

Kids and Sports  
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This writing is among several of my expressions on this site that deal with the issue of young people's involvement in organized sports. The others: the book *Sports in the Lives of Children and Adolescents*; the writing "To a Journalism Student About Sports"; and the thought "On a Very Big Regret."

The sports book was essentially a long answer to a letter I received from the father of a pre-teen boy and girl, a man named Ken Heise. He had read an article I had written about young athletes and asked my advice about whether he and his wife Melissa should encourage their son and daughter to get involved with organized sports, his focus being primarily on school sport programs. The book is a decade old now, but I think it has held up well and I recommend it to you. Especially, review chapter two in which I outline what I call the agenda of childhood. It is the frame of reference I employ when assessing a youngster's involvement in organized sports. By organized sports I am thinking of the team sports, the ones where you wear a number and practice nightly under a coach's direction, and where there are games for cheering spectators—soccer, football, basketball, hockey, baseball, lacrosse, that sort of thing. At the end of that chapter—on pages 38-40--I offer a summary, which communicates a sense of my perspective:

Youngsters are dealing with issues of autonomy, initiative, personal mastery, and gender identity. They are establishing a relationship with themselves as physical beings. They are learning to use their minds, to think. They are defining who they are as individuals and shaping their personalities. They are developing a social self-concept and social skills and a place in the social world. They are creating some fun and excitement in their lives. They are finding beliefs and values to guide them. They are shaping their character and becoming moral beings. They are developing a work identity. They are achieving self-esteem and self-worth (or not). They are developing an academic self-image and style and skills, and acquiring knowledge about the world, including school subjects. They are compiling an academic record and defining scholastic and career ambitions and laying the

groundwork for further education and training. And, so important, they are establishing a relationship with their parents that will be the basis of their connection with them for the rest of their lives.

While children work through this agenda of childhood in many venues, including the classroom and the street corner, organized sports is a particularly good vehicle for it. Sports is a public endeavor: people are watching, which increases youngsters' self-awareness and self-attention, and they find this rewarding because they are in a particularly self-referenced time of their lives. In sports there are usually clear criteria for success and failure. You know how you are doing and when you are making progress. Add to that the fact that sports is arousing and enjoyable when so much in children's worlds isn't. . . .

It is important to keep in mind that children don't choose sports as a vehicle to serve their personal needs totally on their own accord. They are socialized into it by their parents, peers, the media, and, especially, schools. Children choose what to do in their lives from the options they know about and think are possible and that are encouraged from without. It is as if they carry an album of pictures in their heads, and when they are faced with deciding what to do they call up the album and pick the most appealing picture and then try to bring it to life. . . .

With the agenda of childhood as criteria, it appears that sports can be a setting for both the successful resolution of the developmental issues of childhood and the failure to achieve healthy maturation. Sports can build up a child, and it can diminish a child. . . . We want our children to grow up to have pride in themselves, to have a disposition toward curiosity and wonder, to be powerful, and to view the world as a meaningful place that can be understood and mastered. We want our children to be initiators, not reactors, in life, to chart their own courses, or, as one author puts it, to be origins and not pawns in the world. We want confident children, not self-doubting and fearful children. Sports and everything else in children's lives need to be judged on the basis of their effect on the dreams we have for our children and on the dreams they have for themselves. . . .

We can talk about children succeeding and failing in the football or basketball or soccer game. But we need to remember that Ken and Melissa Heise, and all parents, are in a very big game themselves—as coaches of their children as

they play the game of growing up. The consequences of winning and losing that game are monumental.

Now it is ten years later, and what I wrote back then still sounds basically right to me. One thing I'd add now, a new emphasis, a complement to what I wrote back then, is that I hope children's experiences contribute to their becoming the best possible versions of themselves, the unique human beings they are, and that over the span of their individual lives they manifest who they are in every aspect of their lives, both personal and public, and that they are happy throughout life, happy in the sense of feeling fundamentally satisfied with their lives and at peace. Anything that contributes to that is good as far as I'm concerned, and anything that detracts from that is bad. A big challenge for children and young adults coming out of this perspective is to become who they really are, and not to spend their lives trying to be somebody they were not cut out to be, including a sports hero.

Another difference between 1998 and now is that I have a more negative attitude now about organized sports for children and young people. The sports book's message was a balanced, it-could-go-either-way, arms-length-and-dispassionate one: depending on the individual child or adolescent and his or her circumstance, organized sports can be good and can be bad. Sensible enough. But as I write this, in April of 2009, my opposition to organized sports, particularly in schools, has hardened to the point that I'm for all practical purposes saying simply, "Stay away from it--your children have better things to do with their time."

This past week, another parent, this time the mother of a four-year-old daughter, asked me the same question Ken Heise asked over a decade ago: what do you think about organized sports for my child? Unlike with Ken, I know both the woman and her daughter personally, but I don't think my reply to her question would have been different if I hadn't known her and her daughter. This is how I answered her inquiry:

"I suppose I should sound sensible and be qualified and nuanced, but I'm going flat out say that to the extent you can you ought to keep your daughter away from organized sports, the ones where the coach sends her in and pulls her out of the games. Organized sports are authoritarian, "worker bee" arrangements, antithetical to true individuality, autonomy, and self-directedness,

and your daughter doesn't need that in her life. They don't teach, or promote, lifetime activities beyond the propensity to watch and care about strangers playing with a ball—to me there is nothing sadder than being a fan. They are incredibly time-consuming and draining, practices every afternoon, and the games and the summer camps, and all the pondering about how it's going with the team. They squeeze out other things, and make them seem of lesser import. Like doing your schoolwork. And reading and writing and drawing and painting. And writing for the school newspaper, and theater and choir and debate. And connections with people who reflect a variety of interests and styles and ambitions. And concern for public affairs. Teammates become “it” to the point that other relationships become pro forma or simply beside the point, including with parents and other relatives.

“Powerful forces in your daughter's life are going push her toward organized sports. The media, television and newspapers and so on, and the sports apparel companies, hype sports as part of selling their products. Schools at all levels are heavily invested in the teams and the games and the razzamatazz of sports. Coaches and trainers, and the rest of the people who collect a paycheck from sports hustle it hard. Your daughter's peers will buy the sell that is coming at them and talk it up to her. And indeed, to kids sports seems like a good thing to do, the friendship aspect of it, and the games, and even the practices, are heightened experiences and give them something to talk about and think about and look forward to (but then again, an outing with friends to a summer blockbuster movie provides all that too, but that doesn't mean blockbuster movies every day of the week would be healthy for your daughter).

“If you don't look out for your child and guide and advise her around the downside of organized sports, the chances are that nobody else will. The conventional wisdom and just about everybody and everything in your daughter's life is saying play ball, and my study and experience tells me it would be better if she didn't play ball. I think the key is to go beyond simply saying no to field hockey—a mass of people, hunched over, scurrying after a ball with short curved sticks—why? (I especially abhor gymnastics—repetitive, robotic, distorts the body.) Focus on saying yes to, and setting up, alternatives, like dance, racquet sports (all the way through this list, stay away from school-sponsored versions of any of these), golf, hiking, camping, climbing, boating, bird-watching,

nature photography, martial arts, bowling, skiing, swimming, horseback riding, and archery, all of which—and I realize that ultimately this comes down to values and a judgment call—are more uplifting to the human being. In any case, they are more likely to continue in your daughter’s life after the yearbook signing and graduation pictures.

“What this comes down to is the idea that sports are something you do from 2:00 to 4:00 on Saturday afternoons with your friends--play hard, have fun, and then go have a Coke, and that’s it, no practicing all week, no big deal. Sport as recreation, something you *do* once in a while, not something you *are*, a jock, or a student-athlete. To me, trying to get super good at some sport is a sign that something is off-kilter in your life, and you are going to pay for it sooner or later.”

That’s what I said to this mother this past week, and I meant it. I realize this perspective seems extreme and full of holes, and in need of qualification, and that it isn’t going to get me any commencement speech invitations (which I’ve never gotten anyway), but it is my truth these days. I didn’t say *the* truth; I am not so presumptuous as to contend that I have a handle on *the* truth. I said *my* truth, my honest take on reality. One of the big reasons I started this web site was to tell my truth, no holds barred, and there it is, do what you want with it.