

ON FITNESS

Kids' Fitness Training Programs: 6 Tips for Picking a Good One

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Everyone knows that kids are in the midst of, as pediatric exercise scientist Avery Faigenbaum calls it, an "unfitness epidemic."

According to a July [report on the nation's obesity problem](#), fewer than a third of kids between the ages of 6 and 17 take part in regular vigorous activity, defined as 20 minutes at a stretch of exercise intense enough to break a sweat and prompt heavy breathing. But on the other, smaller end of the spectrum, never

have youth sports been taken so seriously by those who participate (and their parents): In addition to high school teams, private club teams, all-star traveling teams, sports camps, and the like are de rigueur for many teen and kid athletes.

So how to get from point A (the sofa) to point B (the school soccer team), or at least to somewhere in between? Enter youth [fitness](#) and training programs, which run the gamut from inexpensive programs at the YMCA or local Boys and Girls Club to sessions with private instructors (often as an offshoot of a general training business) that cost as much as—or more than—a personal trainer at the gym. Here are six tips to keep in mind when you're considering a program:

1. Don't assume your out-of-shape kid can go directly to the playing field. Ideally, a kid shouldn't go right from the sofa to team tryouts, says Faigenbaum, an associate professor at the College of New Jersey. Instead, the child should first have been participating in some form of physical activity, most days of the week, for six weeks. If he has not, "I don't think he should be going out for football or for cross-country" or other team sports, he says. "It's an absolute setup for injury." That's when one of the "get moving" type of programs may be helpful.

You may ask yourself why any kind of organized program is necessary for this kind of pre-sport conditioning. But "when we were kids, we were mowing the yard, taking out the trash, and were outside playing with our friends all afternoon," says Brian Robinson, head athletic trainer at Glenbrook South High School in Glenview, Ill., and chair of the National Athletic Trainers' Association (NATA) Secondary Schools Committee. "You don't see that happening anymore," he says. And that means many kids don't have even a rudimentary fitness base.

2. Pick a qualified instructor who "gets" kids. There is no single certification that is required to train kids, so look for some basic qualifications: a college degree in exercise science or kinesiology and certifications from organizations like NATA, the National Strength and Conditioning Association, or the National Academy of [Sports Medicine](#). Instructors should also "have a good understanding of how kids differ from adults in terms of growth and injury patterns," says Rebecca Demorest, a pediatric sports medicine specialist and the associate director of sports medicine at Children's Hospital Oakland in California. Their core muscles—in

the stomach, back, and hips—are often weak, and many young adolescents are very inflexible, she says. The best way to find out if an instructor knows this stuff: Ask how his or her [workout](#) is specifically geared to kids' anatomy.

Beyond the physical understanding, make sure that the instructor seems to enjoy and appreciate kids and that there's a healthy dose of fun in the classes. "At the youth level, the attention span isn't like an adult's," says Dave Tebidor, director of Manhattan Velocity Sports Performance, which offers classes and one-on-one training for kids and teens (as well as adults). "If a class is 30 or 40 minutes long, the last 15 minutes or so will be a fun game." Talk to other parents who might have used a coach or training center before you sign up your kid, or ask your pediatrician for a recommendation.

3. Make sure the activities are age- and skill-appropriate. During childhood, kids should be running, jumping, kicking, and developing other skills that are transferable to a lot of different sports and activities, says Faigenbaum. The years from ages 8 to 12 are a great time to build this foundation. Adolescence is more suited for "taking competition to another level," he says. As for [strength training](#), a recent position paper by the National Strength and Conditioning Association says that a properly designed program is relatively safe for both prepubertal and adolescent kids and has benefits including muscular strength and injury prevention. Preadolescents and younger teens, however, should not be going whole hog, says Robinson; that means no heavy lifting. And strength-training should be closely supervised.

4. Be wary of specialization early on. With older kids who have picked their sports, "we'll see kids who spend an afternoon practicing 2½ hours for the school team, then will go out and have a specialized hitting or pitching coach for two hours in the evening," says Robinson. If that's not done correctly, with an emphasis on conditioning, it can be a setup for injuries, he says. So be wary of a program focused intensely on a single sport.

It's important to ask whether such a focused strategy is necessary, at least at a young age. "Kids who play only one sport aren't developing their fundamental movement skills," says Faigenbaum. "And once they're asked to move outside that very narrow window, I think they're [on the road to] failure. Ask an Olympic athlete or a pro what they played [as a kid], and he or she will say two or three different sports."

5. If your kid is serious about a sport, look to injury prevention. Because sports are played so intensely and for so many weeks during the year, there's a higher risk of injury, says Gene Schafer, an athletic trainer and owner of ARC Athletics in New York, a training and rehab center whose clients include kids and teens. And there's not always a lot of individual attention in schools, which is why some parents and kids get outside help. "Some kids will come in and not know how to do a proper squat, sit-up, or other core exercise," he says. "Even kids who are in organized sports don't know this stuff."

Besides basic technique and mechanics—which should always be examined if an athlete has a hint of an overuse injury—some specialized programs have shown some potential for preventing specific common injuries, says Demorest. Specifically, a [formal 15-minute warm-up program for female soccer players](#) may help prevent all-too-common injuries to the anterior cruciate ligament (ACL).

[Check out: [Why Are So Many Female Athletes Playing in a World of Hurt?](#)]

6. Focus on the process, not results. Face it: Most kids are not going to make a traveling team and get a college scholarship, let alone play pro sports. So as a parent, focus on encouraging your kids to enjoy activity so they can participate for the rest of their lives. "Get up and move for 30 or 60 minutes," says Tebidor. "And 15 minutes is better than nothing."

[Read: [How Kids Can Win the Weight Battle.](#)]