

Young athletes overdoing it?

SURE, KIDS NEED TO BE ACTIVE IN SPORTS AND PLAY. BUT THERE'S A LIMIT

WARM WEATHER IS BACK, AND YOU SHOULD be glad if it beckons your children outside to play active sports, because exercise is healthy. But make sure your kids aren't pushing their bodies too hard, risking injury.

In a way, the danger has grown. While once kids played different sports in different seasons, today's array of camps, classes, programs and leagues allows young players dreaming of glory to specialize in a single sport year-round. It's a trend the American Academy of Pediatrics has warned against, suggesting that such specialization not take place before adolescence.

Damon DelBello, M.D., a pediatric orthopedic surgeon at Maria Fareri Children's Hospital at Westchester Medical Center, says research hasn't yet established hard-and-fast guidelines on how much exercise is safe for a child (except when it comes to throwing—see "Little Leaguer's Elbow" at right) or exactly how old a child should be to specialize safely. "Every child is different, and finding the right limits is more art than science," he reports.



Damon DelBello, M.D.

But Dr. DelBello cautions parents against three main ways kids get hurt:

1 Overuse: Repeating the same motion without enough rest accounts for half of all injuries seen in pediatric sports medicine.

"If your young throwing athlete has elbow pain, get it evaluated early before it progresses to something more serious," the doctor advises.

Lifting weights, too, bears watching—especially free weights. "While I know of no data yet proving that it causes a particular injury, I have seen a pattern of back injuries that convinces me it's a danger," says Dr. DelBello. "So I now steer young people to weight machines, which are safer than free weights."

2 Poor technique: "When movements are done improperly, over time that can lead to injuries similar to repetitive stress," the doctor says. "For example, poor throwing technique or a bad serve in tennis makes



'Little Leaguer's elbow': what you need to know

THE CONDITION: Formally called medial apophysitis, this injury occurs when repetitive throwing creates too strong a pull on the elbow's tendons and ligaments.

KIDS AT SPECIAL RISK: Baseball and softball pitchers, football quarterbacks

THE DANGER: Repeated pulling can tear tendons and ligaments away from the bone, pulling tiny bone fragments with them the way an uprooted plant takes soil with it. This can disrupt normal bone growth.

SYMPTOMS: Elbow pain, restricted range of motion, locking of the elbow joint

WHAT TO DO: Rest the affected area and apply ice packs to bring down any swelling. If pain persists after a few days of resting the area fully, or if it recurs when throwing is resumed, stop the activity again until the child gets medical treatment.

PREVENTION: It's recommended that a child not make more than 200 throws in a week—including both practices and competitive play.

Source: Pediatric Orthopaedic Society of North America

kids prone to elbow and shoulder injuries."

3 Carelessness: The danger of accidents is often greatest when the crowds aren't watching. "I recently treated a 13-year-old extreme snowboarder who did fine in competition, then fooled around on his backyard slope and sprained his knee," Dr. DelBello says. "I see more silly accidents from casual play than from competitions." So make sure your young athlete uses the same correct procedures for practice as for a game or meet. ■

To learn more about pediatric orthopedic services available at Maria Fareri Children's Hospital at Westchester Medical Center, please call 1-877-WMC-DOCS.