

A PARENT'S GUIDE
TO SANITY IN THE
WORLD OF YOUTH SPORTS

OVERPLAYED



DAVID **KING** & MARGOT **STARBUCK**

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Myth One

Because We Owe
Our Children Every
Opportunity, We
Can't Say No to
Youth Sports

When Jennifer's son, Justin, was two years old, she opened his blue canvas tote bag after daycare to find a registration form for Soccer Stars. Soccer Stars' glitzy website assured parents like Jennifer that the company was the leader in youth soccer development for children ages two through five. The program, offered at the daycare each Friday morning for eight weeks, would add \$160, over two months, to the cost of daycare.

Concerned about finances and unconvinced Justin needed to be developing anything beyond basic life skills at age two, Jennifer and her husband, Ed, agreed that their son could probably live without Soccer Stars.

Because the first week of Soccer Stars was free, Justin came home with a sticker on his back instructing his parents: “Enroll me soon. I did Soccer Stars!”

Jennifer and Ed didn’t enroll him.

The next Friday, only the children whose parents had registered them played soccer. Of the fifteen students in the classroom, fourteen had paid. During the only outside time in the day, Justin stayed inside, alone. Wanting her son to enjoy beautiful fall days and play with his friends, Jennifer reluctantly signed him up.

Two years later, when Justin was four, Jennifer and some of the other preschool moms were enjoying lunch together at an Italian restaurant, commiserating about the way that their babies were growing up. It was kindergarten registration season, and the women were discussing whether their children would go in the fall.

The conversation—about what was in the very best interest of their children—kept circling back to sports. Not elementary school sports, but *high school* sports. Several moms were figuring out the relation between their children’s birthdays and the registration dates for the local youth sports programs. One of them remembered reading that the “most successful” ten-year-old ice hockey players had birthdays between September and December. When they registered as ten-year-olds, they were a full nine to eleven months older than those whose birthdays were in June, July, and August. As parents of young children, these moms knew what a difference nine months can make in physical and emotional development. “Redshirting” their

five-year-olds—postponing kindergarten for one year—meant that they would be bigger, faster, and stronger when it was time for them to play high school sports.

Jennifer was unwilling to join the crowd, and Justin began kindergarten in the fall.

As Justin moved into his elementary years, Ed and a friend of his, another dad, coached Justin's soccer team for their town's parks and recreation department. The team practiced Tuesday nights at six o'clock and played a game every Saturday morning. Both coaches agreed that, win or lose, their aim was to give the kids some exercise, teach them a few skills, and set them free to have fun.

On Saturdays in the bleachers, though, Jennifer began to hear anxious conversations between families. Tryouts were coming up for a local elite soccer club. Though Jennifer wasn't yet convinced that "elite" was a good descriptor for a class of humans who still couldn't get all their urine in the toilet, she listened in.

"I don't really want to pay four hundred and fifty dollars or drive to practices three nights a week or travel to tournaments on weekends," Jennifer's friend Amy bemoaned. "But I feel like I owe it to him."

And there it was.

Amy had spoken aloud what the nagging, niggling little voice had been hissing in Jennifer's ear:

You owe it to him.

He deserves it.

All the other kids are doing it.

Other parents are willing to sacrifice for their children to play.

Don't be selfish.

If you care about him . . .

In Jennifer's best moments, when she looked out the kitchen window to see Justin playing—"carving" a stick with a butter knife, playing hide-and-seek with a neighbor, or having a competition to see who could kick the ball over the roof of the garage—a quiet, sane voice assured her that he was already doing what young boys are meant to do.

But in other moments, that other voice—the one that insisted she was failing him because she wasn't signing him up for elite sports—was pretty persuasive. And that pressure to "keep up with the Smiths" created a knot in her stomach that stayed with her.

TIMES HAVE CHANGED SINCE YOU WERE A KID

The number of children between the ages of six and seventeen involved in youth sports today is about 21.5 million, according to one estimate. That's a lot of kids.

Today parents feel the pressure—sometimes more than our kids do!—to sign up for whatever will give children the greatest chance to be successful in sports and to keep up with others. The messages from travel team coaches, entrepreneurs, club directors, and other parents are often persuasive: Start young. Specialize early. Develop skills. Condition. Find the right travel team.

But experts in the fields of sports and medicine are telling a different story. According to one report, college coaches, scientists, physicians, and psychologists—professionals who have studied children and physical activity for years—are warning that "extreme, early focus on one sport [is] a problematic approach to developing youth athletes."

Without ever asking why, we are subjecting our kids to systems that we don't fully understand and ones that may actually harm them. In the beginning we might register our children

for sports with no higher expectations than that they'll get a little exercise and have fun with friends. Then we might bump them up a league to help them get the kind of "skill development" that will help them succeed against more competitive players. Before we know it, we can't remember the last weekend our family spent in the same city or one that cost us less than \$400. We find ourselves stretched physically, financially, and emotionally. And we wonder how we ended up like this.

The question Jennifer faced at every stage of her child's development still stands: Do you owe your child the experience of playing increasingly competitive youth sports?

Those who know us know our answer: No, you do not.

THE BIG PICTURE

We don't believe that any parent "owes" this to her child. But Christian parents, in particular, are guided by a set of values that equips us to offer a child a loving yes, at times, and a loving no, at other times. Just as there's no one-size-fits-all

Questions to ask ourselves

We can evaluate athletic opportunities through the lens of our commitment to Christ. Helpful questions to reflect on include:

- Are we loving God and our neighbors? (Matthew 22:37-39)
- Are we, like Jesus, growing in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and others? (Luke 2:52)
- Are we being conformed to the pattern of this world rather than transformed by the renewing of our minds? (Romans 12:2)
- Are we being faithful stewards of our resources? (1 Corinthians 4:2)
- Are we living a sacrificial life of love patterned after Jesus? (Luke 9:24)

choice for families to make about youth sports, nor is there a spiritual formula to figure it out! But we want you to hear that you already have tools in your toolbox to help you navigate these choices.

We also encourage you to start this conversation with other parents at your church. Some may choose to do a discussion series during Christian education hour at church. Others may choose to host a single Saturday morning breakfast discussion in your neighborhood or at your church. (Find study guides at www.heraldpress.com/overplayed). We've found that some of the best resources to help Christian parents navigate youth sports are other Christian parents.

As a parent, you can see a bigger picture than your child sees. You do not owe it to your child to get caught up in a league whose functional philosophy is "select the best and leave the rest." You do not owe a child a slot in a system that eliminates more than it retains. In this system, children who don't yet excel are not selected. Then they're right back where they started: without opportunity for physical exercise and play with others. Those who are selected are given messages about their abilities that may or may not be true when it comes to their potential to play high school or college sports.

Participating in youth sports has clear benefits, but it can be difficult to find a healthy balance. For most families, the decision isn't a simple one. Some may have a child who could really thrive in a more rigorous sports environment. Other children will flourish in a more relaxed program. In good conscience, you might also decline entirely the significant time, money, and expectations that organized sports require. The best option facing parents in this situation is not always clear, and a community of faith can help us discern both our guiding values and how they apply in specific situations.

COSTS OF YOUTH SPORTS: OBVIOUS AND HIDDEN

As your family considers how to navigate the opportunities available during your child's childhood, consider some of the real costs of competitive youth sports, particularly any involvement beyond the local, recreational level.

Money

It ain't cheap.

Former Cincinnati Bengals kicker Travis Dorsch is now an assistant professor at Utah State University. He calculates that some families making \$50,000 annually are spending as much as 10.5 percent of their gross income on youth athletics.

Michael Sagas is on staff at the University of Florida. During his daughter's most recent season of travel soccer, he calculated the total cost to be \$18,115.41.

These might seem like extreme cases. But if you are just getting into the youth sports scene, it's important for you to know that the registration cost for the local recreation league can vary anywhere from \$100 to \$400. This varies greatly depending on the sport. As you move "up" to travel, elite, select, or premier teams, the costs also rise, with the low end for a season being \$500 and the high end being \$2,000. Those figures don't even include the costs for equipment, travel, meals, lodging, and sometimes entry fees for weekend tournaments.

While that's a choice some households can make, others cannot. One out of five disadvantaged households doesn't have children playing youth sports because of the cost. We lament the fact that the term *elite* refers not only to a specific level of team play (supposedly related to athletic ability) but also to the upper middle class who can afford it.

And even if your family can afford to play, or is willing to go into debt to do it, that doesn't necessarily mean that you should.

Time

If we're willing, it's possible to count the dollars we'll spend on youth sports. But who has time to count the time? For Christian families, does the way we spend our time reflect the priorities with which we've been commissioned: loving God and loving people? If our commitments to our faith communities and neighbors and those in need have been marginalized by athletic commitments, it may be time to reexamine the way we're using our time.

Don Schumacher is the executive director of the National Association of Sports Commissions. He reports that although fewer young people are participating in team sports every year—something we'll explore in this book—the people who are participating “are participating with a vengeance. They are playing a lot of games and entering a lot of tournaments.”

Those games and tournaments often include several weekly practices, games on weekends, and travel to other in-state or out-of-state cities for competitions. When these obligations conflict with other family commitments—going to Grandma's ninetieth birthday party or volunteering at vacation Bible school—parents often have to choose between two good things. We believe it's legitimate for parents to make decisions, based on their values and family priorities, that won't be popular with coaches and, sometimes, their own children. Choosing to make these decisions together, on the day the coach hands out the schedule, can cut down on stress and anxiety as the season progresses.

The claim that competitive youth sports require a heavy investment of time isn't a judgment. It's a reality. If you believe you have to attend every one of your children's games—more on this later—the amount of time your family gives to sports increases even more.

We understand that, for some families, it works out. We know families who, willing to invest the money and hours and days, like to pack up the cooler and have a weekend adventure. Like most parents, we know that “car time” is when some of the best conversations with our kids can happen. But we also know other families who have weighed the investment of time and have decided to spend theirs in other ways. We want you to hear that even though it might seem like a countercultural choice, that’s a legitimate option.

Time is a precious resource, and we all have a limited supply. As parents, we need to be good stewards of our family’s time and model good choices for our children.

Physical risk

In 2014, 1.35 million children suffered sports-related injuries severe enough to send them to hospital emergency departments. One in every five kids who go to emergency rooms for treatment is there for sports injuries. While many of those injuries are the natural consequence of children being active, more and more are recognized as overuse injuries. Nearly half of all injuries to middle school and high school students are overuse injuries.

There is also a pyramid of sorts with regard to injury prevention and treatment. Knowledge of how to prevent injuries, let alone how to treat them, is virtually nonexistent in youth sports. Many coaches are not even required to have first aid certification. Injury prevention and care are slowly introduced as the competitive level rises, however, to the extent that we have personal trainers and medical personnel in abundance at major university and professional levels. What would it be like if we put more resources into injury prevention and treatment at the earliest ages?

While the physical risk of youth sports is normally identified by injury rate statistics, a child's general health condition can actually decline as well. Skipped family mealtime, an abundance of fast food and late-night snacks, and inactivity associated with playing more games than practices: these can all lead to unhealthy lifestyles for children. On the flip side, the increasingly competitive nature of youth sports means that many children who need to be physically active but who won't make the cut to play for competitive leagues are falling through the cracks.

In fact, during the past thirty years—the period in which youth sports have exploded—the obesity rate among children has doubled. That's a paradox that our culture has yet to grasp.

Emotional risk

Okay, okay. “Emotional risk” sounds like what you'd consider after a bad breakup if you were thinking about dating again. What we're describing for children involved in sports, though, is the kind of emotional experience they'll have in relation to coaches. And parents.

A three-year study of young adults' childhood experiences of organized sports, conducted in the United Kingdom, revealed that 75 percent of respondents reported some type of psychological harm from the sport. This included feeling undermined or diminished by coaches or other players.

In the United States, 70 percent of children who begin a sport by the age of eight drop out of it by the time they're thirteen years old. Behind that statistic are too many kids who've lost their love for the sport and their enjoyment of play.

It breaks our hearts to see the damaged relationships between parents and children when parents push a child beyond what she wants to do. It is hard to listen to a parent bark

criticism at a child for the way he plays. (Think about it: criticizing a child for the way she plays makes no more sense than shaming a child for building a faulty sand castle. But we parents sometimes lose our good judgment when sports are involved.)

Also, because youth sports are often organized according to adult ideas of how things should be done, children are exposed to concepts and experiences before they are developmentally ready. This can cause emotional scars. For example, the number one reason children give for playing is to have fun. If concepts of competition, winning, or playing time based on performance are introduced too early, they can harm a child's sense of identity and relationships.

Loss of age-appropriate play

When was the last time you accidentally dropped a Frisbee onto the neighbor's German Shepherd after chucking a basketball at it to free it from a tree?

Pressed by responsibilities, adults often have a difficult time remembering what it was like to be a child. So when we organize sports for kids, what we create is often marked by "adult" priorities. Full-length fields, ten-foot baskets, uniforms the major athletes are wearing, prominent scoreboards and up-to-the-minute standings: these have become standard for youth sports programs. Some parents unable to attend children's games are even tracking along from their work cubicles on apps that provide live stats!

Often, however, our children haven't developed the cognitive or physical skills required to thrive under the mantle of those standards. Rather, kids are best served when adults who design athletic competitions recognize and honor children's natural stages of development: spatial awareness, competitive drive, emerging personal identity, and ability to build relationships.

Bob Bigelow, a former NBA player who lectures on how to restore a healthier perspective on youth sports, concludes that before the age of twelve, children can't understand their role in team sports. They're just too young. Bigelow makes a few more claims as well, based on his research. He suggests that "for youth sports programs to be effective, the age-appropriate needs of children must be met."

And don't miss what Bigelow says next. He writes, "There is absolutely no correlation between athletic development in children and their potential for athletic success in high school and beyond." That's pretty instructional! We're thinking especially of the explosion in the number of elite travel teams in many communities, as well as the frantic drive of many parents who push their kids to excel in sports in pursuit of college scholarship monies—which may or may not actually exist. (We'll dig into this more in chapter 7.)

We promise you: no college coach has ever recruited a player because his team won the Maple Grove Invitational U12 baseball showcase. Not only is it possible that the most gifted seven-year-old player might not continue to develop into a strong player, but the chances are also high that that child will drop out due to either burnout or overuse injury. It is just as possible that some other child, a late bloomer, will surpass the gifted seven-year-old when they both get to high school.

There is simply no evidence that success in the younger years translates into success in high school, college, or professional sports.

Relational costs and benefits

Depending on your age, you may remember playing kick the can in the street while adults in your neighborhood sat on porches and chatted with one another. Maybe the kids on your

street organized pickup games of kickball or baseball. Many families today, though, report that children aren't even *in* their neighborhoods. They're at piano lessons, city chorus, French tutoring, or a session with a professional trainer.

Those committed to higher and higher levels of youth sports are extracted, in many ways, from the life of their communities. Joining extended family for vacation becomes more difficult. Time for free play in the neighborhood is reduced. Opportunities for kids to build relationships with other children, adults, volunteers, and staff at church are compromised. Attending a cousin's weekend wedding becomes unwieldy.

Despite the drawbacks, many families, especially those committed to living out their faith in the world, choose to invest in the relationships they develop through youth sports. They'll share rides to practice and games. They'll bring food and drink for other families. They'll rally to care for the family on the team who has lost a loved one. They'll invite another family to join them one week at church. When Christian families do choose sports commitments, the bleachers become the place where they seize opportunities to love God and others.

As you consider the kinds of sports opportunities you do or don't "owe" your child, we encourage you to weigh the money, time, physical risk, emotional risk, efficacy of early involvement, and relational implications. Ideally, you will consider these things *before* making the decisions that will shape the way your child experiences his or her childhood. We believe you can do this well because choices about your family's involvement in youth sports aren't made in a vacuum: they're informed by the values you already hold.

IS IT LOVE?

We also want to note that the little voice in our heads that says we “owe” it to our children—giving them an extra edge over others, or at least helping them not fall behind—can often mask itself as the voice of love.

“If you love your child, then you’ll do everything you can to...”

The myth sometimes finds traction in the stories of industrious Depression-era grandparents or great-grandparents, who worked their fingers to the bone to provide for their families. Of a kindly aunt who sacrificed the pork chop so that a nephew could eat. Of the dad who took on an early-morning paper route to contribute to the family’s well-being. These were loving adults who wanted their children to do better than they did. They sacrificed so that their children could survive and thrive.

Those are some solid values.

But for many middle-class families today, this is not that day.

More often, for us, the hissing voice insisting that we “owe” our children a particular athletic experience—four consecutive seasons of a sport annually, an elite travel team, a personal trainer—isn’t derived from the same place. Though we convince ourselves that “giving our children everything we can” is predicated on love, more often it is built on fear.

Janine is the mother of a teenage dancer. She recognizes this pulsing anxiety in her parent peers in sports and also in education. “So many people are in such a panic that their kid won’t have a shot at life if they don’t get into the right school or right team or right training program,” she reflects. “I see a lot of people who are completely freaked out about ensuring that their children have access to the kind of professional lives they have, and they’re going to invest any sum in tutors, enrichment, elite sports, and more to make sure.”

That’s not love. That’s fear.

BUT THEY'LL BE SHUT OUT

Many parents believe, “If my child doesn’t play in this particular program, he or she won’t make the high school team.” Unfortunately, this type of language is being used more frequently as the politics of youth sports rears its ugly head.

That may be true. It may not.

John Amaechi, once a starting center for the Cleveland Cavaliers, did not pick up a basketball until he was seventeen years old. He didn’t play organized youth basketball, and he did okay.

Todd Phillips, the first and only All-American men’s basketball player at Eastern Mennonite University, where I (Dave) work, never played AAU basketball. (AAU, or the Amateur Athletic Union, is an American organization that sponsors programs in a variety of sports and offers tournaments for these local clubs.) And Todd did okay.

But let’s say your child isn’t John Amaechi or Todd Phillips. Where you live, it might actually be *true* that if your child doesn’t play for a particular club, or in a particular league, or by a particular age, he won’t have the opportunity to play for his high school team.

Would that be the end of the world? Do you want to be a part of that politicized system?

If you make decisions that align with your family’s values and mission—which might include dinners together as a family, or time with your church community on Sundays—you have won. Having your child move on to the next level of local or regional athletics really isn’t worth sacrificing what matters most.

As you consider whether you “owe” it to your child, weigh whether the “it” under consideration is the ultimate “it.” Weigh whether you’d like to offer your child a different experience.

BUT THEY LOVE IT

In some cases, parents are the ones pushing to increase a child's involvement in sports. In other cases, children are doing the pushing. In others, it is the coach.

When I (Dave) speak to clubs, organizations, and churches about the realities of youth sports today, someone in the audience, during Q&A or later over coffee, will usually comment, "You know, it's really difficult, because our kids really enjoy it. They really want to do it."

If I'm in a good mood, I'll listen politely.

If I'm not, I'll go old school on 'em.

"Well," I'll offer, "When my son Ryan was little, he often wanted to eat a whole carton of ice cream. But I didn't let him. I knew that too much of a good thing meant he'd be less likely to enjoy it later."

I say it with a smile. But they get the message.

We know what's good for our kids and what's not. Somehow, when it comes to sports, we lose our good parenting sense. It starts innocently enough, but before you know it, you're like the family we know who suddenly realized their son was playing on four baseball teams. During the same season! Parents with the best of intentions pick up their kids from soccer practice at school, grab a Big Mac on the way to club practice, and then stop on the way home for open gym for the basketball team.

And statistics are showing that we're not doing our kids any good by losing our voices when it's time to say no. Kids who have played hard at young ages are burning out by ages thirteen and fourteen. By the time they get to college—the era in which many parents hope their children will peak in terms of athletics—they have dropped out of the sport altogether. It is certainly a phenomenon that surprised me (Dave) when I became

a college athletics director, and it's a phenomenon to which we need to pay attention.

There's a time to say yes to playing a sport five days a week. There's a time to say yes to traveling three hours to play in a tournament. There's a time to invest money into a young person's athletic improvement. But when we say yes at the wrong time, or to a child who'd benefit from a no, we increase the likelihood that our children will drop out of sports early, suffer from overuse injuries, and miss out on other aspects of childhood.

DO I OWE IT?

The question remains. Do you owe it to your child to register him or her for a team every time one is offered?

Is it your parental obligation to give your kid a leg up—or a shin guard up—on other kids?

No. It's never your obligation.

But we do recognize that seizing opportunities for advancement might be exactly the right thing for your child. As your

What does our family value?

In the hustle and bustle of family life, we aren't always purposeful about articulating what we value. Here are a few questions to help your family identify your "family values." (Note: These don't need to be specific to sports. In fact, it's better if they aren't. After you have a good discussion, *then* you can figure out how to apply them to different areas of family life.)

- What do we want to be doing with our money?
- What do we want to be doing with our time?
- What relationships are most important for us to honor?
- What are three to five values we want to name as being important to us?

TIP: Identifying your family's values in advance gives you tools for decision making about athletic commitments and other types of activities.

family life unfolds, it may be that you discover your son lives, eats, and breathes baseball. It gives him great joy. You see him gripping a ball during most of his waking hours (and maybe sometimes while he sleeps). A friend who played college ball notices that your child has a natural gift. Your son comes home from practice and wants to throw ten more pitches into the rebound net in the backyard before watching his favorite pro team on television. The game itself gives your child delight, and the person you see him becoming gives you delight.

Or maybe you begin to notice that your daughter comes alive when she has the opportunity to play volleyball. She loves spending time with the girls on her team and stays late to help another girl learn how to serve overhand. She is selected from among the best players to be on a regional team. When your family goes to the beach for vacation, she sets up a makeshift volleyball court so that your whole family can play together. You find her reading up on the history of the sport during her free time. The game gives your child delight, and the person you see her becoming gives you delight.

We simply want you to hear that—because every child is different—there aren't any formulas. Every parent needs to discern the appropriate amount of involvement that will nurture a child's development and prevent burnout or injury.

In other words, we encourage you not to *owe* your child, but to *know* your child.

A LOVING NO

When I (Dave) got home from work one day, my son Ryan came to talk with me. He was just starting seventh grade and already more than six feet tall.

"Dad," he said, "I'm going to lose nineteen pounds."

"Why would you do that?" I asked, curious.

“I want to go out for football, and I need to lose nineteen pounds to qualify for my age group.”

I asked Ryan more about why he wanted to go out for football. He said a lot of his friends were, and other parents were telling him how awesome he would be. People thought he could be a wide receiver. My wife, Deb, and I know a little bit about physical development, and we decided that playing football (and losing nineteen pounds) was not a wise choice for a kid his size who was still growing. In the end, we said no.

Part of our job as parents is to see the big picture that children don't see.

HELPING A CHILD DECIDE

Sam is nine years old. His buddies in the neighborhood want him to sign up to join their town's recreation league soccer team. It's not highly competitive, and a friend's dad will be the coach. Sam's parents encourage him, and he joins the team.

Over the course of the season, Sam's experience isn't spectacular. He doesn't see a lot of playing time. When he's in the game, he often makes errors. The night after the team's final game of the season, as the family eats dinner together, Sam tells his folks, “I'm not sure if I want to play soccer next season.”

And there it is.

That's the moment when the job of parenting doesn't have anything to do with what you owe your child. The job in that moment is to *know* your child.

We don't know Sam, but let's consider the possibilities.

It could be that Sam is not the least bit athletically inclined. Maybe he doesn't enjoy playing team sports or watching team sports. Maybe he's much happier baking chocolate chip cookies, playing Connect Four with a friend, or building a fort with blankets and chairs. It may be that Sam's parents decide he

would be much better served if his other interests were nurtured instead of playing soccer.

It could also be that Sam is a late bloomer. Perhaps, at nine, he has not yet developed the kind of coordination that would allow him to excel in soccer. Maybe he loves the game and has a great mind for strategy but needs a few years for his body to catch up to his heart and brain. It may be that Sam's parents encourage him to play soccer in the neighborhood, take him to watch a few high school games, skip a season of rec league, and then return to it the following season.

The best they can do is to help Sam find the path that makes the most sense for him.

KNOW YOUR CHILD

During her sophomore year of high school, my (Margot's) daughter, Zoe, was agonizing over whether to play basketball. The agony lasted all the way through tryouts.

And beyond.

Zoe, ambivalent, thought she wanted to play basketball to stay in shape between volleyball and soccer, which were her true passions.

Friends who saw her show up to conditioning and tryouts were thrilled, and insisted she play.

The coaches fell in love with her pretty quickly. (I deny that it was only because Zoe is six feet tall; it was definitely her winning personality and extraordinary effort.)

I tried to act nonchalant and disinterested on the outside. But I played high school basketball, and I would have loved for Zoe to have a similar experience.

Those four competing motivations—Zoe's, friends', coaches', and mine—made it really difficult for Zoe, a thoughtful decision maker, to decide. Typical of many children, she would have

loved to please her mom. Typical of many teens, she would have loved to please her friends. Typical of many athletes, she would have loved to please her coaches. What was really tangled and harder to discern was what *Zoe* actually wanted.

And the answer is nowhere in the parent handbook.

The very best I could do was make a weird, painfully creepy effort to let *Zoe* decide. “What if everyone—your friends, your coaches, me—were all on an airplane that crashed into an ocean?” I asked her. “Then what would you do? What would you decide if it was just you?”

Though the odd query didn’t make it much easier for *Zoe* to choose, it may have communicated that it really was *Zoe’s* choice and that I would honor it.

We don’t owe our children any particular experience of youth sports. What we do owe them is a space to discover who they are and who they’re becoming. Sometimes that happens in the backyard, and sometimes it happens in organized sports. If every parent could see into the future, the decisions would be easy. As it is, we pay attention to our kids and help them become who they were made to be. We listen to them, reflect what we see and hear, and help them make the best decisions they can make.

We do our best to honor the unique individual God has made.

Set limits early



Families who find themselves harried and overwhelmed by their children's athletic commitments often ask themselves, "How did we get here?!" Consider and make decisions about what your family will invest beforehand—when the coach hands you the schedule—not after you're caught up in it. Establishing limits early means that your family will be able to honor other important commitments to extended family, community, and church.

1. Money

Decide in advance how much money your family will devote to sports. Some families let a child know what they plan to spend on summer activities and let the child have a voice in how it's dispersed. Other parents look at their budget and decide what they can afford to spend in a year. Others go into debt. Being proactive in deciding at the front end will serve you well.

2. Time

Decide how much time your family will devote to sports. If you have more than one child, it can get a bit complicated! Some families limit each child to one team per season. Others allow each child to choose a sport to play in the fall and the spring, and skip the winter season. You may decide to join a team that does not have games on Sunday mornings, or choose to forego those games so that your family can attend church services together.

3. Physical risk

Decide how much physical risk you are willing to expose your child to. If your child is a baseball or softball pitcher, learn about the risks of overuse injuries. If your child plays football or soccer, learn about the consequences of repeated concussions. We realize there is a risk in walking across the street, and we're not advocating being overprotective. But it is important to learn about the physical risks of a certain sport or a particular position in a sport.

4. Emotional risk

Decide what kind of adults you want to have shaping your child. If there's a coach with a reputation for being verbally abusive to his players, you can draw the line at letting your child play for that coach. A more difficult call is if one of your child's parents—not you, of course!—is unable to control himself or herself on the sidelines. Just as you have an obligation to protect your child from physical harm, you also have a responsibility to protect him or her from emotional harm. Also, make sure your child's sports experiences are congruent with his or her developmental stage.

5. Loss of age-appropriate play

Decide when is the best time for your child to begin organized youth sports. Because the type of leagues available in your area matters, and because every child and family is unique, that age will be different for different children.

6. Relational costs and benefits

Decide what relational sacrifices you and your child are willing to make in order to honor any commitment you make to a team. Inherent in organized youth sports is the possibility of

developing some great friendships with players and coaches. Time away from your normal orbit, however, can jeopardize existing relationships. Are you willing to take younger siblings along to out-of-town tournaments? Are you—and your child—okay with missing a family vacation with relatives? Will you help your child carve out other time to spend with a lifelong friend who won't be playing sports?

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Q&A with Dave



Question: Dave, is it ever okay not to play?

Answer: This is where we as parents can really struggle, isn't it? We naturally want to give our children the best, and we feel like we owe this to them. And while I'm a big believer in the power of sports to develop children, I'm not of the mind that we owe our children any one particular experience of sports.

I can think of a number of situations when parents don't need to feel obligated in this way.

If athletic fees are out of range for a family's budget, that's a legitimate reason not to play. I want you to hear that there's no shame in that. Parents who want their children to have a great experience of sports can help facilitate free play in a neighborhood or after church at a park. I understand this may be difficult for a child to accept, but great parents who are committed to their children's well-being don't necessarily enroll them in pay-to-play sports.

Another legitimate reason for a child not to play is if you have concerns about the way a coach will interact with your child. Some parents reason, "These are the kinds of jerks she'll have to deal with in life, so I'll be there to support her." Other parents decide, "It's not worth it. She doesn't need to play for this one." As a parent, you have the right and the ability to make either call.

I'm also aware that when a child has had to skip a season or two, or when he hasn't played for the "right" teams or coaches,

the politics of certain communities might actually mean that child is excluded from the next opportunity.

Although that's a hard lump for a child and parents to swallow—and I say this with loving-kindness—it's not the worst thing in the world for your child not to play for that program. It may *feel* like it's the end of the world to your child—or even to you! But I believe that you have the skills to help your child reflect on the fact that, over time, his personhood doesn't depend on it. And I would suggest that if those in charge run their program that way, the welfare of the children is subservient to building a winning program. Are you sure you want to be involved with a program that places politics over people?

I'd also like to underscore that if a child doesn't want to play a sport—because he's not wired to enjoy it, or because she has other interests about which she's much more passionate—that's legitimate! This choice may bruise a parent's pride, but that's not a good reason to push a child. If you suspect there's something else at work—that she's just nervous because it's new, or that he's anxious about playing on a team without his best friend—go ahead and push a little. Our job is to serve our children in the best ways we can.

Of course, there are many other legitimate reasons for a child to not play a sport. If it's not the right choice for your family or for your child, you need not waste a moment of worry about saying a loving, compassionate no.

OVERPLAYED

Remember pickup games in the backyard?
Times have changed.

Should I sign up our seven-year-old son for the travel team? What should we do about our daughter's Sunday morning games? Am I the only one longing for a sane balance between children's sports, family time, and church commitments?

In *Overplayed*, David King and Margot Starbuck offer good news for Christian parents stressed out by these questions and stretched thin by the demands of competitive youth sports. Team up with King and Starbuck as they investigate seven myths about what's best for young athletes. Discover what it means to not be conformed to the patterns of elite youth leagues. Listen in as they talk with other parents, pastors, and coaches about the peril and promise of children's sports. Learn practical ways to set good boundaries and help kids gain healthy identities as beloved children of God—both on and off the field, whether they win or lose.

"Every page of this book screams common sense. It's like a portable parent telling me that I'm not nuts for having questions about youth sports, and that I actually have the power to reclaim my sanity and the sanity of my entire family." —**Scott Dannemiller**, author of *The Year without a Purchase*

"This is the book for parents of any kids involved in the abundance of activities our culture offers (demands of!) our kids. *Overplayed* offers biblical and developmental wisdom to help our children grow appropriately into the people God made them to be." —**Caryn Rivadeneira**, author of *Broke*

"This book is a must-read for parents, as it offers solid, helpful suggestions as to how we can, once again, make youth sports about the kids."

—**John R. Gerdy**, author of *Ball or Bands*

David King is director of athletics at Eastern Mennonite University. He has taught and coached at the elementary, middle, and high school levels.

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