

Is competitive sport too stressful for children? ▶



◀ **C**ompetitive sport may be too stressful if a child is made to feel that self-worth depends on how he or she plays. When the things most important to children — such as love and approval — are made contingent on playing well, they are likely to experience great stress. Research shows that the fear of failure and a child's concern about not performing well may be the main sources of stress and anxiety in children's sport.

Children worry that they will fail, that they will not be able to live up to the demands of competition. Children can feel competitive stress before, during, and after competitions. One U.S. study showed that 62 per cent of youths worried about not playing well and about making a mistake, and 23 per cent said anxiety could prevent them from playing in the future.

Children who take part in individual sports may feel more competitive stress than those who play team sports. And pre-competition anxiety is greatly increased when parents pressure their children to win. The uncertainty surrounding a competition, how important the competition is, or how soon a child will compete can also add to the level of stress.

Sport psychologist Dr. Rainer Martens, an expert on children's sport, suggests that "competitive stress may be likened to a virus. A heavy dose all at once can make a child ill. A small dose carefully regulated permits the child to learn how to channel anxiety so that it aids rather than inhibits performance. Carefully selected competitions together with realistic objectives and expectations will enable the child to learn that sport is fun and can be enjoyed whatever the result."²

There is some concern that the stress in competitive sport may hinder the emotional development of young children. Some experts question whether young children should be involved in organized training and competition at all. They suggest that children are not old enough to cope with the anxieties that are integral to competitive sport. However, research conducted by Dr. Martens and Dr. Julie Simon showed that although sport does cause stress, it is no worse than that experienced when taking an academic test or performing in the school band.