if it's sports or the arts. If it's something they want to do, you should encourage and support your kid," Isom says. "My daughter is really into art. She might want to do art instead of sports one summer. I'm all for it. She's still interacting with people. She's happy doing something she wants to do."

Isom says if a child gets burnt out on a sport, they'll usually tell you. Again, Isom says not to pressure the youth to finish the season. But have a conversation about what's going on and the paths forward. If you have to pull the kid out of the sport for their health, do it.

"If they're showing depression, anger or hostility over the sport, I wouldn't press it any further," Isom says.

And of course, be a supportive cheerleader from the stands. Don't heckle or shout criticism.

"It embarrasses the kid. And those kids can develop anger issues. They learn it from their parents," Isom warns. "It makes the kid feel like a failure when the parents are yelling from the stands. I've seen it. It's not fun. It's not cool."

Learn more

Read more about keeping kids healthy in [sports](#) and [everyday life](#) on the OSF HealthCare website. Pediatric care at OSF includes [local offices](#) like the one Isom works at that can provide sports physicals and treatment or minor sports injuries, plus [OSF Children's Hospital of Illinois](#) in Peoria.