How it started

How To: Guide My Future Olympic Champion?

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0-5 to 16+
A parental guideline for talented youth athletes

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All parents want the best for their child, even the ones who are shouting along the side of their children's sporting games. If you would like to be an example of a sports’ mom or dad your child can be proud of, you might want to learn more about the Parental Guideline.

Introduction
Specific parental behaviour can positively or negatively affect the development of your child1. Guiding your child the wrong way can lead to a decrease in enjoyment, a decrease in performance and even dropout of the sport. Successful guidance can make the difference between your child becoming an Olympic gold medallist, a successful sports player who is having fun or a non-sporter. There is a lot of scientific knowledge regarding guiding youth athletes. The aim of this paper is to bridge the gap between science and practice by creating a guidance tool for you, a parent, who wants the best for his or her child when it comes to sport participation. This guidance tool could help improve the performance of your child. The guidance tool we partly created is a timeline consisting of different paragraphs, based on scientific literature and interviews with parents of talented youth athletes. These paragraphs are categorized with age-related phenomena/factors which can occur during their lifespan. This guideline was established with the help of two parents who we have interviewed: 1) Marijke ten Cate, parent of a 16 year old national runner and- 2) Corina Blom, parent of a 13/15/18 year old speed skater. The timeline is based on the chronological age. Therefore, the age categories can slightly differ between individuals and between boys and girls. The factors are coupled to a certain developmental phase in which it is of great importance. However, the factors in a certain phase should not be neglected during the other phases. For example, it is important to keep in mind that positive mind-set and positive coaching are important at all times. One last comment, the different developmental phases in this guideline should be used with caution in ‘early maturing sports’ (i.e. gymnastics, figure skating) since the investment and specialization stages occur at an earlier age. The guideline (figure 1) is available at www.parentalguidelineforathletes.com and it is possible to receive a flyer via the coaches of talented athletes. Furthermore, there will be the opportunity to get the flyer at parents meetings at TopSportTalent Schools.
Figure 1: An example of the timeline which the parents can use as a guidance tool.

0-5 years old

1.1 Talent detection
Talent detection is unreliable during this early phase and there is simply no research concerning talent detection at this age. It is important not to emphasize specific sport skills. Children first need to learn basic motor skills like proper walking and standing. During this phase the children should be introduced to the concept of sports.

6-11 years old

2.1 Sampling/ Differentiation
It is important to develop a broad set of general skills at a young age. Therefore, it is advised to participate in multiple sports. Participating in multiple sports also increases the chance for children to find the sport which suits him/her best, or more important, is most enjoyable. However, spending too many hours in intensive sport-specific practice at a younger age might lead to early dropout from sport due to overuse injuries or burnout phenomena. The child must have at least 1-2 days without training during a week. This allows children to play outside besides the (deliberate) training, which is of great importance in this stage. Therefore, free playing outside should be stimulated. It is thought that early specialization through spending a lot of hours in sport-specific practice is the only way to reach the top. But this is not entirely true, it does not necessarily lead to higher performance in adulthood. Moreover, successful youth performance does not necessarily predict success at senior level. The message for you, as a parent, is that you have to be careful with early specialisation and allow your children to play (outside) as well.

2.2 FUNdamental
The FUNdamental stage is highlighted in the Long-term Athlete Development Model (LTAD). Within this stage the priority for children aged 6-9 should primarily consist of fun. Therefore,
competition at this stage should not be concerned with winning or losing. However, in some cases, there is already emphasis on winning (unintentionally) imposed by parents. It is important to emphasise on the enjoyment and the effort that children put in during this stage, as highlighted during the interviews: “fun is the most important aspect of sport participation.” (Quote from Interviewer). Children should develop a broad range of skills and key factors, such as agility, balance coordination and speed in an enjoyable and structured fashion. The role for you as a parent is facilitating in finding the right sport(s) and highlighting the importance of making fun.

12-15 years old

3.1 New environment

3.1.1 Puberty

During puberty a child undergoes some drastic physical and mental changes accompanied by a new environment such as a new school or new sport clubs. Peers and coaches start taking a bigger role, while the role of parents decreases. Whereas parents provide a leading role in introducing their child into sports, this role should change towards a supporting parent, ensuring their child has the opportunity to excel. As highlighted in the interviews: “-this lesser extent of control could be difficult.” However, during this stage, children also strive for independence and individuality while still being dependent on their parents, sports club and school. This strive might clash with the constraints at a child’s home, sports club or school. As a parent, it is important to give the child freedom and individuality in his/her sports. Since trying to control the child can distort the balance between dependence and independence. This distortion can lead to pressure and a loss of enjoyment. Therefore, it is important to set clear rules together with the child and allow him/her some freedom, especially within the sport. Furthermore, as highlighted in the interviews: “as a parent you are responsible for creating a safe environment and provide a certain balance between sports participation, school, friends and other hobbies”.

Although professional sport behaviours like eating healthy and not hanging out with friends late at night are important, your child has to develop this behaviour by him/herself. Ideally, your child would come up with his/her own decisions regarding professional behaviour which leads to a higher intrinsic motivation. As a parent you are in the position to talk about the benefits and/or risks of certain behaviour to make your child aware of these, allowing him/her to make well-founded choices.

3.1.2 Time management

Due to the new environment the child engages in during this stage, like high-school, there are some challenges the child has to deal with. S/he enters a double career where time spent in sports and school increases. The pathways in sports and education cannot be viewed as separate, but rather influence each other. It is important to give the child some freedom to find his/her own balance in time management, since parental pushing distorts this balance. As a parent you should discuss time schedules with the child, to make sure the s/he does not suffer from stress due to incomplete homework or failed exams. It is advised to inform the school about the long hours s/he has to spend in sports. Furthermore, the child could struggle with pressure from peers who might not understand why their friend has less time to hang out with them. It could be beneficial for the
child to discuss this with his friends. The role for parents in this is mainly supporting the child in how to start these kind of conversations.

3.2 Physical maturation

3.2.1 risk of injury
At this phase the child starts or has already started to grow rapidly, the growth spurt. On general, this happens from 9-10 years for most girls and 11-12 years for boys. During the growth spurt, children might be more prone to injuries due to a decreased muscle-joint coordination. This does not imply children have to train less during this phase. However, the physical status should be kept in mind by parents to make sure an injury is observed at an early stage.

3.2.2 decreased performance
During the growth spurt, coordination may decrease as muscles and joints grow at a dissimilar pace. Therefore, children can experience a decrease in performance. It is important for children (and parents) to understand the decrease is only temporary and natural. Furthermore, some children experience a bigger decrease in performance than others, which could lead to frustrations. You, as a parent, should not push or blame the child during this period of decreased performance. Since s/he might start to doubt about his/her ability to perform certain tasks they could do before. This could lead to frustrations, a lack of enjoyment, a further decrease in performance and eventually even dropout.

3.3 Height (RAE & differences in PHV)
Children experience their growth spurt at different pace and onset. Some might reach their peak height velocity (PHV) earlier or later compared to their peers. This can lead to differences in performance during competition, since optimal aerobic trainability begins at the age of PHV. The PHV can be influenced by the month a child is born in. In sports with a cut-off date, for example the first of January, the children born in January are older compared to the children born later in the year. These children might have more chances to perform better in their age category because they are relatively older, the relative age effect (RAE). It is important for all children to be aware that being an early or a late maturing child does not predict or influence future performance.

As a parent, it is important to explain to an early maturing child, who might be at the top-level in his age category, s/he probably gets more resistance when everyone is matured. This can prevent a lack of motivation at a later age when s/he is not the best anymore. On the other hand, a child who matures late might not be selected for professional selections, but could still have the potential to become the best when s/he is matured. Whenever a child mentions s/he does not understand why others perform better, you, as a parent, could explain that your child has not yet entered his/her growth spurt and might be better at a later age. You, as a parent should focus more on learning outcomes and the athlete’s personal goals instead of comparing the performance with others, who might mature earlier.
3.4 Psychological factors

3.4.1 Coping
To overcome certain challenges and to maintain motivation during this stage, children have to develop certain psychological factors. Each athlete will experience some setbacks or decreases in performance during this stage. To cope with these setbacks and reduce the induced stress, an athlete as to develop certain coping mechanisms. Coping – which basically means dealing with certain circumstances - can decrease injury and increase performance 17. The emotion based coping mechanism is important since a child can speak about his emotions to express him/herself. As a parent you should make sure your child feels free to express his/her emotions, which is part of the safe environment at home you should strive for as a parent. Your child can focus on how to solve his/her problem while you as a parent can help your child to think about the problem and which steps s/he could take to overcome the problem.

3.4.2 Goal setting
Secondly, as a parent you can discuss goal setting with your children. Outcome goals are associated with earlier dropout and a decreased performance, while more self-centred performance goals or process goals are associated with better athletic development 18. Therefore, children should focus on process goals, like trying to execute some new learned technical/tactical abilities during a match, or self-centered performance goals, like improving their personal best. Outcome goals, like winning medals or performing better than others should be avoided.

3.5 Parental support

3.5.1 Emotional
Be interested in your child’s participation. During the interviews it was highlighted that it is important to realize your child has certain ambitions and is trying to fulfil these. Whether your child participates in a developmental or professional environment, provide positive reinforcement for both effort and outcomes - this will enhance your child’s competence, motivation and enjoyment 19. Focus on helping your child achieve his/her goals rather than your own goals for him/her. Provide emotional support to your child after tough losses or personal setbacks and celebrate their victories. Furthermore, it is important to trust the coach and not to interfere with him/her, especially in front of your children.

3.5.3 Time spent by parents themselves
Due to the increasing amount of training and travelling hours when children reach a certain level, hours spent by parents to support their child increases as well. Parents heavily rely on their partner and other family to manage the time necessary to support their child’s needs within and outside the sport 20. Unfortunately, acquiring coping strategies to fulfil the demands put upon parents is often developed through trial and error, which is not efficient 21. Therefore, gaining understanding in the needs of parents and successful coping strategies is important. For parents, it is important to be aware of their involvement and share their own experience on in/efficient and un/successful strategies, to find the best individual strategy as fast as possible. At our site you can find a forum where you, parents can discuss experiences and learn from them together.
3.6 Nutrition

In all training sessions, athletes burn a lot of energy which needs to be replenished before the next training session to accelerate recovery and be able to perform well during the next training session(s). Therefore, an athlete has to make sure nutritional intake is sufficient. Especially during this stage, where the growth spurt starts, a child has to eat a lot. Insufficient nutrition during this phase is associated with a higher risk of injury\textsuperscript{15}. Therefore, it is important to make sure your child eats enough, to make sure s/he has enough energy. As a parent you can keep track of your child’s eating pattern – for instance with the Voedingscentrum app: ‘Mijn Eetmeter’ - to make sure his/her energy intake is sufficient. Furthermore, you could visit http://mijn.voedingscentrum.nl/ for guidelines regarding sufficient nutrition and fluid intake or approach a professional dietician.

Take home message

With this Parental Guideline insight is given in how to support your talented youth athlete in the best possible way. A lot of different aspects are important to take into account as you have read in the guideline. There is not a ‘one size fits all’ approach possible, and therefore it is very important for you as a parent to talk with your child about his/her (and your own) expectations and needs. You can use the Parental Guideline to start the conversation with your child (and others involved) to get most out of his/her potential and eventually reach the top in a healthy and enjoyable way. Good luck with this beautiful and challenging journey!
References


