



EARLY SPORT SPECIALISATION - *A parent's guide*

So, what is early specialisation? The majority of sports – including field hockey, soccer, and hockey – are **late specialisation sports** which means that children should focus on acquiring general physical literacy skills until the age of 12-15 years when they might start to specialise.

Yet we see specialisation – defined as **“9 months or more of a single sport to the exclusion of others”**– among children younger than 12 everywhere we look in sport. Selection processes, the rise of private coaching and sport academies, and year-round programming, all encourage children to specialise in sports at an ever-earlier age. The theory goes - if your child focuses on one sport, they are more likely to be successful at it. But rather than improving performance, early specialisation is one of the main factors causing the declining participation of kids in sport. Here's why...



Karli Johansen, club player and member of the Canadian Women's National Team, was a multi-sport athlete until she finished High School

“I started playing soccer when I was about 8 or 9 and picked up field hockey a year later. I continued with both until I graduated high school. It worked well because they were usually at opposite times of the year and I was able to find a good balance between the two. Soccer complements field hockey really well - for example soccer training always had a lot more focus on footwork, agility, and speed. They also have similarities when it comes to tactics, structure, and decision making. As a kid I was able to stay engaged year-round without getting bored.”

Children don't have fun! Training multiple times each week with an overemphasis on winning means that sport quickly becomes “work”. It's no fun, it's exhausting, and it frequently drives children to burn out and drop out from sport. (And let's be honest – we exhaust ourselves mentally and financially too).

We are damaging young and growing bodies. Sport doctors report that they are seeing children with injuries associated with repetitive movement at a younger age than in the past. Check out the “When Play is Too Much” leaflet in your Welcome Pack for more tips on preventing overuse injuries.

Don't believe the hype that early specialisation will create you an Olympic athlete – in fact, research shows that specialisation does the exact opposite: Early focus on one sport limits a child's ability to develop fundamental movement skills which can have a harmful effect on later skills development and their ability to perform at a high competitive level.

If we know it's a problem, what is driving early specialisation?

Cultural & parental expectations - We live in a competitive culture and this is reflected in youth sport. Who hasn't experienced PPP - “Parent Peer Pressure” - to make sure we are doing the best for our child? We often fear that if our child falls behind in something, they may never catch up. We start believing that more practice, more teams, more competitive playing at an earlier age, is needed to ensure that our kid is successful and doesn't miss out on their chance for athletic success.

The youth sport industry – many sport organisations encourage children to specialise too early in an attempt to attract and retain participants on a year-round basis. Furthermore, programs often treat young athletes as “mini adults” with inappropriate training methods and excessive competition schedules focused on winning at an early age. As a sport organisation, we believe that we have a responsibility to be part of the solution rather than the problem. More info on what we are doing further down the page.

The benefits of a multi-sport approach for kids aged 6-12 years

Between 6 to 12 years of age, children need to develop a foundation of fundamental movement skills and overall sports skills so that they can acquire more advanced sports skills as they get older. Exposing your child to a wide variety of activities – “multi-sport” – is the best way to enable them to develop this foundation.

- Children become physically literate in a wide variety of movement and sport skills. No single sport can develop all the skills you need to be active for life.
- The lessons learned in one sport will improve your child’s performance in others. A multi-sport approach increases skills, helps decision-making and cross-trains different parts of the body.
- Children have the chance to try different activities. All kids develop skills and passions at different ages. Delaying specialisation can help your child pick one that is the best fit rather than one dictated by early growth or ambitious parents.
- When picking up a sport later in life, adults are more likely to go back to something they did in childhood. Multi-sports kids become adults with options to stay active for life.

What can parents do to help?

- ✓ Encourage your child to take part in a wide range of sporting activity. Trying different sports helps children work on their agility, balance, coordination and speed
- ✓ Do not focus on one sport – although they may have a preferred sport, kids this age should take part in at least 2-3 sports in different seasons throughout the year
- ✓ Inform yourself – find out what is age-appropriate in a sport and check that your child’s programs have clearly defined skill outcomes that are aligned with this
- ✓ Trust your child – put aside your own opinion, present options, listen and watch. They will tell you, either verbally or through body language, whether they have had enough of a sport or need to take a break
- ✓ Speak up – if you have concerns that a program is putting too much pressure on your child, talk to the coach. You know your child better than anyone
- ✓ Don’t be concerned with the score – put the focus on learning and having fun

What is WVFHC doing to manage early specialisation and promote multi-sport participation?

- ✓ Our focus in Spring League is teaching age-appropriate field hockey skills with an emphasis on learning more than winning
- ✓ We have player development matrices that clearly outline the stage of your child’s development and the skills they will be learning during Spring League. If you didn’t get one in your Welcome Pack, please ask your coach for a copy
- ✓ We promote equal playing time and trying out different positions to allow all kids the chance to develop
- ✓ We carefully plan all the programs we offer to take account of players’ ages, to introduce variety, and to create an appropriate balance of training and downtime
- ✓ Where possible we coordinate scheduling with other sport organizations to enable our players to participate in more than one sport at the same time
- ✓ We collaborate with other local sports to offer multi-sport experiences. Watch out for details of our multi-sport summer camps coming soon!

Where can I find out more?

www.getmorefromsport.ca – a campaign in Nova Scotia to promote multi-sport play
www.playmoresports.ca – a guide to the benefits of multi-sport play