



## A LEAGUE OF THEIR OWN

THINK YOUR PRESCHOOLER IS READY FOR ORGANIZED SPORTS? WE'LL HELP YOU MAKE THE RIGHT CALL. **By Karen J. Bannan**

Julie Triedman signed up her daughter, Olivia, for a coed soccer league near their Brooklyn home as soon as she turned 5. The mother of three even agreed to be a coach. But she questioned her decision when Olivia clung to her leg and refused to play in the team's opening game. Had she made a mistake, or would Olivia grow to enjoy it? The answer came a few weeks later, when Olivia scored her first goal. "As soon as she put the ball in the net, her confidence soared and she started thinking of herself as a soccer jock," Triedman says.

A self-esteem boost is just one benefit for preschoolers who play organized sports. They also develop hand-eye coordination and learn

the value of teamwork. Moreover, research shows that kids who participate in an athletic activity are less likely to be obese later in life, and because they have more self-discipline, they tend to get better grades in school.

But determining whether your child is ready for organized sports can be a tough call. "Some preschoolers are physically and emotionally prepared to start a sport, but others will have a better time if they wait a year," says Rick Wolff, author of *Sports Parenting Edge* and chairman of the Center for Sports Parenting, in Kingston, Rhode Island.

Here are five guidelines to make sure your child's first sports experience is a winning one.

■ **Let her decide.** Kids usually enjoy a sport most if they're the ones who ask to join or if they're highly receptive to your suggestion. If your child seems hesitant, consider waiting another year or longer. "A parent who pushes a kid to participate too soon can turn what should be an activity she'll look forward to into something she'll try to avoid," says Jim Thompson, founder of Positive Coaching Alliance, a youth-sports advocacy group based at Stanford University, in California.

■ **Look for a noncompetitive league.** The best youth teams for this age group focus on skill-building, sportsmanship, and fun. While it's fine to praise a child who gets a base hit or a goal, no one should keep track of the score. "Once you do, kids will start worrying that they're not doing a good job," Wolff says.

Mitch Mendler, 5, of Herndon, Virginia, looks forward to playing noncompetitive soccer because everyone gets a chance to kick the ball into the net. "His league takes the pressure off the kids," says his father, Mike.

■ **Meet the coaches beforehand.** Look for team leaders who have a positive attitude. Preschoolers thrive on individual praise and group high-fives. "A coach needs to teach kids that mistakes are okay," says Darrell Burnett, Ph.D., author of *It's Just a Game!: Youth, Sports & Self Esteem: A Guide for Parents*. "Anger, yelling, and criticism are warning signs that he or she shouldn't be coaching kids."

Don't forget to ask about the behavior of

other parents too. If adults push their own kids too hard, the negative vibes can affect everyone on the team.

■ **Watch and learn.** You can tell a lot about a league by attending a game. First and foremost, everyone should get an equal chance to play. Practices should be no longer than an hour, including a snack break, since kids this age have short attention spans and expend energy quickly. And the atmosphere must be lighthearted. "There shouldn't be a lot of restrictions or boundaries," Wolff says. "If everyone is just running around in a pack after the ball instead of staying in position, that's fine for now."

■ **Be flexible.** Even though games for the pee-wee set are usually over in about 45 minutes, your child may tire or become bored before the final whistle. If she wants to hang out on the sidelines, let her. She may be having an off day, and it's better to let her skip a game than to risk souring her on a sport for good.

While it's normal for a 4- or 5-year-old to daydream on the bench, a complete lack of interest may indicate that your child isn't ready for a league. If you think this is the case, give her the option of quitting. "She may not be able to keep up with her peers, and the last thing you want to do is damage a young child's self-esteem," says Ron W. Quinn, Ed.D., author of *Coach's Little Book of Wisdom: Hints, Tips, and Insights for Coaching Kids*. "Remember, there's always next season." □



## ATHLETIC ALTERNATIVES

Think your child may be better-suited to individual sports than to a team approach? Here are four activities worth considering.

### MARTIAL ARTS

**Why it's great:** Teaches self-discipline, respect, and perseverance. Provides a good workout while improving strength and balance.

**Keep in mind:** Some classes for 5-year-olds include sparring with other kids, which may be too intense for your child.

### SWIMMING

**Why it's great:** Enhances strength and flexibility. Allows overweight and asthmatic kids to exercise with minimal health risk.

**Keep in mind:** Classes should be taught only by a certified water-safety instructor.

### GYMNASTICS

**Why it's great:** Increases a child's flexibility, balance, and concentration.

**Keep in mind:** Requires upper-body strength some kids this age don't possess.

### TENNIS

**Why it's great:** Provides good aerobic exercise and develops hand-eye coordination.

**Keep in mind:** May be too physically demanding for your preschooler.