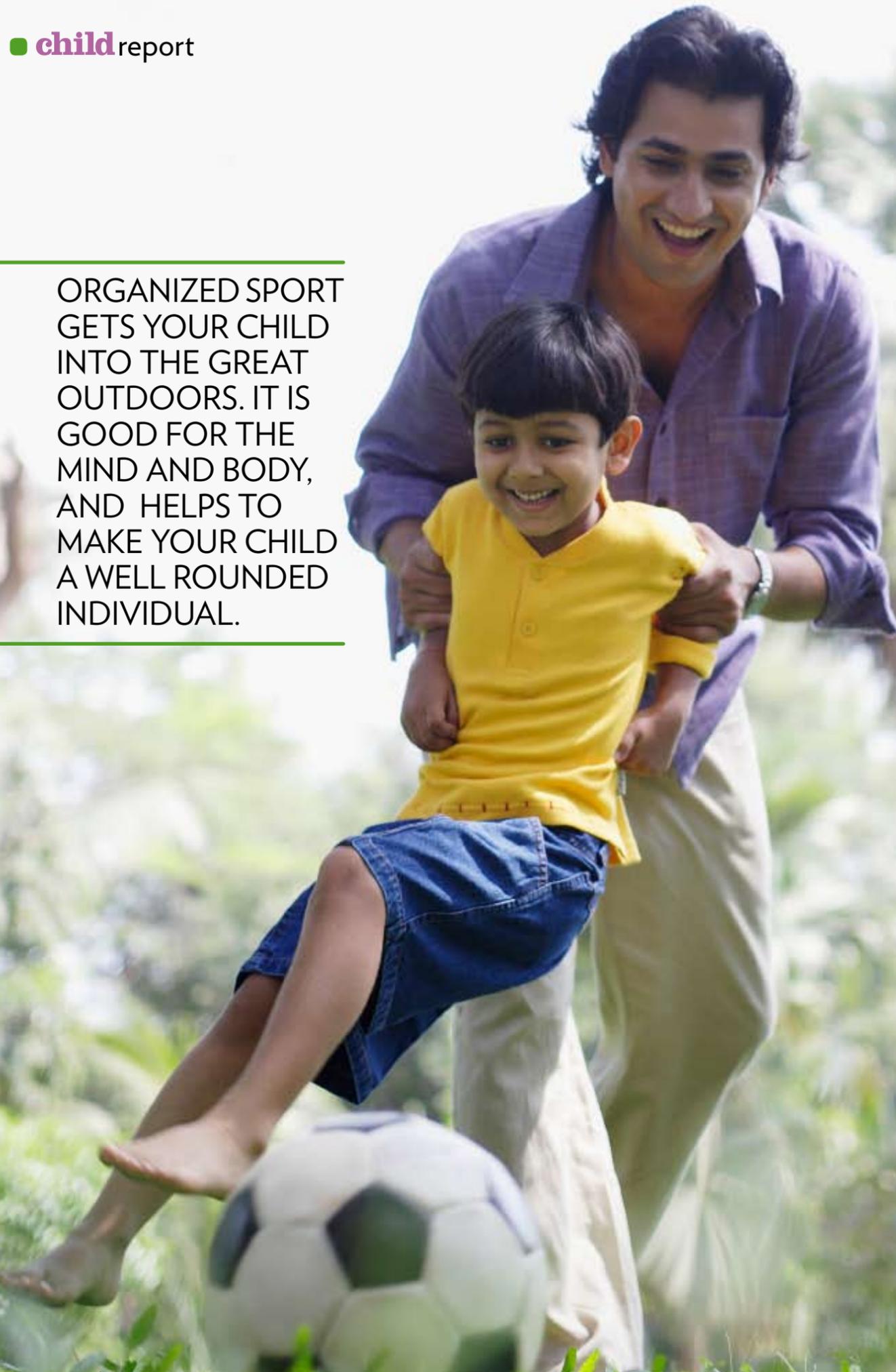


ORGANIZED SPORT GETS YOUR CHILD INTO THE GREAT OUTDOORS. IT IS GOOD FOR THE MIND AND BODY, AND HELPS TO MAKE YOUR CHILD A WELL ROUNDED INDIVIDUAL.



12 THINGS TO KNOW BEFORE YOU

Get, Set, Go...

WHETHER YOUR KID LEARNS A SPORT OR IS ABOUT TO ENROL IN ONE, HERE'S WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE NUTS AND BOLTS OF IT ALL.

BY PRITI SALIAN PHOTOGRAPH BY FLORESCO PRODUCTIONS/CORBIS

Like a number of moms, Sushmita Gupta's reason for enrolling her 4-year-old child in junior tennis coaching was manifold. She wanted to get him out to play so he wouldn't spend hours slumped in front of the TV. She thought it would benefit to have an extra-curricular activity that he could fall back on later in life. And in some small measure, she wanted him to have opportunities that she and her husband never had. If a medal or two came her way, she wasn't complaining.

Perhaps your motivation for getting your child into a coaching class is similar to Gupta's. But before you decide on whether you've got the next Dhoni at home, or whether sports coaching is even the right way to go for your child, here's some advice from some of India's top sporting people.

They talk of the role it plays in your child's life, and about your role in the game of sports coaching.

DO Begin Early.

Though it is never too late, Dr. Vece Paes, hockey Olympian, and father of Grand Slam-winning tennis player, Leander Paes, says, "You can put your child into some kind of sport by 4, so that she gets initiated into exercise and gets the kind of body movement that only a sporting activity can give her." Paes began swimming at 4 and played soccer at 5. Sania Mirza, ace tennis player, began at 6. If you are starting early though, let your child begin with one game, and gradually build up to two in a year or so, as stamina levels increase.

Join a good academy.

Your child must learn the basics right, as it's difficult to correct poor technique later. "A good coaching class will expose him to his peer group and help him develop team spirit," says Dr. Arpita Anand, Consultant Psychologist, Delhi. "It also develops a competitive spirit in your child and you can expect him to learn to fight for himself, stand up for his rights and defend himself," says Jeev Milkha Singh, golfer and Arjuna Award winner.

Look at it as a health and habit builder.

"Sports is good for the development of your child's bones, joints, muscles, coordination, motor skills and the mind as well" says Dr. Sanjay Sarup, Head of Paediatric Orthopaedic and Spine Surgery, Medanta Medcity, Gurgaon. For most kids joining a class translates into having a routine. Ideally, your child gets back, has her lunch, quickly finishes her studies, gets dressed and is ready to go! No harassment over finishing home work every day or haggling over evening wake-up calls.

Anita Bala Sharad from Delhi, who has two daughters, Manjari, 11 years, and Unnati, 8 years, is a happy mom ever since she introduced the girls to basketball last year. "My daughters are far more active, spend less time in front of the TV, eat well and sleep on time," she says. They look forward to attending classes in the evening irrespective of the heat, cold or rain. To add to that her kids have also started making healthier food choices. "They themselves refuse aerated drinks and load up on fruits," she says, as the advice is better taken when offered from a sports coach, over a parent or teacher. Maggie Amritraj, mother to tennis players, Anand, Vijay and Ashok, says Vijay was a sickly child even at 10 years. "Introducing him to tennis was the best thing that we did for him," she says. "It helped him come out of his sickness and become what he is today."

Provide a good diet, for longevity.

"A good sportsperson needs to be agile and can be light on his feet only when there is no undue fat on his body," says Col. Rathore, shooter and Olympic silver medallist. "When you need to dodge, you cannot afford to slow down, due to your weight," he asserts. He insists that children eat smaller and multiple meals in a day and avoid junk food. However, there are also activities, like swimming, which require your child to have a high carbohydrate diet three hours prior to practice. Your kid's coach will be able to tell you the right diet for the game he plays. Generally, what's good for your kid's health will also be good for his sporting activity.

Give her space.

Let your child explore different sporting activities before she settles down with her favourite. Some children like to see immediate results (as in basketball). Some may be okay sweating it out for a few years (as in tennis). There may be days when she won't want to attend a certain class. Be gentle with her and allow her the leeway. "After all how many adults take to one exercise routine and stick to it?" asks

COACHING CLASSES

Bhupinder Bisht, cricket coach, Roshanara Club; Benny Joseph, football coach, St. Columba's School, Delhi, and Nisha Millet, advise on selecting one.

■ Go by word of mouth. Take into account what parents of kids who are playing on the circuit have to say about coaches and institutes.

■ Check out the premises and the infrastructure. If it is a swimming class, look at the pool cleaning system. Choose one that uses ozone-treated water.

■ The coach to student ratio should be low, especially in sports where safety is important. Ideally there should be one coach for every eight children in a pool.

■ Find out whether the coach reaches the class on time. A coach should, ideally be early, to get things organized before the kids arrive, and leave later.

■ Take permission to watch one class and observe how the coach teaches. A good coach will be standing and instructing kids and not sitting around.

■ The coach should tell your child about good food habits, and advise her on a dressing style for the class, ensuring that she follows what he says.

■ A good coach is a psychologist, trainer and a parent, all at the same time.

■ Avoid a harsh coach. He won't be able to get your kid to love the game. If your child doesn't feel like playing on a day, he should give him the flexibility of skipping practice.

■ The coach should keep the lines of communication open with the parent and the child, informing parents of progress.

■ A great coach is one who can give your child a combination of serious sports and fun. Exercises and tricks he teaches should appear like a game, and hold your child's interest during practices.

INTRODUCE YOUR CHILD TO A VARIETY OF GAMES AND LET HIM PICK HIS FAVOURITE ONE.

Dr. Anand. Your child may also want to quit a certain sports class after a while. "Find out what's holding her back and try to find a solution," she says. If you feel she is disinterested in the game, get her into another activity. If it's the tedium of the routine, talk to the coach to shake things up a bit. "If you want your child to be successful, allow her to do what she likes," says Jeev. "While a little push is important so that she does not get complacent, you can't achieve much by making strict rules for your child. It will only lead her to dislike the activity," he adds.

Motivate.

If your child is not interested in sports, select a sporting activity that you are interested in and tell him more about it. Introduce a game through matches on television and live matches, if you can. Encourage him to collect sports cards that are given away free with products. Mattel also has a game of cards called Wickets which provides information about cricket. "What is most important here is that you expose your child to the right peer group," says Col. Saurabh Shekhawat, who has scaled Mt. Everest thrice. Introduce your kids to peers who love sport. Take him to the local sports complex, so that he is inspired.

Emphasize hard work and focus.

"Sincerity and hard work are the tools for excelling in sports," says Milkha Singh, an Asian Games gold medallist and an

Olympic record breaker, now Director, Sports, Ministry of Education, Punjab. You need to be serious too. Don't skip practice because you want to watch a movie. When your child begins to play, she may have aches and pains and may not wish to continue. "This is the time when you need to help her come out of her comfort zone," says Col. Shekhawat. You should encourage her to carry on.

Get involved.

"Your involvement with your child goes a long way in keeping him interested and doing well in sports," says Amritraj. She would take her sons out at 5:30 a.m. every day and asked them to run with the car while she drove. "Once they were tired, I gave them their favourite goodies and brought them home, drove them to school, and again after school took them for tennis classes," she says. There is no substitute to the tips and tricks that a child learns from a parent. But a word of caution here from Col. Rathore: "If you lack the patience and expect too much from your child in too short a time, don't coach him at all." It can turn your kid against the game and even towards you. "Both parents need to be involved. "I make it a point to start early from my office to take my son to his class on days my husband is travelling," says Monica Banerjee, from Delhi, mother to Vibhore, 7 years. "This way, we make sure that he does not miss his class ever."

DON'T

Look at competitive sport too early.

“Competitive sports can be draining as they require regular practice”, says Arjuna Award winner and champion swimmer Nisha Millet, who runs her own swimming academy in Bengaluru. “It is not a good idea to push your child into serious practice every day for several hours unless she is at least 9 or 10 years old. “Before that, three or four times a week is fine, so that she develops a liking for the sport, learns her techniques well and practises her strokes,” she adds. After that if you feel that your child is cut out for it, by all means, allow her to compete. “Skills develop better by participation in competitions,” says Dr. Paes. But it is only by 14 that he feels your child should be playing the local circuit.

Overspend.

When budgeting for a course, always count the class fee, the cost of sports gear and the commuting cost. If you are a permanent resident of a locality, you may consider becoming a member of a club, like Delhi’s DDA Sports Clubs or the Roshanara Club. The fee for members is considerably reduced (from Rs 1,200 to 600 in Roshanara). Similarly, if your child joins an evening sports activity in his own school, you can expect a discount. Government-owned facilities are also

lower-cost options (Rs 1,000 per month for swimming lessons at Sarvodaya Vidyalaya, Delhi, as opposed to Rs 3,000 to 4,000 at a private centre). Get your basic equipment right—the shoes, the racket. These can prove to be expensive (a pair of football shoes can cost about Rs 3,000). But you don’t have to shell out money on the peripherals. An original Manchester United T-shirt is an extra, not a necessity. Also, having the best racket in the world when your child is a beginner, is not necessary. Ask your coach for a good Indian brand.

Get over-enthusiastic.

“Once you have initiated your child into a game, don’t try to give him everything associated with it immediately,” suggests Col. Rathore. He goes on to explain that if your kid has just begun to play golf and is learning to swing the club, don’t get him a new golf set, or his excitement will die. Get him an old club which may be cut to his size. Set goals for him and as he achieves each, give him a little extra something, so he hungers for more. “Remember, it is not about what you can afford, but about what is best for your child,” says Col. Rathore.

Ignore school participation.

When you choose a school, do look at the sports curriculum, the grounds, teacher qualifications and the sports equipment. “My daughter did not take an interest in any sports activity till last year, because all that her school offered was a double games period for kids, once a week,” says Mayuri Sikandra from Chandigarh, mother to 8-year-old Suniti. “This year, since the introduction of an extra games period four times a week, she has taken up skating and swimming seriously,” she adds.

SUCCESS STORY

Check out whether your child is really serious about sports. Look for these signs, say experts.

■ **OBSERVE** your child to check whether he is really interested in the game or only in the accessories and the glamour associated with it.

■ **CHECK** with the coach. He will be your best guide about how well your kid is doing. Does your child pay heed to instructions?

■ **SOME CHILDREN** are competitive right from the start. If your sports star comes home and regularly reports her triumphs, you’ve probably got a winner.

■ **IF YOUR CHILD** is ready to play the fourth match even when you can see that he is ready to collapse, he is high-spirited and driven.

■ **IF YOUR 9-YEAR-OLD** likes to compete with 12-year-old kids, and is sticking it out despite some bullying, she definitely has a competitive edge.

Bank on sports.

However successful your child is in a certain sport, and whatever his level of skill and interest, it should be backed with sound education. “Good education helps your child conduct himself well, interact with people and value life too!” adds Jeev. There is also a lack of good coaching classes and academies in many cities. “Plus, you need to factor in luck, destiny and opportunity, when it comes to success in sports,” says Col. Rathore. There may be times when your child has to miss school, if he participates in competitions, but you need to find ways to make up for it.

Be too ambitious.

Let your kid play the game because she enjoys it. “Let sports be the stress buster, and not a must in your child’s life,” says Dr. Samir Parikh, Psychiatrist, Head, Mental Health Department, Max Superspecialty Hospital, Delhi. Games should be played for basic enjoyment, peer interaction and physical fitness rather than for excellence. If your kid excels, it’s a bonus. If your kid isn’t interested in any sport in particular, simply encourage her to go out and play with her friends. **Q**