



**When should
children specialize
in sport? ▶**

Experts agree that in most cases, children should avoid specialization and work on developing a wide range of sport skills. Not until the child grows into adolescence should parents and coaches encourage specialization. If teenagers display skill and talent and love for a sport, increasing the amount of time spent training may be appropriate.

Lyle Sanderson, associate professor of physical education at the University of Saskatchewan, says prepubescent children should be encouraged to play as many sports as they can to develop a wide range of motor abilities.

Children, from approximately eight years of age until the onset of puberty, need to be placed in sports where they will receive competent instruction and work on developing sports skills. These are the 'skill-hungry years', when a child's ability to develop movement patterns is much higher than in adolescence. Specializing too early in sport means children will miss out on a broad base of activities.

"What's happening in gymnastics and swimming is absolutely criminal," says Sanderson. "Eight-year-old kids spending 20 hours or more in the gym are not being prepared for life."

Children who spend too much time involved in one particular sport may run the risk of burning out physically and emotionally. They may lack the well-rounded life experience that is needed to grow into emotionally healthy adults.

"I don't think being completely focused in any one area is ever good for a child," says Sanderson. "If you lose the ability to play that sport, you may think that you've lost everything."

Children need free time just to play, says Sanderson. Many parents who want the best for their children put them into too many organized activities. "It's just as healthy to let kids kick a ball around or play hide-and-seek."

Children should be exposed to as many different activities during the skill-hungry years. Before the adolescent growth spurt, children have a great capacity to develop the rough form of motor skills. Early specialization limits a child's potential in all sports, including the one in which he or she is currently specializing.