



SUCCESSFUL SPORTS PARENTING

Gender and the Young Athlete

In looking at development across the various disciplines, the notion of gender as a discriminating variable comes up again and again. However, caution is warranted: we don't want to separate males and females to such an extreme that we treat them as being on opposite ends of a spectrum. But, on the other hand, there are some gender-related differences that we must be aware of. Ideally, we want to strike a balance between knowledge of gender-related differences but not so much so as to form incorrect stereotypes and over-generalize.

Given this, it seems beneficial to summarize some of the more relevant gender-related differences:

Puberty

Boys reap the benefits of testosterone that is in full throttle during puberty. There is an increase in muscle development due to increased testosterone. Concurrent with this increase in muscle mass is a decrease in percent body fat. ALL these changes are seemingly advantageous to the male athletes.

For females, puberty brings about an increase in the hormone estrogen. This increased estrogen aids in laying down more fat and breaking down protein. Unlike males, female development during puberty can initially have a deleterious effect on athletic performance.

Recommendation: Training programs need to provide females with the opportunity to maintain their muscle and offset the natural physiological changes that are occurring. Additionally, remember that increased fat deposits for women is nature's way. It is not necessarily a change in her diet, changes in her training, or lack of willpower but is part of her development as a female that, to a large degree, is out of her control.

Psycho-social Development

There are numerous psycho-social developmental differences between young males and females. Let's present some of these differences:

Perceived Competence: in general, males tend to have higher perceptions of athletic competence than girls, meaning males view themselves as more competent or able as athletes. And, we know that one's perception of competence influences such things as participation, enjoyment, and motivation. Extra steps may need to be taken to develop, bolster and reinforce young girls' perceptions of competence, to help them recognize and appreciate their abilities as swimmers.

Goal Orientation: findings are fairly consistent in showing that females are more task-oriented and males are more oriented towards winning. A win or outcome orientation suggests one focuses on comparing performance with and beating others whereas with a task goal orientation one is focused on comparing one's performance to personal standards and personal improvement. A task orientation has been tied to positive achievement related behaviors that we want to see in our young athletes. Given that only one athlete can "win" (which aren't very good odds), we may need to encourage boys to also compare performance relative to themselves as it greatly increases their chances of experiencing success and is much more within their control.

Social Affiliation Needs: girls seem to have greater needs for affiliation and are more motivated to participate for social reasons whereas boys tend to be more motivated by competitive factors.



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As we discussed, maturation or natural growth and development tends to have a negative impact on females whereas it tends to be advantageous for males. With female athletes, we often see an increase in percentage of body fat and a relative decrease, but not necessarily absolute decrease, in muscle mass. Following are a few practical strategies for dealing with this common challenge:

- Parents can prepare female athletes for the growth and development and natural changes that will occur. If maturation brings about detriments in performance, help the athlete recognize why these performance decrements are occurring and encourage the athlete to persevere.
- Teach kids coping skills to deal with adversity. They will then be better prepared to deal with this adversity.
- Don't let the highs get too high or the lows too low: keep it in perspective. It is crucial to not make a big deal out of success or failure.
- Don't give up on your girls as they are struggling with development; focus on having them give an honest effort in what they do.
- It may be beneficial to focus on training and think about decreasing the number of competitions until the athlete adjusts to her body. It doesn't make sense to have the athlete "beat her head against the wall," struggle with confidence and experience failure and frustration.
- Find a role model or older athlete who had similar struggles and can talk to the younger athletes about how they coped.