

TEACHING KIDS SPORTS: FOUNDATIONS FOR YOUTH ATHLETES

Presented by The National Academy of
Sports Medicine

The main goal for children, when it comes to exercise, is for them to move. However, while we're encouraging young "athletes-to-be" how to move their body and move them well, we are setting the foundation for their future in sports and life (in general). Let's explore this important subject a little more in depth and learn how you can teach foundational sports skills to children: as a proud parent, [a youth exercise specialist](#), or a [youth sports coach](#).

How Sports Can Help Children Move Efficiently

Young children are forming neurological patterns to travel from their brains to move their bodies efficiently as they practice their skills kinesthetically. These skills develop over their years of growth and become more and more effective with practice and repetition.

As early as walking age [onset], a child's muscle patterns for proper gait and movement establish through adequate functionality for limbs and muscles activating at just the right time (Chang, Kubo, Buzzi, Ulrich, 2006).

Muscle organization appears to emerge slowly (and to require an enormous amount of practice before stable patterns begin to occur). Simultaneously, other walking and movement patterns emerge earlier and require more stabilization (Chang, Kubo, Buzzi, and Ulrich, 2006).

The earlier instructors, trainers, teachers, and coaches assist children with movement patterns required in sports, and the more time muscles and the body [in general] can progress properly and execute efficiently.

Why and How to Encourage Children to do Sports

Fitness leaders and coaches can encourage early sports skills to support their developmental function and create movement patterns to lead children into sports activities. Infant reflexes and reactions can progress into rudimentary motor skills, which develop into fundamental motor skills before becoming sports skills (Fundamental Motor Skills and Sports Specific Skills, 2020).

Children usually do well with exercise and movement engaging in the process and knowing that the activities they are going to do will add fun to their day. The ideas outlined in this post can be pieced together through gameplay, circuits, or even obstacle layouts to keep sessions upbeat and lively.

The perfection of movement isn't the goal; the goal is to allow a child to practice teaching their body to move the way they decide they want for it to go. Every physical movement a child experienced from birth into their later adolescent years is something brand new.

Foundational moves for sports skills can be quite straightforward. Again, adjustments to each activity session can be a change in theme or presentation to keep the exercises lighthearted and fun for students.

6 Important Sports Skills for Children:

When it comes to teaching the fundamentals of sports for children, there are a lot of movements and drills you can utilize while [training youth](#).

The movements underlined below are some of the best for recruiting muscles, increasing coordination, and improving the health and wellness of children.

1. Throwing and Catching
2. Jumping/Hopping
3. Running
4. Kicking
5. Ball Bounce
6. Stopping/Starting

Let's look at these a little closer to learn how to best practice these effective movements for youth exercise.

#1 Throwing (Underhand and Overhand)/Catching

Sports that require an overhand throw can include softball, volleyball, baseball, and tennis (Fundamental Motor Skills and Sports Specific Skills, 2020). Children have to practice understanding how to move their eyes and arms and legs simultaneously with this movement.



Instructions for teaching children to throw overhand and underhand include:

1. Keeping their eyes focused on a target throughout the throw (i.e., a hoop for a beanbag)
2. Stand side-on to the target
3. Keep their throwing arm nearly straightened behind the body
4. Step towards the target with their opposite foot of the throwing arm
5. Work towards hip to shoulder rotation during the throw
6. The movement finishes with the throwing arm following through to end up down and across the body

#2 Jumping/Hopping

Hopping or jumping with two feet and single-leg variations occur in sports like basketball and baseball.

Landing safely with knees being behind the toes is a significant progression that children want to master as they learn how to move more and more. Initially, when jumping, children jump innately. Their balance is what can take practice in single-leg movements. Galloping, skipping, and bounding with freeze or pause moments can be a way to enhance the stabilization of hopping and stopping that motion. Cones or other markers give children a target to jump or hop to as well as a place to challenge their pause or stabilization.

#3 Running

Running is included in just about every sports event. Children need only to run from one point to another and practice biomechanics with coaching (see NASM Blog for a post on [Teaching Children to Run Early](#)) Instructions for teaching children to include the following steps:

1. Keeping their eyes focused forward throughout the run
2. Landing right below their hips with their feet
3. Arms bend at elbows and move in opposition to their legs
4. Ground contact with the front part of the foot (midfoot to forefoot)
5. The body leans slightly forward with neutral hip alignment

#4 Kicking

Kicking motions occur in sports like kickball and soccer. Instructions for teaching young athletes-to-be how to kick include set up similar to that of a throw. The opposite arm and leg start in front of the kicking leg. Children can learn to kick with their inner foot or with their toe.

The size and weight of balls is of consideration, depending upon the stature of those kicking. Some children may need assistance using the power in their core and posterior chain to ignite their kick, while others will learn how to control the propulsion and power of their kick to lead the ball to shorter targets.

#5 Ball Bounce

Ball bounce occurs in sports such as basketball. Hand-eye coordination helps children work on their dribble to get a feel for the ball bouncing off of a hard surface, back to their hand, and then back to the ground. Dribbling and ball bouncing are taught in front of the body before introducing children to bounce the ball lateral to their body.

Instructions for teaching children how to dribble or ball bounce include:

1. Keeping their eyes focused forward on the ball throughout the bounce
2. Their goal is to make contact with the ball using the mid-fingers of one hand at about hip height
3. Their wrist and elbows should bend then straighten to push the ball
4. Their hips and knees should be [ultimately] flexed during the bounce

#6 Stopping/Starting

Young athletes-to-be can be one speed: fast. The goal of a coach is to teach children to control their body movements with targets to assist them with starting and stopping at prescribed interval times. Cones and targets can give them starting and ending points.

A whistle or hand motion can keep their attention to initiate a movement to begin or to ask them to stop. These skills are particularly critical in sports, remaining in bounds, and maintaining safe parameters for all participants.

Students start to show an understanding of a variety of movements required sports early on in their movement years. By watching their leadership examples, they visually see how to accomplish these skills while physically fine-tuning their sports skills throughout childhood.

Positive reinforcement for participation and for making attempts at these skills motivates kids to keep homing in on their skills and developing self-efficacy of their exercise time.

For an Additional Resource on Programming for Youth Athletes:

Be sure to [check out this video](#) on the how to program sports for youth athletes utilizing corrective exercise as a basis.

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