

Your Child and Sports

By Genevieve Richards

Many parents have high athletic expectations for their children, sometimes before they are even born. While Dad is dreaming of fathering the next Tiger Woods or Derek Jeter, Mom is praying her child will not only be perfectly healthy, but perhaps even grow up to achieve the same acclaim as Mary Lou Retton or Mia Hamm. While these aspirations may seem ridiculous at such an early stage, in reality they might not be all that far-fetched.

Nature or Nurture?

Scientists in Australia have recently identified the gene thought to be linked to athletic performance. This gene, alpha-actinin-3, comes in two forms: R allele or X allele. R allele produces the protein actinin that is only found in fast muscle fibers and is responsible for bursts of speed and power that sprinters need, while X allele does not produce actinin and is ideal for endurance athletics.

While fascinating, these studies don't mean that your child will never achieve athletic greatness if he or she does not produce actinin—they only indicate that the child not producing the speed gene may be better suited to specific endurance activities and field games such as soccer and baseball, rather than those where speed is essential.

While the scientific jury may still be out on whether great athletes are born or bred, or whether successful athletes may be genetically “ahead of the race,” the external environment in which your child lives has as much impact on his abilities as the ease with which he catches a ball or covers 100 meters.

A study carried out in Boston by Shari Kuchenbecker, Ph.D. on how much psychological and physical characteristics matter in the development of young athletes showed interesting results. The study surveyed 658 coaches (male and female) of athletes between the ages of three and twenty two to characterize the athletes' winning potential from a list of 64 physical and 64 psychological characteristics. Results showed that psychological factors such as “loves to play” and “positive attitude” far out-weighted physical skills like “natural physical athlete” or “good eye-hand coordination.”

Dr. David McDuff, a specialist in behavioral sports Medicine and Clinical Associate Professor at the University of the Health Sciences in Bethesda, Maryland, says that when working with younger athletes he takes a family sports history and has found that athleticism has a genetic basis. He says that if the parents were never exposed to a particular sport, they may not realize that they had a “genetically-based” or natural talent for that sport. “What I usually see is that the children of gifted athletes often choose the same sports their parents played, and therefore might have missed an even greater talent match with another sport,” he says.

For example, I know that good hand-eye coordination runs in my family. My father was once the South African heavy-weight boxing champion; he was the best in a sport which relies on exceptional hand-eye coordination and split second timing. As a small child, I displayed the same skills of hand-eye coordination while learning to play tennis and have always had above average catching skills. I also found that learning to roller skate and ice skate was a relatively simple task, as I had also inherited my father's excellent sense of balance.

Without a favorable setting to nurture natural athletic ability, your child's talent might never reach its true potential. The old adage of “what you put in is what you get out” definitely applies when it comes to sports. Elite athletes are only as good as they are because of talent and a lot of determination.

Dr. McDuff says, “While it is generally true that you get out what you put in, it is also important that an athlete have fun to keep training and competing.” He adds that too much training without breaks or variation can, and does, lead to sports burnout. He gives an example of two 14-year-olds—a distance runner and a gymnast—who came to him with performance problems. “I could tell immediately they were not happy training or competing, both were too focused on the outcomes and not enjoying the fun of the process of training and competing. In both we worked to shift the attention to finding something enjoyable about training and building confidence on it. For the gymnast we focused on attentional shifting and centering; she began to learn relaxation techniques that she put into her pre-competitive routine and she eventually shifted to another club where the coaches were more positive. The runner did not like competition and if she focused on placing first or second in a race she was miserable. In her we changed

the focus to running up while improving her ability to surge and recover. Just by shifting away from the results her times improved dramatically.”

“The bottom line for children is to make it fun and competitive,” **says McDuff**. He adds that it is important to pick out the positives of play for all those who participate. He also recommends changing sports through the year for a young child so that the child is fresh when the next season comes round. “Even if a child has an exceptional talent in one sport, I think it helps long term to compete in another where the talent is not as high.” This suggestion is consistent with recommendations from the American Academy of Pediatrics, which says diversification will lead to more consistent athletic performance and fewer injuries

Finding the Right Sport for Your Child

Most young children, regardless of their sex, enjoy games—both boys and girls love to play baseball, rollerblade, and turn cartwheels. While a child who is seen to be talented may be encouraged to pursue a specific sport, it is important to remember that children involved in an intensive training program for one sport may be at greater risk of injury than those involved in more than one pursuit.

It is also important to ensure that your child is engaged in a sport that is age-appropriate. Joe Churley, MD, professor of pediatrics, adolescent and sports medicine at Houston’s Baylor College of Medicine, says that before the age of five the closest kids come to sports is throwing, catching, running, jumping, and swimming—basically “sports” is letting them do what they like to do in a safe, supervised environment.

He also says that between ages six and nine, children have better visual and motor skills and that their attention span is also improved. “They can do sports that are a little more complex, like baseball and—maybe even football and basketball.” He also advises parents that the emphasis has to be on building skills rather than competing.

Dr. Churley goes on to say that although growth spurts at ages ten through twelve can cause problems, children at these ages can follow instructions, track objects more easily and put together complex sports like hockey, basketball, soccer, and football.

The Mental Game

Brekon Jones, a Sport Psychology Trainer and Performance Coach in Sydney, Australia, says that “combining mental and physical skills training gives the young athlete the maximum opportunity to achieve peak performance.”

“I recommend the use of positive self-talk and positive affirmations,” agrees **Dr. McDuff**. “I try to help individuals or teams develop specific phrases that if repeated, will reinforce the desired action. For example, I did some work for a gymnastics club recently and in meeting with the coaches we agreed that it was vital for young gymnasts to learn to keep their core muscles tight. Through discussions they decided to use the term ‘beam tight.’ Beam tight was then shortened to ‘BT’ which also meant belly tight or butt tight (two core muscle groups). To make practice more fun (another important strategy for children) they introduced ‘BT’ checks and competitions.”

Dr. McDuff adds that for individuals, finding a light and positive phrase that fits within the rhythm of the sport, one that is positive and can be repeated, is important. One young runner he is working with has decided on “run light” and “lift up.” Visualizations are usually added to these affirmations for teens, and **Dr. McDuff** has found that with younger female athletes, if you want a positive outcome you should comment on it with enthusiasm and sincerity and this will often trigger a positive momentum.

Your child’s developing character traits will also determine to what extent she develops as an athlete, as her character helps shape her day-to-day behavior and serves as the basis for her actions—both on and off the playing field. The experts all agree that the main factor influencing your child’s character through organized sports involvement is that she enjoy playing the game, win or lose.

About the Author

Genevieve Richards was born and educated in South Africa and has lived in London for the last eight years. A graduate in public relations and journalism, she has now branched out into freelance writing.