

COLORADO STATE UNIVERSITY

# Sport Specialization Amongst Youth Athletes

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## **Introduction**

Youth sport specialization in the United States (U.S) has grown significantly in the last couple of years. Approximately 60 million youth participate in sports every year, and about half of those youth participate in a club sport alongside an interscholastic sport to focus on a singular sport year-round (Jayanthi et al., 2019). Participation in youth sports provides several benefits to children. Children have increased physical activity, improved academic performance, and better health-related quality of life (Strosser, 2023). However, several scholars believe that there has recently been a significant shift in the motivation behind youth sport. Youth sports used to be a fun activity for youth development, but it has shifted into an adult-driven game focused on training and performance. Has this shift in motivation altered the ethics of sport? Does sport specialization benefit or hinder the youth who participate in it? Youth sport specialization has become a heavily debated ethical issue amongst scholars, physicians, coaches, and parents.

## **Statement of Problem/Issue**

Recently, there have been studies published to answer the big question of whether specializing in a sport increases the overall risk of injury in youth athletes. There have also been studies done on how parents and coaches influence a young athlete's decision to specialize in a sport. The biggest question that can be asked surrounding this topic is whether it is ethical for coaches and parents, and other individuals in the sports industry, to encourage sport specialization despite the increased risk of injury that could come from it. Given that these young athletes are still under the care of their parents and under the influence of their coaches' advice, ethics play a big role in the decision-making process of both entities.

There are three ethological theories that a person operates out of when making an ethical decision. These ethical theories are deontology, teleology, and existentialism (Malloy et al.

2003). It can be implied that most often coaches operate using the deontology theory because they follow the rules of their sport and have the duty to protect the health of their athletes.

Parents often operate using the teleological ethical theory because they focus on what is going to be the best thing for their young athlete. Most parents want the best for their children in any way that they can provide it. The athletes themselves often operate out of the existentialist approach because they utilize their autonomy and what is best for themselves. However, it is important to note that these are not always the cases, but the ethical theory that one operates out of, and their personal morals and values play into their decision on when it comes to allowing youth athletes to specialize in a sport.

## **Literature Review**

### **Defining and Understanding Youth Sport Specialization**

Even though several articles have been recently published on the topic of youth sports specialization, the definition of youth sports specialization has not been concrete. Youth sport stakeholders need to understand the definition of youth sport specialization in order to fully comprehend and improve clinical practice (Bell et al., 2021). Most stakeholders refer to sports specialization as year-round training in a singular sport (Bell et al., 2021). However, the authors of this article conducted a study that involved a variety of stakeholders and utilized the Delphi method to develop a concrete, consensus definition of youth sport specialization. After three rounds of discussion and examination, the stakeholders came up with the following definition: “Sport specialization is intentional and focused participation in a single sport for a majority of the year that restricts opportunities in other sports and activities” (Bell et al., 2021, pg. 1241). There are also additional clauses to this definition if multisport or single-sport athletes meet the following elements: participate in a single sport for >8 months out of the year, have limited or

ended involvement in other sports or activities, and their focus on a single sport limits time for other activities (Bell et al., 2021). A lot of recent articles have utilized this definition or a similar one to operate with when conducting research. This definition is also important to understand when dealing with ethics because it helps define the ethical issue that is being evaluated.

In addition to the article that defined youth sport specialization, Kliethermos and other authors published a description of how the topic has previously been studied. The article highlights that there has been research conducted on the impact of sport specialization on child and athlete performance and development, the impact of sport specialization on musculoskeletal injury risk, and early discontinuation of sport, and finally, organizational guidelines and recommendations for healthy and safe youth sport participation (Kliethermos et al., 2021). The article also states that there needs to be further studies in prospective research, sport-specific research, and performance and sport-specific skill research (Kliethermos et al., 2021). It is important to examine previous studies that have been completed on the issue because these studies paint a path for further exploration and consensus.

In his article, Baker focuses on the idea of whether or not youth sport specialization is a requirement for adult expertise. This article highlights the pros and cons of youth specialization, along with the pros of early sport diversification. Specializing in a sport at a young age could give an athlete deliberate practice in their sport, which would allow the athlete to become an expert in their sport (Baker, 2003). On the other hand, specializing in a sport may also have psychological consequences on young athletes and cause concern for discontinuation of sport (Baker, 2003). Early diversification in sport, on the other hand, allows a young athlete to understand the mechanisms of the sport, increase their aerobic activity, and should not put them at a disadvantage for adult expertise (Baker, 2003). It is important to note both the pros and cons

of sport specialization because ultimately, the knowledge of both contributes to one's standing on whether it is ethical for athletes to specialize in a singular sport at a young age.

### **Physical and Psychological Impacts of Sport Specialization**

Several articles have been published surrounding the idea of increased injury within youth sport specialization. In an article published by Jayanthi and other authors, they conducted a study of multiple other articles surrounding the topic of health consequences in youth sport specialization. From their study, the authors found that early sports sampling is beneficial to a young athlete because it promotes long-term success and enjoyment in sports (Jayanthi et al., 2019). The study also found that specialization in a single sport before adolescence can contribute to overuse injuries and burnout (Jayanthi et al., 2019). One thing to note is that specialization in a sport consists of increased training and competition loads (Jayanthi et al., 2019). Overall, the article states that there is potential for negative injury and psychological consequences in youth sports participation (Jayanthi et al., 2019). However, despite these concerns, the risk of injury may not outweigh the potential benefits of participating.

In his article, Strosser studies the health consequences of youth sport specialization. The authors of this article also conducted a literature review study. They examined previous research that has been conducted on the risk of injury in youth sport specialization. The authors of this study concluded that there is an increased risk of injury to young athletes who specialize in a singular sport (Strosser, 2023). The article states that the increase in the chance of injury could be a result of athletes' increased sports training and volume (Strosser, 2023). However, this study was not as big and complex as the other health consequence study that is mentioned above. Therefore, the author's ultimate conclusion was that there needs to be further research conducted on the topic (Strosser, 2023). Both of these literature review studies concluded that youth sport

specialization requires a young athlete to increase their time spent training and competing, which can lead to overuse injuries or just increase their risk of injury in general. There is the possibility that it can also lead to psychological consequences as well. However, it could be beneficial for the area of risk of injury, and youth sports specialization should be researched further and more in-depth.

Another area of research that has been conducted surrounding the issue of youth sport specialization is how it affects youth athletes' mental health and illness, along with how it satisfies their physical needs. In his article, McFadden and other authors conducted a study on a group of youth hockey players in regard to how sport specialization affects their mental health and illness, and (dis) satisfaction of physical needs. The authors surveyed approximately 525 youth hockey players (McFadden et al., 2016). In this study, the authors concluded that athletes who specialize in a sport reported higher physical need dissatisfaction than those who participate in recreational sports (McFadden et al., 2016). These results may be due to the fact that often youth athletes who specialize in a sport are performance-driven; however, they do not often get rewarded for their efforts throughout their specialization journey (McFadden et al., 2016). The study also found that there is no significant difference in mental health and illness between athletes who specialize in sports and those who do not (McFadden et al., 2016). This is an important area to be further researched because there could potentially be a correlation between the risk of injury and mental health in athletes. However, in general, mental health is a rising issue amongst youth and young adults; therefore, it is important to understand how sports specialization plays a part in that.

## **Influences of Coaches and Parents in Youth Sport Specialization**

In addition to the variety of articles that have been published surrounding increased risk in youth sport specialization, several studies have been conducted surrounding youth sport coaches' knowledge and perspectives on the issue. Post and other authors conducted a study that surveyed youth coaches' baseline beliefs and perceptions of youth sport specialization, because understanding these coaches' perceptions can help essential stakeholders in the sports industry develop strategies for education around safe sport participation (Post et al., 2020). The authors received survey responses from 367 youth coaches; the survey combined questions about coaches' knowledge of the recommendations for safe sport participation along with questions regarding the coaches' knowledge of youth sport specialization (Post et al., 2020). The results of the survey showed that 4 out of 5 coaches were unaware of the safe sport recommendations (Post et al., 2020). For context, these recommendations note that youth athletes should not play one sport for more than eight months per year, and participating in organized sport should not play more hours per week than their age (Post et al., 2020). The study also concluded that most youth sport coaches were highly concerned with youth sport specialization. Overall, this study concluded that even though the majority of coaches were unaware of the youth sport recommendations, they were all concerned about the risks involved with youth sport specialization.

In an article surrounding the same topic, Disanti and other authors also completed a study that surveyed coaches' attitudes and beliefs surrounding sport specialization. However, in this study, the authors wanted to examine the opinions of both high school and club sport youth coaches. The results of this survey concluded that, on average, club coaches were more likely to be in favor of sport specialization than high school coaches (Disanti, 2019). Both sets of coaches

also concluded that team sex was a big influence in the coaches' perception of sport specialization; for example, female athletes are more likely to participate in sport specialization (Disanti, 2019). Finally, the coaches' primary sport influences their perceptions on the topic (Disanti, 2019). Overall, the study concluded that even though club coaches seem to be more in favor of sport specialization, other factors contribute to all youth coaches' perceptions (Disanti, 2019). The study did indicate that the competitive context of sports has a significant influence on coaches' perceptions (Disanti, 2019). It is important to study and understand coaches' knowledge and beliefs on youth sport specialization because, as the article written by Post and other authors mentions, coaches are one of the biggest influences in a youth athlete's sport decisions (Post et al., 2020).

However, it is important to note that coaches are one of the biggest influences in a youth athlete's sport decisions; parents also have an influence on their children. In the area of youth sport specialization, there have also been studies conducted on parents' perception and influence surrounding the topic. An article published by Bell and other authors describes a study that they conducted with 1000 parents in order to understand how parents perceive sport specialization. This study concluded that over 80% of parents were unaware of the safe sport recommendations (Bell et al., 2020). These are the same recommendations that were mentioned in the surveys conducted on youth sport coaches. The study also found that 55% of parents considered sport specialization to be a problem, while only 43.3% believed that sport specialization could lead to an overuse injury (Bell et al., 2020). Overall, this study proved that many youth athletes' parents are concerned about the risk of injury and sport specialization being a problem (Bell et al., 2020). This concern showcases that the awareness of this issue is increasing; therefore, it is important

for parents to understand the variety of aspects linked with sport specialization, given that their knowledge and perceptions of the issue reflect on their young athletes.

Similar to the study conducted by Bell and others, Wright and several other authors conducted a study on the same topic. However, for this study, these authors chose to focus on how parental perfectionism and parenting styles are two dimensions of parental influence on young athletes. It can be assumed that when a parent focuses on achieving an elite status for their child, that aspect of perfectionism can influence children to pursue sport specialization throughout their young sport years (Wright, 2019). This study also aimed to study how parental involvement in their child's youth experience stems from their parenting styles (Wright, 2019). Overall, this study concluded that parents grouped by level of both perfectionism and parenting style do play an important role in their perceptions of youth sport specialization (Wright, 2019). For example, parents who fell into the high authoritarian and perfectionism level reported greater support for sport specialization (Wright, 2019). While parents grouped in the high authoritative and moderate perfectionism level reported lower support towards the issue (Wright, 2019). Studying these aspects of parents can showcase what kind of parents endorse sport specialization and indicate what types of parents pressure their children's sport choice and participation.

### **Discussion**

Although this research does not specifically talk about the issue of sport specialization in regard to ethics. This research can still be used to answer the ethical question of whether it is ethical for coaches and parents, and other individuals in the sports industry to encourage sport specialization despite the increased risk of injury that could come from it. This ethical issue can be evaluated from all three of Malloy's ethical lenses: deontology, teleology, and existentialism.

From a deontological perspective, the insights of both Post and Disanti indicate that coaches have a duty of care to protect the health and safety of their athletes. Oftentimes, coaches can utilize the safe sport recommendations provided for youth athletes. These recommendations outline how long a single sport should be played within a year, along with how many hours per week a youth athlete should participate in organized sport. Post's article in particular showcases that many coaches are unaware of these recommendations; therefore, it could be indicated that several youth coaches are unintentionally failing their athletes by allowing and possibly encouraging them to specialize in a single sport. These articles also show that even though the majority of coaches are unaware of the safe sport recommendations, many of them are still concerned about sport specialization being an issue

From a teleological perspective, the insights from Bell and Wright suggest that parents are also unaware of the safe sport recommendations that their young athletes should be abiding by. However, parents' knowledge of these recommendations is not as important as the athletes' coaches, but parents should still be aware of how sport specialization can affect their children. Often, parents either support or do not support sport specialization, depending on their aspects of perfectionism and their parenting styles, as noted by Wright. It can be assumed that parents alone face the ethical issue of wanting the best for their children; however, they may risk potential harm in the pursuit of those outcomes. These articles, similar to Post and Disanti's, indicate that parents are also just generally uneducated about sport specialization, but about 50% of parents do raise concerns surrounding the issue.

Lastly, from an existentialist perspective, athletes may feel empowered by having the ability to make their own sports decisions; however, the influence that coaches and parents contribute to an athlete's decision could affect the true autonomy of their decision. In his article,

McFadden analyzed the physical need satisfaction of youth hockey players. McFadden's study concluded that the physical needs of athletes who participated in sport specialization were not being met, while those who participated in recreational sports were (McFadden et al., 2016). This result also contributes to the idea that external pressures may limit a young athlete's true autonomy. These findings suggest that there could also be an ethical dilemma of allowing athletes to exercise their right to true autonomy, or are these athletes conforming to adult-driven expectations?

Overall, since the rise of youth sport specialization, several ethical questions and concerns have come to rise. Are athletes pursuing this specialized course of action because their parents and coaches want them to? Will specializing help them obtain scholarships and college play, or will they obtain an injury before they are able to see if their hard work paid off? Sport specialization has changed the motivation behind sports; however, it is very important for those in the industry to understand the potential side effects of changing the environment from fun and fair to performance-driven sport.

### **Conclusion**

There are several changes that the sports industry can make to encourage coaches, parents, and athletes to consider the ethics behind the issue. More education can be provided to both coaches and parents concerning the recommendations for safe sport participation, encouraging parents to prioritize long-term well-being over short-term achievements, and promoting the benefits of multi-sport participation are just some actions that can be taken to provide ethical analysis and insight on the issue. Knowledge and education are the best remedies for ethical issues because they ensure that all parties obtain all the crucial information and facts to make an informed decision.

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