

How to Find the Right fit for Your Gifted Child

FACTORS TO CONSIDER

QUESTIONS TO ASK YOURSELF...

Physical Ability



How much athleticism and coordination is needed?

What is your child's ability level?

Social Ability



What is the level of social interaction?

How much communication is involved in participating?

How developed are your child's communication skills?

Emotional Ability



How does your child cope?

Is he able to handle success, failure, and challenge?

Are there particular scenarios (e.g., losing, following rules) that your child struggles with in particular?

Individual vs. Individual Team vs. Team

Is your child better suited to work alone or individually?

Will being with teammates be beneficial or too challenging?

Setting



Are there a lot of spectators?

Is it a popular sport that has a high level of competition?

Are there tryouts?

Does everyone make the team?

superior intellect developed well ahead of their social and emotional skills and physical maturity.¹ For these children, sports and other physical activities may not come as easily. The impact of asynchronous development on the motor cortex, coupled with social and emotional obstacles, can discourage some gifted children from finding athletic and social outlets.

Of course, physical activity is vital to the overall health and well-being of children, and exercise is needed to build muscle tone, maintain a healthy body weight, and strengthen the cardiovascular system. Additionally, exercise can have psychological and mental health benefits: Research suggests that movement and physical activity can improve children's memory while also lowering stress.² This is particularly true for gifted students. Research shows that participating in sports can enhance academically talented teenagers' physical capabilities, physical appearance, emotional stability, self-concept or general sense of self, and same-sex peer relationships.³

Yet, finding a sport that meets the needs—and helps overcome the challenges—of the gifted student can often feel like threading a needle.

What are the Challenges?

Physical. Asynchronous or unbalanced development can manifest itself in gifted kids as a lack of muscle tone, balance, or coordination. This translates to an awkward, or even clumsy, child who may struggle with any physical task, especially sports that require a high demand of coordination—like baseball, golf, tennis, basketball, or soccer. Additionally, some gifted children may process visual or auditory information at a much slower pace.⁴ This can impact their ability to participate in a sport that relies on ample flexible processing and problem-solving skills. These developmental differences can be present from a very young age and are even more common in boys than girls.⁵ Hitting a backhand over the net while in a full sprint involves a high level

of coordination, and nailing an iron shot from 150 yards out puts tremendous demands on the player's fine and gross motor movements. The sheer physical nature of many athletics can be taxing for some gifted children—especially given that academic and cognitive tasks come so easily to them.

Social. Flexible thinking and language processing are two areas where children can struggle.⁶ Team sports require a lot of communication among teammates, players, and coaches. Being on a team means adhering to rules, following drills, participating in practices, and listening to authority figures. A gifted child may have a hard time meeting the demands of the social rules, interactions, and hierarchies that engaging in a team sport requires. Sports like soccer and basketball involve skills like passing, moving, and coordinating plays; such team-based skills require constant verbal and non-verbal communication throughout the game as well as during practices. This could lead to system overload for certain gifted and talented students.

Emotional. Underdeveloped emotional regulation may present challenges for some students when it comes to athletics.⁷ In sports, as in school, this often results in meltdowns, tantrums, rule-breaking, and getting into trouble. Sports require sharing, working well with others, graciously losing, persisting through challenges, accepting penalties, and publicly displaying ability. This combination of social pressure and high motor-skill demand can overload children's emotional regulation skills. Ultimately, this can lead to more social struggles, further discouraging gifted children from persisting in sports.

Putting It All Together

In many cases, these three components can interact in a cyclical process that will compound, rather than cure, the student's struggles. Imagine a 12-year-old playing Little League®. Placed out in right field, the child repeatedly misreads the play and throws to the wrong base each time the ball is hit towards him. When he comes to the plate, he often strikes out due to his underdeveloped gross motor skills, causing him to cry, scream, and throw his helmet. By the time the game wraps up, all of the other players are upset with their teammate, leaving him to sit on the bench alone.

So, what might be a better fit for this child than Little League Baseball?

Choosing a Sport

You must be thoughtful about what your child will be able to manage—and have fun participating in. It's important to consider sports that gifted children will be most successful in, based on their physical, social, and emotional needs.

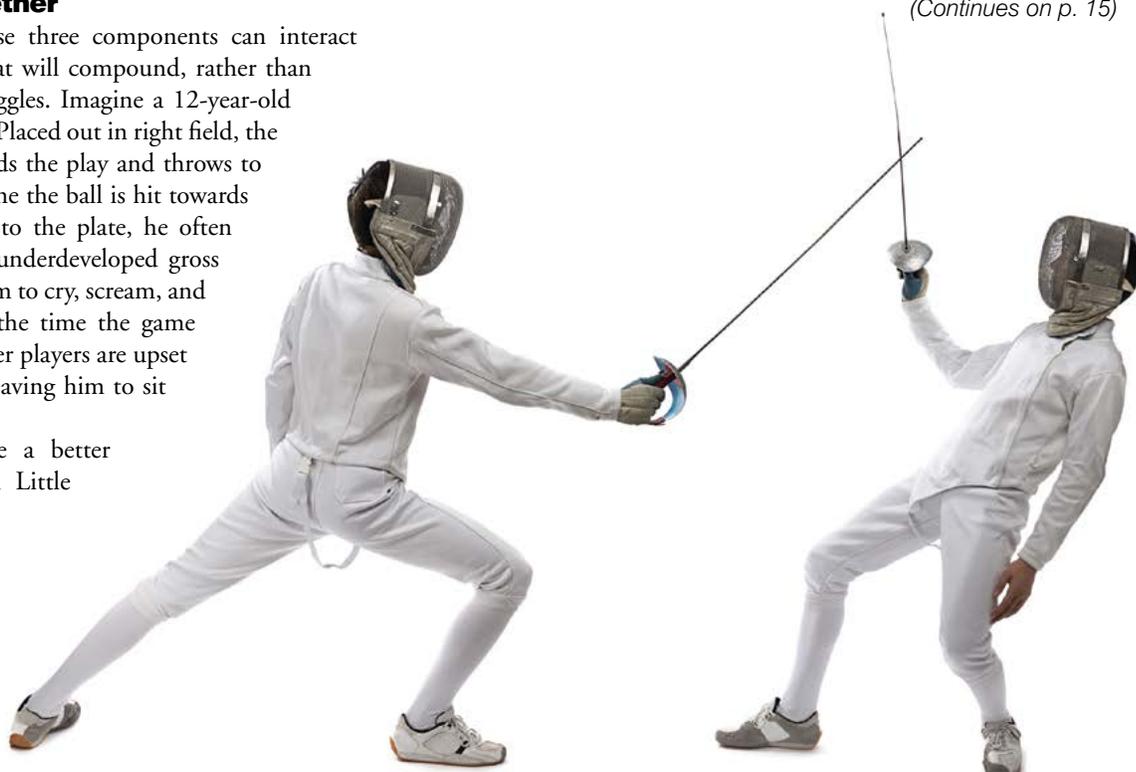
Individual Sports

Fencing and Martial Arts. Much like chess, fencing is a tactical sport requiring a high level of technique and strategy. Working with a coach can help promote self-evaluation, reflection, and metacognition; training involves footwork, endurance, and mental focus. Like fencing, karate relies heavily on physical endurance, but it adds in elements of respect, relaxation, and discipline. Karate is done individually but within a group setting, a fact especially beneficial for younger children. It relies on very little one-on-one competition and provides consistent short-term rewards in the form of the belt color system. A bit off the beaten path, neither fencing or martial arts has a lot of publicity surrounding them.

Individual Team Sports

Wrestling, Gymnastics, Cross Country, and Swimming. Although team sports, these sports all involve individual competition, and they require endurance, practice, and athleticism—and considerable coaching and training. Additionally, wrestling and gymnastics are poor fits for children who lag in development in strength and agility, while cross country and swimming may not be good fits for some children based on their balance and

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endurance. These four sports keep children physically fit, allow them to socialize, and let them compete against only themselves. Additionally, these sports usually don't make cuts at the high school level, so anyone can be on the team.

Team Sports

Soccer, Hockey, Basketball. These sports are great for the student who is socially adept, providing camaraderie, teamwork, and socializing with other students. While on the high-end of athletic ability and hand-eye coordination, soccer, hockey, and basketball often provide children the most well-rounded experience. The child participates in a more public forum, where teammates directly rely on them. As a result, there is also a bigger potential for failure or social ostracization if a child cannot keep up. For young children, team sports are an excellent way to connect with others and make friends; however, competitiveness in these sports increases quickly as students get older. This can make it tough for any child to keep up, but can also be particularly challenging for a gifted student who may be frustrated if her ability level is not on pace with that of her peers.

The position a child plays on the team can also impact his experience. For instance, a child who struggles socially but craves a team experience may play goalie, which provides a social buffer and requires a lower level of on-the-field teamwork.

Although finding the right sport for a gifted child can sometimes seem like a hopeless chase, there are plenty of options out there waiting to be discovered. Parents must be thoughtful

when analyzing the team environment, competition level, social demand, and physical ability that exist within a given sport. There are plenty of sports that can provide the right fit and will allow children to have fun, be active, and interact with others. All it takes is a little bit of research into various options, and some dedicated thought about how to align a child's strengths and weaknesses with the demands of the sport. ☺

Author's Note

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Endnotes

- ¹ Neihart, M., Pfeiffer, S. I., & Cross, T. L. (2016). *The social and emotional development of gifted children: What do we know?* Waco, TX: Prufrock Press.
- ² Ford, D. M. (2011). *An action research inquiry into the relationship among aerobic activities, memory, and stress with students identified as gifted* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.
- ³ Rinn, A. N., & Winger, S. R. (2007). Sports participation among academically gifted adolescents: Relationship to the multidimensional self-concept. *Journal for the Education of the Gifted*, 31(1), 35–56.
- ⁴ Blackburn, A. C., & Erickson, D. B. (1986). Predictable crises of the gifted student. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 64(9), 552–555.
- ⁵ Blackburn et al., (1986).
- ⁶ Palmer, D. (2012, December 26). Gifted kids with learning problems. *Psychology Today*.
- ⁷ Rinn et al., (2007).

