



**At what age should  
children become  
involved in  
competitive sport? ►**

◀ **C**hildren tend to be attracted to competitive sport. From an early age, they try to jump higher, throw further, or climb higher than their brothers and sisters. Competition is not a problem for young children. Problems only arise when someone else — usually a poorly-informed coach or an overly-enthusiastic parent — distorts competition by over-emphasizing the value of winning.

The Coaching Association of Canada recommends that children can begin to participate in suitably designed competitive sport after the age of about 11. However, children learn better in a non-stressful environment. Young children under the age of 11 are still trying to develop their capabilities. Excessive stress could lead to low self-image and will severely hinder this learning process.

David Carmichael is director of research and development at the Ontario Physical and Health Education Association in Toronto. He says children should begin their sporting experience in a child-centred program appropriate to their level of development. Opportunities should be provided for all children to play at their own level, including the late bloomer, the more sensitive, or the clumsy child.

Sport psychologist Dr. Terry Orlick has long been advocating the benefits of a joyful and cooperative sport environment. His book, *The Cooperative Sports and Games Book*, suggests how games can be altered to adopt a cooperative play approach.

Many of Canada's national sport organizations have also recognized the benefits of cooperative play and have adapted their programs to meet the needs of young players. For example, the Canadian Hockey Association developed the Initiation Program for children under the age of eight. This program replaces the competitive element in hockey with an emphasis on teaching young players the basic fundamentals of the sport, fair play, and fun.