

## Sports, kids and parents . . .



By Jane Whiting

Hopefully, the 2008 Summer Olympics will inspire many more kids to get active in a sport. The sight of aspiring Canadians competing in everything from swimming and gymnastics to basketball and martial arts, should encourage increased participation in a range of physical activities this fall.

However, while many kids need the active support of their parents as well as enthusiastic coaches – the majority of them just want to enjoy a sport without the pressure of Olympic-like expectations!

Whether kids join a school team or club, take individual lessons, or play at a competitive or recreational level – the physical exercise alone will contribute greatly to their overall health and development. Keeping kids active plays an important part in reducing the risk of childhood obesity and disease – plus the psychological and social benefits of playing sports have also been well documented.

Some children are not instinctively attracted to a specific sport, and parents may be unsure of how or where to get them started, or know which activity is going to provide a safe and enjoyable experience. School sports and fitness programs are a good place to start, but do not always provide a variety of activities on a regular or frequent enough basis to appeal to all children. And parents should not assume that the required daily exercise needs of their children are being met at school.

To help parents understand what the recommended activity levels are for various ages and how to find a sport that provides a healthy and positive development, they can go to a number of informative sources. Sports organizations and associations provide a number of guidelines for parents. Long-time hockey coach and dad Liam Maguire (Editor of *Centre Ice*), also has some great tips for parents on how to support their children in sports.

“The most important aspect to me as a coach is to make parents aware that the best thing they can do for their children is to have them participate,” says Maguire who has coached kids for seven years. “I don’t care if it’s hockey, baseball, soccer or whatever – they need to be active.”

In Health Canada’s *Family Guide to Physical Activities for Children* (aged 6 to 9), it recommends at least 90 minutes or more of daily exercise, which can be achieved throughout the day. However, as most children are encouraged to

increase their physical activity by 30 minutes a day, it suggests that too many are not reaching this minimum goal.

More sports-oriented parents with athletic children who are already involved at a competitive level, can also benefit from expert guidelines on how to promote appropriate expectations and attitude.

Maguire has an eleven-year-old daughter who is a competitive runner, plays basketball and swims. His 12-year-old son is a big hockey player too, so Maguire understands the role of being both a parent and a coach in an individual and team sport environment. “Because of my experience as a hockey coach, I know that my job as a parent is to watch my kids play and enjoy the game. It helps that I know nothing about basketball – except for the fact that the guy who’s coaching the team knows what he’s doing!”

While Maguire urges parents to be more than a chauffeur, he warns them against becoming a car-coach or criticizing their child’s game. When dads and moms have conflicting ideas about their child’s training or playing methods, he suggests that they either step back or step up as a volunteer and become a qualified coach.

He believes that sharing an active passion for sports with his children has developed a bond that will last forever. “It’s absolutely vital to go out and be there for them. Don’t spend your time on a cell-phone, cheer them on and talk to them about it afterwards in a positive way. We all have to remember that kids are not mini-adults.”

Canadian Sport for Life (CS4L) is an initiative of Canadian Sport Centres and Sport Canada, that promotes well-being and excellence in sports. First and foremost it recognizes that children play to have fun, while supporting a model of Long Term Athletic Development (LTAD) as a means to help children become physically literate. A CS4L booklet aimed at parents, explores how children experience sports and what motivates them.

Its main advice to parents includes discussing the sport with their children to find out what their goals are, to avoid specializing in one sport too early, or putting too much emphasis on winning. CS4L reports that when kids are pushed into a sport because a parent enjoys it or has an unfulfilled childhood ambition, they are less likely to continue in the activity and are more susceptible to burnout.

In a section on FUNdamentals, CS4L also informs parents about ways to encourage a sport that promotes age-appropriate development. For girls and boys ages six to nine, the guide suggests enrolling a child in a variety of seasonal sports and activities. Talk to the coach and school about the training program for the sport to ensure it works with the child’s level of athleticism and ability.

CS4L includes a useful code of conduct in the booklet for both parents and kids to observe. The code is developed by the Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport for use by community coaches to help create a positive environment of communication and respect. It focuses on fair play, good sportsmanship and acceptable behaviour. Take a look online at [www.LTAD.ca](http://www.LTAD.ca).

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