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HEADLINE: Don't push young athletes

BYLINE: By Betsy Flagler

Q: My 3-year-old son has exceptional athletic ability for his age, and I'm trying to figure out the best way to foster his abilities. He loves to play sports and can handle a lacrosse stick, play hockey and hit a thrown baseball. He has more coordination than the 6- and 7-year-old kids in our neighborhood. I don't want to be some crazed parent, but at the same time I'd love to continue his development. -- A father in Lexington, Mass.

A: "The child should continue to be exposed to many activities without any pressure to perform at such an early age," says Paul R. Stricker, author of a new book for parents and coaches, "Sports Success Rx! Your Child's Prescription for the Best Experience" (American Academy of Pediatrics, \$15.95). "And there is no support for having a child this young start to specialize in any one activity."

Even though the boy already shows promise, his skills will still develop sequentially, just probably a bit faster than his friends, says Stricker.

"Most children in the 2-to-5-year age group do not truly gain a benefit to future sports performance from focused practicing of skills," he says. "Plus, overly focused training at this age just increases the potential for injury and excessive pressure."

After about age 5, practicing tends to translate into performance benefit in some sports activities, but not all, says Stricker.

"Expectations are unrealistic, and pressures are high on young kids to perform in sports simply due to a lack of knowledge about how those sports skills develop," he says.

The goal of his new book: to try to provide that knowledge to parents and coaches.

Ann Todd, former executive director for North Meck Youth Soccer Association, in Cornelius, N.C., says: "I've seen kids burn out early because of parents putting them into sports too soon. A 3-year-old can master the skills, but is not able to understand the game."

Foster the various skills, Todd suggests, but don't put a 3-year-old in game-like situations.

Todd, a mother of two, recalls with her own son: "We put him in soccer at age 4. He was too young and was reluctant to return the next year."

In soccer, she says, "The kids don't understand, 'Why is everybody not sharing the ball with me?'"

And in T-ball, tiny players understand hitting and catching. But put them on bases, Todd says, and it's a whole different level of understanding. At about age 6, kids start to understand the competition side of things a little better, and the nuances of the game. Until then, tying it all together is tough.

No strong correction or critique is needed, says Michael Gurian, family therapist and consultant. A lot of praise is good.

"This child's natural athleticism will be an asset all his life," says Gurian, author of "The Wonder of Boys" (Tarcher, \$14.95). "At the same time, at three years old, this child's inborn nature does not have to be pushed or prodded. Three-year-olds need more bonding than they do organized activities, so my primary suggestion would be for the father to actively engage his son's athletic talents every day, if possible, and make pleasant and active bonding the priority. Let the athletics take care of itself."