



# What are the risks of early specialization? ▶

Many parents dream that their child will be the next Wayne Gretzky or will win an Olympic medal like Silken Laumann.

Such dreams have their price. Becoming a champion can require as much as 10 years or more of intensive preparation. Even then, success is never guaranteed. For the child, the rewards may be non-existent — a lost childhood, a damaged psyche, a life plagued by injuries, or the taint of athletic failure. Children who specialize in sport and experience a great deal of success at an early age may have difficulty coping with athletic failure later in life.

In *Little Girls in Pretty Boxes*, sportswriter Joan Ryan lifts the lid on what can happen in the process of shaping elite female gymnasts and figure skaters. She describes the training that drives young athletes to breaking point. Her book is a chronicle of eating disorders, stunted growth, stress fractures, and family break-ups. Ryan says the extraordinary demands of training can be compared to child abuse.

Leading children into early specialization has its cost. Swimmer's shoulder, tennis elbow, and runner's stress fracture are chronic overuse problems common with repetitive training cycles. Doctors are reporting a dramatic increase in the occurrence of these overuse injuries, even for younger children.

Physical education professor Lyle Sanderson says that many parents and coaches still believe that early specialization is the key to high performance. He reminds parents that not all children develop at the same rate, and that many young superstars may simply be maturing at an earlier chronological age than other children.

The role of parents and coaches is to help children make good decisions about their involvement in sport. Just as a loving parent guides a child away from a sweet treat before bedtime, he or she should encourage appropriate involvement in sport and a well-rounded, healthy lifestyle.