

When Should My Kid Specialize



Deciding when your child should specialize in sport is an inevitable question every elite sport family comes to during their child's athletic career. The answer to these questions can often be confusing for parents given pressures from what other families may choose to do, feedback from coaches, their own family values, feeling like there is a 'ticking time clock of opportunity,' and more. The answer is often personal to each family and each athlete. We consider the athlete's age, maturity level, future pathways, and athletic development.

As most of the research published leans more towards later specialization over early, we also acknowledge that this isn't a one-size-fits-all answer. For some athletes, they have absolutely no interest in other sports and can only picture themselves as a golfer. For others, they might enjoy playing other sports with their friends in the off-season or trying out for a low-commitment school-sanctioned team or other area of interest. Whatever the decision, there should always be discussion between the athlete and parent(s).

Another helpful tip is also doing your best to not look at this as an all-or-nothing question. By that we mean if the athlete doesn't specialize at 12 years old then they must wait until they are 17 years old. Waiting to specialize might mean coming back to this question in a year from now and going through this process again. It might also mean choosing a point in time or situation (e.g., after the athlete completes their final level in lifeguarding, or if the athlete loses interest in practicing piano). At the end of the day, the answer will always come down to what is in the best interest of the athlete's health and well-being as a human.

In terms of the research, The Board of Certification for Athletic Trainers (2018) noted, that except for a few sports with early peak careers (i.e., gymnastics and figure skating), the odds of becoming an elite athlete in a chosen sport did not increase due to early specialization. Another study noted that team sports, as well as tennis and golf are recommended for the athlete to specialize between ages 14-17. This being due to the risks associated with early specialization which can include psychological stress, burnout, and overuse injury. Again, this is never a one-size-fits-all approach, and every athlete is different.

A different perspective taken in terms of the early specialization debate comes from golfer Michael Balderstone who looked at it as 'early diversification in sport.' He mentioned how skills from other sports can be helpful in golf, such as body awareness, swing development, and physical literacy.

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Beyond the literature, from a mental health and mental performance perspective, it can be helpful to better reflect on how your athlete is wired. When thinking of bringing more attention to one area of their life, it is important to have a balance so that their entire identity is not wrapped up in their successes or challenging moments in golf.

When deciding what is best for your athlete, there are some questions to consider:

1. What are their goals (athletically and non-athletically)?
2. Does your athlete volunteer their time to golf or is it something that the parent schedules for them? (What is their level of personal motivation when it comes to golf?)
3. Is your athlete at or past the age of puberty?
4. When is your athlete their happiest?
5. How does your athlete handle success in golf? How do they handle setbacks or challenges in golf?
6. What is your athlete's personality like? Can they create boundaries and limits for themselves, or do they get obsessive about things?

FOLLOW THROUGH

How can I Support My Athlete Through This Decision?

1. Trust your Instincts – If you have a feeling that your athlete is training too much or needs something different, you're probably right.
2. Remember Why Your Athlete Began Sports - We begin sports at a young age for fun and enjoyment. Ultimately, your child will be encouraged to put more time into their sport if they're enjoying the process of it.

If you're interested in doing some research of your own on this, check out the link below:

https://www.bocac.org/newsroom/youth-sport-specialization-how-early-is-too-early-to-specialize?category_key=at

“For myself, playing something else helped me be a little bit more of a well-rounded athlete.”

- Augusta James, Former LPGA Golfer