

SHOULD MY CHILD PLAY UP?

In many programs, there are opportunities for a child to play "up" with older children. In club sports, this might mean playing with an older age group. In school sports, this might mean playing varsity with older kids rather than sub varsity with age level peers.

The decision to play up depends on the child, the sport, the coach, and the program. Many kids have been helped by playing up, but as many or more have been hurt by the experience. Therefore, the decision to play up should not be an automatic "yes." Here are twelve questions to ask yourself as a parent if your child is a candidate for playing up. If you can honestly answer "Yes" to all of these questions, then your child might be a good candidate for playing up. If you answer "No" to any of these questions, then you should give playing up some careful thought. In either case, it might be a good idea to discuss these questions with the coach and/or program director. You might also consider talking to your pediatrician.

- I. Does my child really want to play up? Playing up can create extra stress and demands on a young player. The player will need strong self-motivation to make it work.
- II. Can my child have fun and friendship with the older kids while playing up? Most children & youth point to fun and friendship as the main reasons for playing. If they lose these, they generally lose their interest in the sport.
- III. Has my child demonstrated mastery of the fundamental skills of the sport compared to age level peers? Moving kids up before they master the fundamentals can hurt them in the long run if the older team does not spend as much time on basic fundamentals. Also, if they do not have the fundamentals reasonably in hand, they are likely to struggle against older kids who are equal or greater in size or athleticism.
- IV. Is my child more mentally mature than most age level peers? Mental readiness is too often overlooked in decision to play up, especially if the child is big for her age. A child who is not mentally ready to manage the stress of playing up might actually lose his natural enthusiasm and leadership ability if they are struggling with self-confidence and more frequent failure against older peers.
- V. Is my child in excellent physical condition compared to most age level peers? A tired player is a player at risk for poor performance and injury. A child who plays up should be in excellent physical condition (cardiovascular especially) so that they can have better mental concentration and reduce the risk of injury.

- VI. Is my child physically advanced to the point where he/she physically dominates most age level peers? If your child is not physically beyond their age level peers, think carefully about how they are likely to perform against players who are bigger/faster/stronger.
- VII. Does the program/coach really want my child to play up? Good programs and coaches think carefully about decisions to let kids play up. Beyond the decision of whether it might be good for your child, they have to think about the impact on others in the program as well as risk of injury. If the team is selective and a younger child playing up is taking a spot from an older player, the program has to carefully consider the overall implications of that decision. If the program director or coach does not think it is a good idea for your child to play up, take that advice seriously.
- VIII. Does the coach have a plan for integrating my child into a group of older players? If your child is going to be placed in a more demanding situation by playing up, it is fair to ask the coach for her ideas on how to integrate your younger child into a team of older players. It is important to assure that the younger player will not become socially isolated on the team.
- IX. Would my child be given a reasonable amount of playing time while playing up? Moving up a level only to receive minimal or no playing time is rarely helpful. Kids want to play, and it is hard to improve athletically or mentally while sitting on the bench.
- X. Would my child have ample opportunity to practice leadership by playing up? An excellent athlete who sticks with her age group might have many opportunities to practice leadership. A child who plays up might not get that chance until much later, if ever. That early leadership experience can be very important when the child reaches his senior year in high school and is expected to lead the team.
- XI. Can my child keep up academically while playing up? Sometimes playing up means more practice time, more fatigue, or more travel. Don't forget to consider the implications for schoolwork before deciding to play up.
- XII. Can our family support the commitment to play up? Sometimes playing up means more money, more travel, more stress, and more family sacrifice. Think carefully about the time and money commitment before deciding to play up.

In summary, there are no hard and fast rules on playing up. The important thing is to decide what is best for your child given his or her unique ability, personality, age, sex, sport, and program. We hope these questions will help you think through the options and make the best decision for your child.