

Sports Outreach And Recreation

KEEPING IT FUN!

By Timothy Barton, Jr., FPC Intern

A recent study in US News and World Report showed that the number of children between the ages of 6 and 17 in the U.S. rose by nearly 7 million between 1990 and 2002. The interesting thing is, the number of players in each of the major sports decreased significantly during this same time.¹ It seems strange in a time when so much emphasis is placed on sports, that the ratio between kids in an age group verses kids actually playing sports would be decreasing. The natural question we must ask is, "Why?"

Arnold LeUnes, a sports psychology professor, attributes the amount of children dropping out of sports to the fact that children are no longer allowed to focus primarily on fun.² Sports are such a popular part of our culture, and athletes receive so much praise and glory, that the pressure to excel faces every child. Children, no matter how talented they are, are still children. They may play volleyball better than anyone you have ever seen at their age; but, if they are not allowed to enjoy it, the game itself, then statistics show their interest will fade away.

Taking Off Unhealthy Pressure There is nothing wrong with wanting your child to do well in sports, or even wanting them to go on and play at a higher level. However, we must remember that it is "more likely your child will be struck by lightning than that they will go on to professional sports." This is a harsh reality.

Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these. Matt 19:14"

You have all heard the story, haven't you? No one thought the child could make it. However, due to hard work and great passion from the child as well as the parents of the child pushing and pushing to keep the child focused, that child proved everyone wrong and moved to the top. When they arrived, they thanked their parents for keeping them focused along the way. These are the stories that receive glamour. We usually hear them around the Super Bowl, or other large sporting events. They are great success stories, aren't they! The problem is, these stories are rare. Even more important to note is that in the cases where the method of pushing a child to a specific sport does not work, it often causes injury to the child, a distaste for sports which is a loss of something that can teach valuable lessons for life, and even a strain on parent-child relationships. This is a hard, but too-often-repeated truth.

The Power to Encourage or Discourage It is unlikely that any of us would say, "I am not concerned for the well being of my child." These words in a parent's mouth would sound ridiculous. It is natural for us to care for our children. The problem is that it is easy to confuse the well being of our children with living out our own dreams through them. LeUnes says that the reason fewer children are interested in playing sports longer is that children are trying to live up to *unrealistic evaluations and expectations* of their parents.

As you make decisions about your children and the things you will encourage and discourage (whether this be in the world of sports or otherwise) ask yourself if you are making your decisions for the well-being of your child. This is the primary job of any parent! It is so important in fact, that the Bible uses the relationship of a Father to a child to explain the relationship between God and His people. Parents are given this role by God himself.

The Bible says in Ephesians 4:14 that children are easily tossed to and fro. In other words, they will follow what other people tell them because they are easily swayed. The people they will follow the most are their parents. Where are you leading them?



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¹Cary, Peter. "Fixing Kids Sports," *US News and World Report*. June 7, 2004.

²LeUnes, Arnold. "Parents Could Learn Lessons From Children About Youth Sports," *Aggie Daily*. March 27, 2000.