



## The Arena of Sports Skill Development

Do you enjoy watching your hockey player improve his or her skills? Do you notice that some skills are easier to learn than others or that some skills take longer than others? Do you remember those childhood developmental milestones like sitting up and standing? Well, the developmental highway did not stop with potty training, and kids continue to pass through many levels of skill development into their teenage years that will have a significant impact on their game.

Most of us involved in youth sports want youngsters primarily to have fun with their activity, and experience a sense of accomplishment and achievement because that is truly what defines “success.” However, the world has somehow settled on a definition of success that *only* involves first place or the gold medal, which leaves a very small group of athletes who will ever achieve success in that way. Can you imagine how this misperception has magnified pressure in youth sports? Think about how you define success, and how that may affect your child’s participation in either a positive or negative way. Also, think about how the world’s definition can be so misleading. If a child does not give his or her best effort and easily wins, how is that really “success?” But if a child gives a tremendous effort, has many personal improvements and accomplishments, and ends up in last place, hasn’t he or she still experienced personal “reality” success?

Getting a handle on sports pressure in hockey or any sport can be tremendously difficult, especially when other parents around you don’t have any interest in anything other than fulfilling their own expectations. However, *your* child athlete is the most important because the way you support your child will have major implications on how he or she approaches life many years down the road. So how can you lessen the pressure?

1. Cheer your child’s achievements and effort without overemphasizing hockey as their life. If that is all they hear you speak about, then they confuse their identity and self-worth with their actual performance.
2. Avoid unrealistic or perfectionistic expectations. If your standards are too high, then your child may develop such a fear of failure that he or she may be too afraid to try anything beyond what is a “safe” performance.
3. Show your support on and off the ice so your child knows that you care about him or her as a person, not just as a hockey player.
4. Gain more knowledge of the developmental stages children go through in order to gain sports-appropriate skills. It is fascinating to know that youngsters develop in different ways at the same time—physically, visually, chemically, and mentally.

All of these pathways develop in a similar sequence from child to child, but clearly at different rates and to varying degrees. In addition, since each child cannot be the gold medal winner, it becomes critical to find ways to support skill progress, character growth, and an enjoyable experience. Balancing on skates, turning on the ice, hitting a stationary puck, meeting a moving puck across the ice, and building endurance are all developmental milestones that you cannot speed up past a certain point just by more practice. Excessive pushing to achieve a skill before it is developmentally or physically appropriate can only contribute to the growing rise in overuse injuries and mental burnout. Instead, understanding that developmental process helps decrease adult stress and unrealistic expectations, leaving room to support the achievements that make your child beam from ear to ear. And if seeing that smile isn't true success, then I don't know what is.

Tune in to future newsletters as we skate into more detail on the developmental process.

Paul Stricker, MD

Author of *Sports Success Rx!—Your Child's Prescription for the Best Experience*

Sports Medicine Pediatrician and Olympic Physician

[www.drpaulstricker.com](http://www.drpaulstricker.com)