

Parenting Your Champion: Developing Talent

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There are three phases of sports development:

Phase 1 : Introduction/Foundation

Approximate years in phase = 5

Age of athlete: 4.5-9.6 years

In this phase, allow your child to dream big and to ensure lessons focus on fun and fundamentals. It's important to recognize your child's interests and provide them with opportunities and support to help him/her be successful. Try your best to focus little attention on winning and rankings as well as encouraging participate in multiple activities and sports. Now is not the time to specialize. Equally important is using this time to emphasize positive attitude and life skills and as a parent, try to keep a neutral demeanor at practices and competitions. Being overly nervous or displaying negative emotions will only send the wrong message to your child.

Parents during this phase should learn what their role is (supportive and on the sidelines) and what the role of the coach is (the technical expert and in charge of wet side matters). Avoid burnout by putting limits on practice time.

Phase 2: Refinement/Transitional

Approximate years in phase = 4

Age of athlete: 10.6-14.6

During this phase, do things to ensure that the sport remains fun. It's important to identify a knowledgeable coach who understands the proper training and technical progressions while working with a teenager. In this phase you can encourage your child to win, but more importantly to give his/her best effort. Leave swimming on the deck and avoid overly talking about it at home. Keep your child's experiences well-rounded by focusing on non-sport family activities and by emphasizing normal childhood chores and responsibilities.

In this phase, you can start to involve your child in decision making by making sure you allow for recovery time physically and mentally from the sport. Continue to reinforce the principles outlined or introduced in the Foundation phase.

Phase 3: Elite Performance

Approximate years in phase = NA

Age of athlete: 15.4 +

In this phase some things parents can look out for are being careful to care about your child as a person and not just as an athlete. In this phase the athlete becomes the main motivator and there is less push from the parent. Help facilitate this independence by making him or her responsible for equipment, commitments and scheduling. Emphasize good behavior and sportsmanship and to help remind your athlete that sports is a game of highs and lows and to work to stay emotionally even. Reassure and relax your child and provide them with honest feedback.

What's important to remember that many of the same themes will resurface from phase to phase. Be supportive, know your role as a parent and reinforce life skills and good sportsmanship throughout all phases.