

PHYSICAL THERAPY CORNER

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EXERCISE FOR THE CHILD ATHLETE:

PART 1: THE BASICS

This is a hot topic as so many children begin sport specific training at an early age. The athlete and their parents are looking for ways to improve strength, speed, agility and flexibility to perform better and to help reduce the risk of injury.

Let's start at the beginning of child development. A toddler builds strength and coordination by playing. Their play consists of crawling, rolling, sitting up and falling down, kicking and pulling. Later, they begin to hop, jump, squat, balance on things and run.

Each child grows and develops at his/her own pace. Eventually they begin to do higher level activities like climbing on objects, playing catch, juggling or dribbling a ball etc... How do they get so good at doing these things? Play is exercise and everything they do builds strength, flexibility and coordination. Their bodies are built to fall down without getting seriously hurt and twist into unusual positions.

Children then begin to participate in games that combine the activities they like the most, such as, playing tag, wiffle ball, kick ball and dodge ball. They begin to gravitate toward what they are the best at and the parents begin to sign them up for t-ball, dance class, soccer, basketball, etc.... Many children like to play different sports but some like to just play one. Playing multiple sports helps them develop strength, coordination, flexibility in multiple body parts. This is all the exercise they "need", when combined with proper nutrition, to be healthy

PART 2: IMPROVING PERFORMANCE

The intensity levels of the sport begins to increase and, in order to prevent injury and help improve their ability, specific exercises need to be added to the practice regimen. Simply playing the game is not enough if your child decides to participate in the more elite levels of the sport they choose. The coaches will begin to have the children do push-ups, sit-ups, lunges, squats, sprints and many other exercises.

Could any of these exercises harm your child? If done incorrectly and with poor form yes they possibly could. Exercises need to be modified for each individual athlete's strengths and weaknesses. One child may only be strong enough to do a lunge half way down or one child cannot do a push up when they are up on their toes. The coach must be aware of this and help modify the activity to make it effective and safe.

The coach will have a difficult time initially trying to understand each child and how they respond to the exercises. Some children just don't have the desire to work hard and do the exercises incorrectly. They may look as if they can't do the exercise because it is too hard when actually they are not trying. However, if your child reports to you that a specific exercise or activity is causing pain or is too difficult please talk to the coach about modifying the activity.

Much debate has gone on for years about sit-ups. Are crunches better than full sit-ups? Do they hurt your back? Should they be done at all? Sit-ups themselves have not been proven to be "bad" for your back. Previous injury, poor exercise technique, abnormal weakness of the lower back and/or abdominal exercises, poor posture and poor flexibility are "bad" for your back. Research shows that more strain is put on the low back with full sit-ups than crunches, while crunches put more strain on the neck. Stuart McGill, a leading spine biomechanics expert believes that our spines have a limited number of flexes in them and that repetitive flexion exercises are bad. However, there is no way of determining what this number is. Sit-ups are a very simple way of strengthening the hip flexors and abdominals, which are extremely important in sport performance. Use caution and if your child truly has pain when doing sit-ups there are other exercises that can be done.

A physical therapist is highly qualified to complete a thorough evaluation of your child's strength, flexibility, balance and many other areas related to sports performance. A specific exercise routine can then be set up to address the deficits. You don't need weights and a bunch of machines to improve; you just need a fun and challenging workout.