

Should young children be involved in off-season training? ▶



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◀ **I**n general, the answer is “no.” Young children under the age of about 11 should be experiencing a wide variety of different sport activities and should not focus their efforts exclusively on one sport.

Superstar Wayne Gretzky’s dad, Walter, agrees. Wayne didn’t play hockey in the summer. “I wouldn’t allow him to play in the off-season,” Walter Gretzky says. “He was encouraged to play other sports and get involved in other activities.”

Depending on the sport, off-season training is unrealistic for young children.

“The hockey season typically runs from September to April,” says coaching consultant Tim Robinson. “I don’t encourage my kids to participate in summer hockey programs. If they did, they would miss the opportunity to play summer sports such as baseball, tennis, and swimming. The skills they learn through participation in these sports will help them with all their motor skills in the long run.”

Summer hockey is now said to be contributing to the dropout rate in ice hockey by burning out 13-year-olds. Former Calgary Flames coach Dave King believes that requiring children to commit to hockey alone is a mistake. “There’s a lot to be said for playing more than one sport. Soccer, for example, develops agility and quick feet. These skills are very useful for hockey players.”

On the other hand, some sports, tennis for example, have a short competitive season, generally running from June to September. It may not be unreasonable to register a child for a set of indoor tennis lessons during the winter if he or she is interested.

The 10 most important reasons I play my best school sport.

1. To have fun.
2. To improve my skills.
3. To stay in shape.
4. To do something I’m good at.
5. For the excitement of competition.
6. To get exercise.
7. To play as part of a team.
8. For the challenge of competition.
9. To learn new skills.
10. To win.

Sample: 2,000 boys and 1,900 girls, grades seven to 12, who identified a “best” school sport. From the 1987 study on youth sport conducted by Dr. Martha Ewing and Dr. Vern Seefeldt.