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## **CANADIAN SPORT FOR LIFE Specialization in Sport**

Most Canadian children are introduced to a variety of sports through the school system, organized or informal community recreation, and sport clubs. Depending upon their interests, abilities, financial considerations, and a variety of other factors, they may continue to participate in one or more of these sports.

At some point in the young athlete's development, the issue of specialization must be considered if long term, optimal performance is the objective. When is it appropriate to specialize in one sport, or if playing a team sport, when should you specialize in one position?

Specialization is usually defined when young athletes limit their participation to a single sport on a year round basis, with deliberate focus on training and development in that sport. In the Canadian Sport for Life model, this is the "Training to Compete" stage.

Research suggests that different sports can be categorized as either early or late specialization sports. For athletes to consistently reach the elite levels, a few sports should encourage early specialization (e.g. gymnastics, figure skating, diving, freestyle skiing, snowboarding and swimming), while other sports should consider the benefits of late specialization.

At the grassroots level, some coaches urge children to specialize prematurely, and parents will often push their kids enthusiastically in this direction with the belief that their child could "miss out" if they don't. However, there are risks in specializing too early in some sports as it has been linked to problems such as imbalanced athlete development, overuse injuries, and early dropout from the sport.

Regardless of the often negative consequences of early specialization, experience shows that there are a few sports where athletes need to specialize at an early age if they want to excel, usually between the ages of five and eight.

Artistic and acrobatic sports are early specialization sports in order to maximize the athlete's potential. Early specialization includes an early start age in sport generally, early involvement in one sport, early focused high intensity training, and early involvement in competition.

The categorization of early versus late specialization sports does not suggest a lack of participation in these late specialization sports. Many late specialization sports require early exposure to the sport, or some of the sport-specific skills, to be successful when it is appropriate to specialize. For example, ice hockey builds on the early development of skating skills.

Research with German Olympians has found that some of the factors impacting short term success are a detriment to longer term success. While there is nothing wrong with junior success, it is more important for coaches and athletes to focus on the training effort and to provide conditions for long term success. These athletes were typically involved in many sports in their youth and started training later in life in their main sport. The research also found little correlation between junior success and senior success.

More information about aspects of sport specialization is available on the Canadian Sport for Life website ([www.canadiansportforlife.ca](http://www.canadiansportforlife.ca)). You can learn more about specialization in specific sports by reading the long term athlete development documents for each sport.