



A resource to spark biblically-centered conversations with your kids about the issues they face in today's youth culture.

YOUTH SPORTS & CHURCH PARTICIPATION

BY: Jason Engle, CPYU Research Fellow and Teaching Pastor at Westwood Baptist Church, Roxboro, NC

For families with young athletes, the pressure to participate in travel and club teams continues to intensify. How should Christian families think through participation, especially as scheduled practices and games conflict with gathering with the church on Sundays?

What is Happening?

- Youth sports in the U.S. generates \$40 billion in annual revenue, travel and club sports accounting for much of the recent growth. With 60 million children in the U.S. playing sports, families spend an average of over \$1,000 *per child* each year on their *primary sport* alone.
- As more and more young athletes choose to specialize in a single sport, community recreation leagues are experiencing fewer numbers and diminished levels of competition.
- Parents are experiencing mounting forms of pressure for their young athletes to participate in travel and/or club teams. First, as more young people participate, peer pressure compels parents to want their child(ren) to not be left out. Second, as more young athletes begin vigorously training at younger ages, parents who view athletics as a possible pathway to college scholarship and/or achieving professional dreams view participation as necessary in order to prevent their child(ren) from falling behind.
- Because travel/club tournaments primarily take place on weekends, Christian parents increasingly feel the pressure of choosing between sports and church attendance, and often for large portions of the calendar year.
- In attempting to accommodate the busy schedules of families, even community recreation sports leagues have begun to encroach upon Sundays. This is especially true for coaches looking to schedule practice times that both suit their own busy schedules and that offer a time that works for all of the families involved with a specific team.
- Youth sports has been identified as one of several cultural trends attributed to the steady decline of Sunday church attendance over the past 20 years.



WORLD





WORD

What Does God's Word Say?

We must be sober-minded to our tendency toward idolatry. Jesus teaches that, “where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matt. 6:21). Jesus alone stands as the only worthy object of what our hearts look to as supreme treasure. God’s eternal plan of redemption has as its objective the uniting of all things in Christ (Eph. 1:10), the one who is preeminent in all things (Col. 1:18). If this is the goal of redemption, then this should shape the goal of every parent for the heart of their child: to know and treasure Jesus as supreme. We fall into idolatry when we instead set our hearts’ supreme affections on anything other than the One who is worthy of it. Anything that makes high demands of our calendar and our bank account can quickly pull us toward idolatry.

What we communicate to our children about church is profoundly important. Much has been written about how an increase in participation in youth sports has affected church attendance, but the purpose and function of the gathered church lies much deeper than what we experience while attending a service. The writer of Hebrews (10:19-25) exhorts his hearers to “not neglect to meet together,” but for the active purposes of stirring one another up to love and good works, and encouraging one another in light of the coming Day of the Lord. Ephesians 4:11-16 portrays every part of the body of Christ as meaningful members. Only as each grows up into maturity into Christ does the whole body grow and function as it should. We need to guard against measuring faithfulness to church by attendance rather than by meaningful membership.

Parents are called to embrace their role as the primary faith influencer of their children. Deuteronomy 6:4-9 reveals the God-given stewardship given to parents in leading their children to know God and worship him alone. As parents, we must take this stewardship seriously, both to intentionally lead our children in this way and to guard against allowing other gods to capture their hearts’ focus and affection. This passage also reveals that this stewardship is to be carried out within the context of a community of believers who will intentionally come beside parents to encourage and join them in this work.





WALK

*"And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God."
(Philippians 1:9-11)*

Conversation Starters and Questions:

The key word for families when considering whether their kids should participate in a sports program—or any other extracurricular activity—is intentionality. Participation in sports is a good and healthy thing for young people, but as in all things parents should approach it with careful wisdom and discernment. A lack of intentionality leads to a drift away from Christ. Here are 7 questions that parents should lead their family in answering as they consider participating in sports programs:

- Why? *It seems so simple, yet we should never begin to think through this question by discussing the "how?" or the "what?" before clearly answering the "why?"*. Does the answer to this question align with our family's foundational convictions?
- What are the potential dangers to the spiritual lives of our family members? How might we become distracted from our primary pursuit of knowing and treasuring Jesus by participating?
- What are both the explicit and implicit demands on our family's schedule and finances to participate? What will we be asked to sacrifice, and will the sacrifice be worth the cost?
- What are the potential detrimental tolls participation could have on our family? Are we considering **every** member of our family?
- How can we as a family guard against drifting from our commitment to Christ and his body if we choose to participate (even short-term)? Who will intentionally hold us accountable in this way?
- What seems to be my child's spiritual gifts, and how can participation help or hinder the development of those gifts for God's glory?
- What are the opportunities for our family to be on mission while participating? How will we keep that intentionality throughout?

For further reflection: Exploring this topic also allows parents to assess their own hearts when it comes to their desires for their child(ren). Parents should often revisit the question, "What is our greatest desire for our child(ren), and how does that shape our decisions concerning virtually everything else?"