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| [Performance Implications of Physical & Mental Growth of the Young Athlete](http://www.coachesinfo.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=340:tennis-growthimplications-article&catid=95:tennis-general-articles&Itemid=173) |
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| The extensive involvement in sport and physical activity is an integral part of western society. On many occasions sport has been described as a major social institution. The adult controlled sporting mediums largely caters for young people in the age range of 10-18 years off age and involves millions of children world wide. There are proponents of junior sport who view it as a miniature life situation where children can learn life-long skills that will enable them to tackle the tasks of later life more competently. Critics on the other hand counter by pointing out that the excessive physical and psychological demands placed on the young people in these programs are primarily designed to satisfy the egos of coaches and parents. In order to gain a balanced point of view one needs to carefully consider the physiological and psychological development of children in this age range and ensure that these factors are taken into account when designing and conducting sporting programs for the young children.   * Introduction * Physical Development * Conclusion (Phys.Devel) * Psychological Development * Conclusion (Psyc.Devel)   Introduction  Many factors must be taken into account when considering the growth and maturation of the human body and the readiness of children to compete successfully and without fear of injury in a sporting competition. It is well documented that children participate in competitive sport at many levels, ranging from free play through to the highly organised competitive league. This exposure provides sport with significant power and influence in young children's lives.  In many countries interschool sport and inter club competitions are an everyday occurrence and could be classed as a way of life. These sporting competitions are not without their problems and short comings, and in a number of instances there is opposition to the "institutionalised" type of organisation that sport displays. Some issues include the readiness of the children, appropriateness of the physical contact, the early specialisation, parental pressures, and the suitability of the game for children. Other concerns include the early talent identification programs that are being established and the intensive training and demand the sports are placing on the growth and development of the young bodies. One only has to look at the intensity of the training programs that are required for elite level women gymnasts to appreciate what damage can be done. This example is parallel to the program for young tennis players, where boys and girls train and play virtually all year round on a variety of hard surfaces. The impact on the body in both of these sports is significant and could have an effect on the growth of joints and limbs. While evidence shows that growth plate injuries due to excessive training are not common, care should be taken during the period of most rapid gain in height (on average 14 to 15 in boys and 12 to 13 in girls), where severe injury to the end of long bones could threaten the growth plate.  Physical Development  **Physical growth and maturation**: Children grow at different rates at different ages, and different children also develop at different rates, so there will be early and late developers. Not only are the rates of growth different, but also the changes in the body proportions can vary, and this will directly affect the ability to perform. Teachers and coaches are well aware of the young student who has a rapid growth spurt and develops into a gangly type of individual, lacking power and co-ordination. Then, as puberty is reached, there are the differences in body shapes and proportions that become apparent between the sexes, and these changes will also cause problems to arise and difficulties to be experienced. One of the greatest problems experienced by those having a growth spurt is the lack of muscular structure to support and assist with the co-ordination.  Effect of training and exercise on growth and development: Because of the lack of standardisation in research techniques, samples and variables selected for observation, it is very difficult to conclude whether exercise has a negative, positive, or no effect at all on skeletal development. With the simultaneous effects of normal growth, and a variety of other factors, it is very difficult to accurately attribute growth to exercise. While it has been difficult to separate maturation and training effects on performance, one facet of skeletal growth that is affected is the bone density. Bone density is found to increase with physical activity and decrease with inactivity. Evidence of this has been found in tennis players where the bone of the dominant arm has a higher density than the non-dominant arm.  Aldridge (1996, p.61) concludes that, "there appears to be a sports specific relationship between skeletal development maturation and success. This relationship is probably not produced by the different training required for different sports, but is more probably an inherited characteristic in the individual". It therefore follows that the late developer is probably more suited to gymnastics while the early developer is more suited to sports involving contact, strength and speed.  Regular physical activity is believed to have a favourable influence on the organism during growth and development. Studies have shown that physical activity is also a significant factor in controlling weight and in the growth of skeletal and muscular tissue. While training can reduce body fat and increase muscle bulk, it has been demonstrated that regular activity has no apparent effect on stature, skeletal proportions and physique, or biological maturation as commonly assessed in growth studies (Malina, 1980, 1983a).  Studies undertaken comparing young athletes of local, national and international calibre with the general population generally indicated that young athletes, on average, grow and mature in a similar manner to non-athletes, that is, the training and stress of competition does not advance or delay the growth and maturation of the active young athlete (Malina,1984; Malina, Meleski, & Shoup, 1982). Although some variation during adolescence exists due to individual differences in the timing of the adolescence growth spurt, the individual's somatotyping is relatively stable during growth and is not significantly influenced by intensive training, except for local changes associated with heavy resistance training. This may not be sufficient to markedly alter an individual's somatotype (Malina and Bouchard, 1991).  **Patterns of physical growth**: Significant material has been produced outlining the growth patterns of children from birth through to full maturity. Research studies have shown that the most rapid period of growth occurs immediately after birth, and then the growth rate slows to a modest steady process during childhood. This is followed by an adolescent growth spurt and then by a deceleration until the growth pattern finally stops. A similar pattern is noted in the relative growth patterns of both boys and girls during childhood, with boys being slightly taller and heavier than girls at the same age. This difference is seen as no real significance in terms of sport performance. Boys will experience their adolescent growth spurt about two years later than girls. Following a rapid gain in height there is a period of maximum gain in weight. This will be due to a large increase in body fat in girls with a relatively small increase in muscle tissue, whereas with boys it is due to a decrease in body fatness and a significant increase in muscle mass. This means that post adolescent girls have only about two thirds as much muscle as their male counterparts and about twice as much body fat.  As the age at which the adolescent growth spurt occurs from one individual to another, there will also be a variation in the readiness of being able to compete in sports events against their peers. The significant differences in age that the growth spurts can occur means that in sports programs matched on age, a number of the competitors will be disadvantaged if they are late maturers. In the childhood years, both boys and girls have the potential to develop strength and increased ability to perform motor skills prior to puberty. During adolescence, boys will develop greater strength and show an increase in performance and endurance than girls. This extends into early adulthood.  The tendency for girls' performances to plateau around the time of puberty has often been attributed to the physical changes that occur, such as the increase in the percentage of body fat. There are however, other reasons such as social rather than biological factors that can be attributed to the decline in girls' performances. Strength is another factor that gradually increases in boys during childhood with boys being slightly stronger than girls. The boys continue to improve during adolescence whereas girls tend to decrease. The rate of increase in boys will of course vary according to their stage of maturity.  At the junior level of competition, the following question is often asked, "Should boys and girls compete against one another?". Because of the very slight differences in size and strength, there is no reason why they shouldn't be competing on the same team during the childhood years. The potential for causing injuries because of size and strength is almost non existent at that stage of development. However, as they reach adolescence the situation changes significantly, with the boys possessing more height, weight and muscle mass, and thus having an advantage in the physical contests and therefore safety and fairness becomes a concern.  Smith , Smoll and Smith (1989, p.56) have recommended that "after the age of eleven, boys and girls should have their own competitive opportunities in those sports in which body size and strength are determinants of proficiency and injury and risk". It is during the adolescent growth spurt that the long bones increase their length by activity of the specialised cells located in the growth plate at either end of the shaft. The cartilage composition of the growth plate is the weakest point in the shaft and is susceptible to injury. If injured, this could cause problems with future growth of the long bones. The Academy of Paediatrics' Sports Medicine Committee has recommended that intense athletic activities such as long distance running and weight training be restricted and, in fact, discouraged during childhood until the rapid growth phase in early adolescence has been completed.  **The early and late maturer**: The problems associated with early and late maturation are many and varied, and these seem to be particularly relevant in the cases of boys where strength and weight can be important. The early maturer has the advantage in sports where size, speed and physical strength play a major role in success. It has often been noted that the early maturer is able to excel in several major sporting codes. These individuals often enjoy a decided advantage over their team mates and opponents throughout primary school and into the first three years of high school. The early success can have long reaching effects as parents, coaches and the individuals themselves begin to place all their energies into their training to the detriment of their academic program and all round development.  Problems quickly arise when the peer group starts their growth spurt and begins to catch up in terms of strength and speed, and the advantage that the early maturer had is lost. Bewildered and despondent, the youngster is left with an uncomfortable feeling of failure and in some instances rejection as those around him start to have the success that he previously had experienced. To prevent this problem from arising, it is important to provide the early maturer the opportunity to compete with those of a similar maturity, not of the same chronological age. This can be done in both team and individual sports.  Conversely, the late maturer has the problem of experiencing little or no success during those years leading up to adolescence. The late maturer will be small in stature and have less strength, endurance and speed than their average peers. If sport is important to these individuals, it is imperative that they be directed to those activities that are not primarily dependent on size and strength for success. They could also be persuaded to postpone their entry into the competitive arena until such time as they felt comfortable to compete. This may mean waiting until 16 years of age to start participating in competitive sport. This will enable the youngsters to avoid the negative sporting experiences that come with delayed maturity which could be a 'turn off" from sport for life.  Parents and coaches should be aware of the implications of delayed development and establish their expectations accordingly. Given encouragement and the correct management, there is no reason why the late maturer cannot develop and enjoy a successful sporting experience in the senior years of high school.  Conclusion  The question of physical development remains a complex issue, and research has shown that it is affected by many factors. While it is essentially genetically controlled, it is also affected by environmental conditions. The influence of training on the developmental process is still open to debate, and more research is necessary before definite conclusions can be reached. A sound knowledge of processors of growth and development will enable coaches and teaches who are working with children, to organise the training programs that will be more beneficial to the children from a physical and psychological perspective.  Psychological Development  **Why is the mental development of the young athlete so important?** Millions of children throughout the world are involved in school and extra curricular physical activity programs. Gould and Martens (1979) found that on average children participate intensely in organised sport 11 hours weekly for an 18-week season. A later study by Martens (1986) revealed that in the United States alone 25 million children under the age of 18 years are involved in organised physical activity programs. Given this involvement, the implications for the contributions of sports psychology and the consideration of the mental development of young children is most important.  The psychology literature has highlighted the significance of the social development and the changes in self-esteem that take place throughout the growth of the young child. Given that sports participation peaks around 12 years of age, the sporting experiences in those early years can be critical in determining the attitude that the young children adopt towards sport and physical activity. Contrary to many beliefs, participation in organised sport is not always beneficial and in fact can have a negative impact when it comes to sportsmanship and human relationships. Martens (1978) points out that character development, sportsmanship and achievement orientations do not necessarily occur through just participating.  **Psychological and sociological considerations**: In between the ages of 7 and 12 years of age, the children are emerging from the dominance of parents to where the peer group influence increases in importance (Spink, 1990). It is in this period of growth that the children develop a sense of identity and an ability to socialise (Harter, 1978). Sport, and in particular team games, provides a median or opportunity through which this development can take place. Often these games are seen to be most beneficial if they are organised and run by the children themselves, away from the influence and direction of adults. This format gives the children feedback about themselves and indicates clearly their performance level as compared to their peer group (Passer, 1988).  **Stages of psychological development**: Harter's (1981) study investigated the dimensions and development of self-esteem and found that eight year old's do not distinguish between cognitive and physical competence whilst children between the ages of 8-12 years clearly differentiate between the five salient domains: scholastic competence, physical appearance, peer acceptance, and behavioural conduct. With adolescence, four dimensions emerged, these were: close friendships, romantic relationships, job competence and morality.  The results from Harter's study have demonstrated that with the changes in cognitive and physical maturity, changes will also occur in the various competence or behavioural domains. Passer (1996) examined the three psychological issues relevant to guidelines for children's participation in youth sport. The three issues were: motivational readiness, cognitive readiness and potential harmful consequences of participating.  The first issue of when children are in a state of motivational readiness is closely linked to their social comparison behaviour. From a sporting viewpoint, social comparisons occur when children become attracted to, seek out and take advantage of opportunities to compare their physical performance and abilities with others. Studies by Roberts (1980) and Sherif (1976) have indicated that very young children do not compete because they are either incapable of or uninterested in social comparison. It is therefore important to assess the age at which children's social comparison motivation begins to occur.  Naturalistic observational studies have shown that children pass from a stage of autonomous achievement orientation at about two to three years of age (Veroff, 1969; White, 1959), to a stage where children increasingly act to maximise their self-gain from three to five years of age (Pepitone, 1980). At this age level, children will simply act to acquire something they value but will not compete for it in the true sense of social comparison competition (Pepitone, 1980). Other studies performed by Butler (1989) and Pascuzzi (1981) have also supported these findings.  The social comparison motivation has been found to significantly develop during the early years of primary school. Frey and Rubble (1985), in classroom observation studies, found that there was a sharp increase in children's social comparison related to performance assessment once the children began first grade. The research has indicated that children develop an interest in social comparison as a means of determining where they are ranked and how they are performing by comparison with their peers. The major factors that were listed by both primary and secondary school students as focal points for comparison included social comparison interests, physical and athletic ability (Alder, Kless, & Alder, 1992; Buchanan, Blankenbaker & Cotten, 1976). It is therefore to be expected that as children reach this age group they will look to sport and physical activities to develop their skills and make comparisons with their peer group.  If motivational readiness is to be used as a guide for participation in sport and physical activity, it would appear that participation should be around seven to eight years of age, and then it should be carefully monitored to ensure that the children are coping with the competitive situation.  The second issue identified by Passer (1996) is the children's cognitive readiness for competition, and more specifically their information-processing abilities. It is important for young athletes to be able to attend to and remember considerable amounts of information in order to successfully perform the skills required in a specific sport or activity. At pre-school age the children tend to have a short span of attention and are easily distracted, whereas once they progress through the primary school they are able to concentrate for longer periods of time and focus on the tasks required (Ruff & Lawson, 1993). The children also become much more adapt at gathering relevant information and ignoring task-irrelevant information. In addition, the children's memory capabilities improve as they grow older and they are able to store and process information at a much faster rate and are much more flexible in their thinking. They also display other cognitive abilities during this stage, these being simple logical reasoning, problem-solving skills and language comprehension. It has been proposed that children's cognitive abilities are such that they do not develop a mature overall understanding of the competition process until they are about 12 years of age (Coakley, 1986; Roberts, 1980).  Coakley (1986) proposes that it is around 10-12 years of age that children finally develop the capacity to recognise other viewpoints, while adapting and making allowances for group perspectives. There still is some debate amongst researchers as to the specific ages at which these perspective-taking abilities develop, as some more recent studies have shown children as young as three years of age adopting another child's perspective at simple tasks (Shaffer, 1993). However, as Coakley (1986) points out, children as young as seven years of age playing a team game often appear completely oblivious to what the other team members are doing and are only interested in the ball and themselves. Observation of children of this age will support this viewpoint put forward by Coakley.  Passer (1996) identified psychological harm as the third potentially harmful consequence that children risk when they participate in organised sport at a very young age. Research has shown that sport competition can have negative psychological effects if it is mismanaged and is inappropriate for the age group. There is always the danger of a lack of motivational and cognitive readiness for competition being a problem with young children. While many may be able to enjoy the playing of sport, they may not like the competitive nature of the games and, as a result, they will be likely to drop out at the first opportunity. Parental pressure and continual peer group evaluation can place additional stress on young athletes and result in an unnecessary competitive component being created which again causes the young athletes to turn away from the sporting scene. When children also just participate to please their parents, high competitive stress has been found to be created (Scalan and Lewthwaite, 1984). McGuire and Cook (1983) have also found that children who participate in youth sport programs with the purpose of pleasing their parents, are less likely to be satisfied with their own sports experiences and are more likely to discontinue with their involvement.  It is important for parents, coaches and administrators who are responsible for children's sport to appreciate that young children do not fully understand the complexities of causal relationships and, as a result, may form inaccurate assessments of their physical skills competence based on their success or failure rate in sports. This can lead to children gaining inaccurate perceptions of their performance outcomes and can lead to them developing unrealistic expectations and misplaced judgements.  Children are very sensitive to the response that they receive from adults, and in many cases adults do not realise this is the case. This response can be a verbal response, which may be either positive or negative, or it may just be in the form of body language, which is interpreted in a particular way by the child. Examples of this include the way in which a child may misinterpret the lack of action, facial expressions or constructive mild criticism from an adult. As a result of how they interpret this response they may become distressed or apathetic. Research has shown that young children are more likely than older children to infer someone's emotion based on a simple outcome such as a remark, a gesture or a facial expression (Gross and Baliff, 1991).  This finding must be kept in mind in the context of sport, where young children are consistently under the eye of coaches and parents, and will be very sensitive to any gestures and responses from these individuals. The children are forever on the lookout for adult responses and feedback with regard to their performance outcomes. Because of their relatively limited cognitive skills, younger children will also experience difficulty in interpreting instructions as well as older children. This problem may lead to children becoming frustrated and unduly stressed along with the parents and coaches. Careful planning, and an appreciation by adults of the situation confronting the young children, can go a long way to avoiding unrealistic expectations of their cognitive and physical abilities. Task demands and level of speech, adjusted to correspond with the developmental level, should assist in making participation in sport a more enjoyable experience for the children.  **Why do children participate in youth sports?** A significant amount of research has been performed over the past 20 years to provide a wealth of data on why children and adolescents participate and drop out of sport (Wankel and Sefton, 1989; Weiss and Chaumeton, 1992; Weiss and Petlichkoff, 1989). From their studies, these researchers have proposed the following reasons for participating:   * competence (learning and improving skills); * affiliation (being with and making new friends); * team identification (being part of a group); * health and fitness (getting and staying fit); * competition (excitement, demonstrating skills); * just having fun.   While the reasons cited are basically intrinsic rather than extrinsic in their orientation, there is little doubt that as the children become older and participate in a more competitive environment, the extrinsic values such as trophies, winning and premierships become a primary motivational factor.  It is important to understand that the children's reasons for participation will be largely influenced by psychological and physical development. Harter's competence-motivation theory (1978, 1981) identifies components contributing to the development of self-perceptions, affect and motivation. According to this theory, children are motivated to become competent in their environment, and will participate with the aim of gaining mastery of tasks. Their motivation will however, be influenced by their level of self-esteem and how they perceive their own performance, particularly with reference to their peer group. The information that children use to judge their competence varies with age. Researchers (Horn, 1991; Horn and Hasbrook, 1986, 1987; Horn and Weiss, 1991) conducted several studies to investigate the nature of the preferences of young children. The results indicated that younger children (ages 8-9) used adult feedback and evaluation whilst the older children (10-14) relied more on the feedback gained from peer group evaluation. In later adolescence there was a tendency for the use of internal and multiple criteria such as goal achievement, self-improvement, speed, ease of learning new skills, and enjoyment of the activity.  **Why do children drop out of sport?** Children's sports participation peaks between the ages of 10-13 years and then consistently declines to the age of 18, where a relatively small percentage of individuals remain in competitive sport (Ewing and Seefeldt, 1989). The reasons given for discontinuing participation are many and varied. The following reasons for withdrawing were cited by Whitehead (1997), boredom, having other things to do, lack of success, too much pressure, poor coaching, embarrassment, ridicule, rejection, friends leaving, expense, injury, work and other commitments. Many of these reasons correspond to the results from previous studies that have been carried out to investigate reasons for the youth drop out rate in organised sport. These include studies by (Duda, 1992; Ewing and Seefeldt, 1989; Gould, Feltz, Horn, & Weiss, 1982; Gould and Petlichkoff, 1988; Watson, 1986).  Children's interpretation of success will ultimately influence their feelings about a sport and will influence their enjoyment and their behaviour in that environment. Success and enjoyment should encourage them to persevere; however, this is not always the case and other opportunities and external factors could cause them to take on other activities.  **What are the effects of organised sports?** Highly structured competitive sport can place a tremendous importance on winning. This emphasis can carry over into the children's sporting domain via the parents, coach, teachers and peer group. With the development of sport at the junior level, children are being exposed to a competitive environment at a very young age. With the high exposure of sport in the media today children often watch skilled senior players executing feats and behaviour patterns that are beyond the younger athletes capabilities. These high profile athletes may in turn be set up as role models for the youngsters, resulting in unachievable goals being established.  The basic problem stems from the fact that children's sport is usually organised by adults and this takes away the spontaneity that exists when children organise their own games. With most children relying on feedback from adults, it is important that this is positive and encouraging otherwise motivation, self-esteem and perceived ability may suffer.  The supporters of competitive sport would argue that the playing of organised sport prepares the child for the competition they will experience in later life. It plays an important part in the socialisation process, and brings children in contact with social values. Sport is viewed by many as an anticipatory model of society which prepares children to take their place in society.  There are however, critics of sport competition who believe that too much emphasis is placed on winning, resulting in the development of anti-social behaviour such as, aggression and cheating. The problem stems from adults failing to appreciate that they are dealing with children and not miniature adults. Scanlan (1985) and Passer (1982) have documented the stress factors that children feel in competitive sport. They have found that those who are higher in competitive trait anxiety perceive greater state anxiety in competitive environments. In addition, children with low self-esteem experience greater stress compared to children with high self-esteem. Those children who have a low expectancy of success will also experience greater competitive stress, while those who lose often will experience greater immediate stress than those who regularly win.  **Sporting myths:** Over the years a number of arguments have been offered to support competitive sport as an important medium for children. It was commonly believed that children's competitive sporting programs produced better athletes. Kemp (1985) stated that in some sports, international performances occur at a very young age and therefore it is essential that basic training occurs during childhood or early youth. Examples of sports that come under this category would include gymnastics, swimming, skating, tennis and rhythmic gymnastics. There are, however, many sports where there is no positive relationship between an early beginning to training and success. These include such sports as football, basketball, cricket and rugby. Because of the physical demands of these activities, it may be advantageous to allow the young athletes to learn the basic skills via minor games in the early stages of their physical development rather than the formalised competitive situation. Studies carried out by Clough, McCormack and Traill (1993), Robertson (1982, 1991), and Robinson and Carron (1982), have all reported a high drop out rate of young athletes who became disillusioned with the formal rigours of organised sport.  The question of sport providing additional play opportunities has been put forward to support the argument for competitive sport. However, the importance placed on competitive sport and the time it takes away from other leisure activities may also lead to children turning away from organised sport. In addition, the nature of competitive sport does not allow for the majority of children to experience success. With winning being emphasised, only the top few will be rewarded for their efforts, while the majority of children who need the physical activity will choose to move away from the area. According to Alexander (1991), a number of children will take on the spectator role and never participate in any further physical activity.  The belief that children will need to compete in later life and that sport provides the perfect medium for learning has often been raised in defence of organised competitive sport. Eitzen and Sage (1986) have pointed out that there is no documentation to demonstrate that children are worse off for not competing in competitive sport at a young age. It is not just the competing that is the problem but the intensity of competition; and the associated stress and anxiety that is detrimental to performance and participation (Martens, 1977; Scalan and Lewthwaite, 1984; Scalan and Passer, 1979).  Other factors have been suggested as reasons that actually discourage children from continuing in physical activity through to later life. These include the poorly trained coaches who may mean well but are not sensitive to the needs of youngsters, and have little experience in developing these needs. A second major reason is the lack of control that children have over their sporting environment. Adults direct the competition and this competition may not resemble the competitive experiences that they have later on in life where they are more in control of the competitive situation.  It is evident that some children may be positively reinforced by the competitive experiences, whereas there are a majority of children who will be alienated and not wish to compete or participate in physical activity in later life.  **What can coaches do?** Sport can be a training ground for life-long achievement, and given the significant time that sporting coaches have with the children during both training and match days, there are numerous opportunities for the coach to ensure positive benefits arise from the sporting experiences. Classic research about coaching children has been conducted by Smoll and Smith (1980) at the University of Washington. The results of their studies revealed a strong correlation between instructional techniques, positive reinforcement, mistake-contingent technical instruction and the high rating received from the children. An experimental study was also conducted by these researchers, whereby coaches were trained to exhibit desirable coaching behaviours such as encouraging remarks and positive feedback to the children. The children in the experimental coaching group indicated a greater liking for their coach, and showed significant positive changes in their self-esteem when compared with children who were coached by coaches from a control group, who had not had any guidelines to assist them with their coaching techniques. These results clearly demonstrate the effect that positive coaching behaviours can have on the psychological development of children. Other studies by Black and Weiss (1992), Horn (1985) have found that remarks from coaches that are sincere, positive, and encouraging after a good performance frequently lead to effectiveness, competence and enjoyment. One can conclude from these results that coaches need to be given guidance about both the physical and psychological development of children and how best they can adapt their teaching to gain maximum benefits. The major factors that need to be considered in developing sound coaching techniques include positive feedback, encouragement, developing realistic expectations, and creating an environment that is free from fear where new skills can be developed.  **What can parents do?** Numerous researchers including Horn (1991), Horn and Hasbrook (1986, 1987), Horn and Weiss (1991), have emphasised the importance that the young children place on feedback from parents, coaches and teachers. Sensitivity towards the children regarding their performance is therefore of paramount importance. Self-comparison and feedback will occur in all situations, but it is important that adults are more understanding and place the importance of sport and its related achievements in the true context of importance. In other words, the children should be made to realise that failure to win a competition does not mean that there is little hope for them in life. The emphasis first and foremost should be placed on having fun, participation and developing skills. While most children want to play sport for enjoyment and fun, parents can inadvertently turn the activities into a pressurised situation where the competitive element is over-emphasised. Parents can also fall into the trap of comparing their children's performance with others instead of encouraging skill development. It is important that the children are made aware that physical and skill development do occur at different times for different individuals and this will help them to appreciate why they are not performing at the same level as others. This is important in terms of the child's self-esteem and development of self-worth.  Conclusion  Competitive experiences are an important part of a child's development, and correctly managed it can be a very positive training ground for teaching one to compete successfully in the numerous areas that will confront them throughout life. The real value of competition will depend on how it is conducted. Parents and coaches have a very important role to play in ensuring that development and transition occurs in a manner that will maximize the young athletes' inherent potential and provide an enjoyable learning experience along the way.  References  Adler, P.A., Kless, S.J. & Adler, P. (1992). 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