

Sports and the Family

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Participation in athletic activities and playing on sports teams has often been viewed as contributing in a positive manner to the character development of children. In fact, there are many benefits to participating on sports teams 3-4 hours per week, including cardiovascular health, learning discipline, self-denial, and sacrifice for others, and learning how to play on a team. However, a remarkable change has occurred over the past 20 years in regard to the degree of involvement on sports teams by children. Today, many children are under extreme pressures from both coaches and parents to commit themselves to give an unprecedented amount of time and effort to participation in team sports, including those teams which travel regularly on weekends and during the summer. This has led to injured children, damaged families and poor behavior by parents and coaches. (See youtube video on the difficulty youth face when families don't maintain balance in athletic activities <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IyFxmCSt4R0>.)

Pope Benedict shared his wisdom on sports and youth with ski instructors in November 2010, "Important also is your testimony of faithful laymen that even in the context of sports activity, are able to give the right centrality to fundamental moments for life of faith, especially to the sanctification of Sunday as the day of the Lord." A significant change in the relationship children and families have with sports has damaged

marriages, family life and the ability of numerous children to enjoy sports as a pleasant, relaxing childhood activity. This is explored in Mark Hyman's book, "Until It Hurts: America's Obsession with Youth Sports and How It Harms Our Kids" and Michael Sokolove's book, Warrior Girls: Protecting Our Daughters Against the Injury Epidemic in Women's Sports.

Reasons for growth in sports obsession

Numerous factors have influenced the present harmful obsession with sports in Catholic families. The most notable is the loss of the traditional western civilization view of masculinity as primarily based on maintaining a strong and healthy character through daily growth in virtue. Also contributing to the sports obsession is parental confusion about the nature of masculinity and femininity in children, parental selfishness, weakness in spiritual fatherhood, permissive, pleasure-seeking parenting styles, a father's preoccupation with sports as the means to relax, excessive competitiveness and pride, and strong hopes of the child earning a college scholarship. Unfortunately, some fathers even develop the obsession as a result of not being as successful as he wanted to be in team sports when he was young.

Damage to marriages, children and families from excessive focus on sports

In my clinical work I see serious emotional conflicts in children as a result of their parents' obsession with their athletic activities. These include sadness and anger, a belief that sports are more important than

their parents or siblings, a growth in selfishness and competitiveness, performance-based self-esteem and approval-seeking from their parents. The children have also lost the psychological benefits of family dinners and vacations. Children suffer from “burnout” along with purely physical problems like orthopedic overuse injuries.

The increased excessive focus in family life upon children's athletic activities is creating a number of very serious conflicts in Catholic marriages. These include marital conflict from a lack of priorities and balance in married life, lack of time for marital friendship, loneliness, depression and/or anger, particularly in the wife, permissive parenting (in the sports-obsessed parent) and loss of a sense of Sunday as a special day for the family and for the Lord.

Coaches

Coaches can facilitate a healthy relationship with sports if they focus on developing good character instead of solely on winning, if they correct selfishness, control anger, demand respect, give children a reasonable, balanced schedule and avoid scheduling practices and games during the dinner hour and on Sundays.

Parental actions to protect children, marriages and families

Parents, particularly fathers, need to take steps to protect the culture from its present obsession with sports. These actions could include working as a couple to establish healthy family priorities with God first, the marriage second and the children third, communicating to sons that

male confidence results from developing a healthy personality (primarily through growth in virtues), establishing Sunday as a day for the family and for the Lord (not for sports), allowing participation in only one sports team at a time, warning children of the dangers of excessive competitiveness and its associated pride, presenting healthy role models to children, never criticizing a child's athletic performance, letting go of a possible obsession with sports, body image and a craving for youthfulness and, finally, recognizing that one should not try to live out childhood dreams for athletic success through one's children.

The Right Balance

There is every reason to be hopeful that Catholic families can grow in wisdom and in prudence so that their children can enjoy the numerous benefits of balanced athletic activities without becoming obsessed or controlled by them. If you would like more information about the topic discussed here, go to www.childhealing.com or www.maritalhealing.com.

For a copy of the full article excerpted above, go to www.childhealing.com/articles/sportsandfamily.php

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