**WHY SHOULD MY CHILD WRESTLE?**

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Endorsed by: [USA WRESTLING](http://www.usawrestling.org/)

**Introduction**

Of the many sports your child can participate in, Wrestling is perhaps the most misrepresented, misunderstood, and underrated. The ratio of participation to public awareness is remarkably lopsided. Each year hundreds of thousands of kids participate in this sport, yet the average person knows as much about wrestling as they might know about rugby or polo -- which combined, involve far fewer athletes. The purpose of this guide is to generate new interest and awareness among parents whose children want to participate in this exciting and rewarding sport.

Hopefully, this guide will help expose the myths and uncover the benefits wrestling has to offer, and most importantly, help parents understand how this unique sport best compliments other sports choices their child makes.

**Q&A**

Doesn't wrestling involve or eventually lead to the kinds of things professional wrestlers do on television?

If you've been exposed to high school or college wrestling, you may already realize that so-called "professional wrestling" (i.e. WWF) as depicted on television, is entirely different from the actual sport of wrestling. So different, in fact, that there is little, if anything in common:

**The Actual Sport of Wrestling**

* Based on self-discipline, hard work, skill and determination.
* Conducted on a mat with regulation shoes, kneepads and headgear.
* Physically demanding, but relatively safe and non-violent. Does not involve or even tolerate actions intended to cause injury.
* World-class wrestlers utilize skills, strength and endurance developed over a lifetime of practice and hard work.

**"Professional Wrestling"**

* Based on theatrics, entertainment value and shock factor.
* Conducted in a ring with boots and outrageous costumes.
* Violent in nature with contestants depicting punching, kicking, body slams, etc.
* Showcase events typically involve participants with no amateur (real) wrestling experience.

If wrestling is nothing like WWF on TV, then what is it all about, and what should parents and kids know about the sport when considering their options?

Wrestling is perhaps the purest form of athletic competition to exist in the realm of organized sports. There are no bats or balls, or pucks or sticks. No pads or helmets or jerseys. There's no time to rethink strategy, regroup, or even to catch your breath. There's only you, and your opponent of equal weight and size. Experience, preparation and the will to succeed will determine the victor. There's no doubt about it, wrestling tops the list of intense, highly-competitive sports.

Wrestling involves a unique balance of practically every aspect of physical and psychological conditioning. Strength is as important as stamina. Speed as technique, strategy as intensity, and power as is coordination. However, it's not always the natural athlete that ultimately succeeds in the sport - it's the natural competitor.

Kids that are strong for their weight, well coordinated and naturally aggressive are usually more successful early on in the sport. However, it's the highly competitive kids that really enjoy the sport, that eventually achieve the highest levels of success. True competitors come in all shapes and sizes, and in varying degrees of natural talent. Many of the best wrestlers the world has ever seen, such as John Smith, Dan Gable and Dave Schultz were not star athletes. They are and were ordinary people with an extraordinary competitive drive.

Gifted athletes, especially those that are strong and well coordinated, typically do well and take an early liking to the sport. Some kids that thrive on competition, with only average or below average natural ability, often surprise parents and coaches by eventually surpassing more gifted kids through hard work and preparation.

Although it is wise for parents and coaches to de-emphasize winning, victories can be extremely gratifying because of the strong sense of personal accomplishment. The effort put forth in practice and preparation is apparent in competition, and not lost in a team effort. This aspect of wrestling can be a great motivator and teacher, and can develop a person's work ethic, self-confidence, and ability to achieve in all areas of life. Wrestling is great for exposing the "champion" within most any kid, but especially with those that love to compete.

How does wrestling compare with team sports such as soccer, baseball and basketball?

Wrestling is considered an individual sport, but includes many of the benefits of team sports. Wrestling differs from most team sports in that during competition, athletes must rely entirely on their own individual abilities for success. Those that dedicate the time and effort will eventually achieve at a level directly proportionate to the investment they have made - even if their teammates prepare and perform at a different level.

Similarities exist in that teammates still depend on each other in team competition. Team victories in meets and tournaments are determined by the number of individual victories, and the extent to which each match was won or lost. Wrestlers also develop an appreciation and respect for teammates that have been through the same challenges, and a strong sense of belonging and camaraderie with teammates and other wrestlers.

Other team sports may be better for developing interactive player-toplayer skills such as passing and blocking, but wrestling can offer benefits that other team sports lack. The individual nature of the sport provides an outstanding opportunity for young athletes to develop a sense of responsibility and self esteem while learning the relationship between effort and achievement.

What physical effects can the sport of wrestling have on children?

Sports offer opportunities for children to improve their strength, flexibility and coordination, while having fun. Most sports activities rely more on some muscle groups and less on others. For example, most sports focus primarily on pushing motions (leg/arm extension) such as throwing, hitting, kicking, jumping and running.

Experts believe that unilateral (equal emphasis on all muscle groups) physical development is especially important in young athletes. Isolated development at an early age, over a long period, increases the risk of injury and limits long-term foundational growth. Swimming, gymnastics and wrestling are among the few sports that engage both pulling and pushing muscle groups.

Of all the sports choices a parent and child can make, wrestling is perhaps the best sport for overall physical development because it involves all muscle groups, and requires the greatest balance of athletic skill. In other words, wrestling does more to improve basic things such as strength, balance, speed, agility and intensity, and is not as specialized as most other common sports.

Does wrestling teach or promote aggressive or violent behavior?

Aggressiveness? Yes. Violence? No. Wrestling is often referred to as the toughest sport, and in many ways it is, but it is certainly not violent, nor does it lead to unruly or destructive behavior.

One of the factors that make wrestling so different from most other sports is that wrestling involves head-to-head competition. Each wrestler's efforts work in direct opposite from each other as in a tug-of-war contest. Success in wrestling requires the ability to attack, as well as the ability to stop your opponent's attack. The same factors apply with boxing and martial arts, but an attack in wrestling is nonviolent. Wrestling does not permit opponents to strike one another, and imposes strict penalties or disqualification for violent behavior. In essence, wrestling is unique in the fact that it can be very aggressive without being violent. The objective is not to destroy or harm one's opponent, but to out-maneuver them and to gain control.

The intensity with which wrestlers compete increases with age and experience. Kids wrestling, especially the younger age groups, in not nearly as intense as high school or college wrestling. It's common for new wrestlers to feel somewhat intimidated at first, not knowing how they compare with other wrestlers, but that is soon overcome. Wrestling, perhaps more than any other sport, is a great for building confidence while retaining a healthy dose of humility. The long-term result is that it develops the champion from within, and leads to greater success both on and off the mat, and does not turn kids into bullies or thugs.

At what age should kids get involved?

Some parents feel that wrestling is too intense for young kids, and that it is better suited for post-pubescent teenage years. Denying a child the opportunity to participate in wrestling until high school greatly reduces their chance of success. Wrestling is a sport involving very complex technique that can take many years to master. A great high school athlete with little or no wrestling experience has little or no chance against an 8 or 10 year veteran. Some kids can close this gap by their last year of high school, but like most sports these days, starting younger seems to be the norm.

There are two entry points prior to high school - kid's clubs and middle school wrestling. Both are very accommodating for new wrestlers. Age and maturity level is not a factor by the time kids are in middle school, but at the club level, kids can enter wrestling as young as 4 or 5 years of age.

There is no easy way to know when a child is mature enough to be participating in a new sport. Some might be ready at three, while others might not develop an interest for wrestling until their early teens. The best approach is to introduce kids to the sport at a time and pace that is consistent with their interest level, backing off when necessary, and allowing more participation as their interest grows. In any case, it is important NOT to involve very young kids in a highly competitive program. Parents with young wrestlers should check that their club can properly accommodate young wrestlers with a separate, less competitive regimen involving more fun, "tumbling" types of activities, with virtually no emphasis on any of the serious, more competitive aspects of the sport.

Is wrestling a "dangerous" sport?

There is a common misperception among the non-wrestling public that wrestling is a very dangerous sport. Perhaps it's the aggressive nature of the sport, association with "Pro Wrestling", or perhaps fear of the unknown. Several studies have been conducted in recent years that show wrestling to be safer than many more common sports including football, ice hockey and gymnastics. Most notable in these reports, is wrestling's low percentage of serious, permanent and life-threatening injury in relation to other sports. A quote from USA Wrestling Club Organizing Guide has the following to say about Risk of Injury:

"Wrestling is a contact sport and injuries will occur. As would be expected, wrestling has more injuries than tennis and swimming, but most wrestling injuries are minor, consisting of sprains and strains. Wrestling has fewer serious injuries than football, basketball or ice hockey. There is a lesser chance of getting seriously hurt when wrestling than when riding in a car, skateboarding or riding a dirt bike."

Safety factors in some ways unique to wrestling include:

* Rules, regulations, and state certified officials.
* The high ratio of officials to athletes (one for every two).
* Greater strength and flexibility as a result of more emphasis on practice and preparation.
* Competitors are matched by age and weight.
* Perhaps the most notable difference with respect to the risk of injury, is the lack of high-impact collision that occurs in most other common sports. Wrestlers do collide, but never at great momentum or speeds as can happen with sports that involve running such as football, baseball, soccer, hockey and basketball. Also, overuse injuries from highly repetitive motions such as pitching are virtually non-existent in youth wrestling because of the variety of movement, and there is no risk of injury from hard objects such as bats, sticks, balls or pucks. On the other hand, wrestlers are more susceptible to some communicable skin infections such as ringworm, but these incidents are quite rare, and can be prevented with the proper precautions, such as washing the mat and showering after practice.

Wrestling injuries can and do occur, but are more of a factor at the collegiate and international levels where match intensity is much higher. Most injuries occur during periods of horseplay or unsupervised activities such as before or after practice or competition. Parents and coaches can reduce this risk through proper planning and preparation.

Can wrestling have an effect on character development?

Success factors in sports, or anything for that matter, are part God-given (i.e. height and size) and part acquired (i.e. endurance). Success in wrestling depends most on acquired factors, and unlike most other sports, wrestling does not favor athletes of any particular height, size, weight, [muscle type](http://www.sterectory.org/Wrestling/guide.html#mtype), race or social class, and does not rely on superior vision or hearing.

Wrestlers learn, by the nature of the sport, that long-term success has much more to do with the investment made than the "natural" gifts one is given. Wrestlers learn the value of preparation and hard work, and the role it plays in achieving one's goals. Wrestling provides real-life experiences that build and strengthen the following character traits:

* Self Reliance
* Mental Toughness
* Work Ethic
* Competitive Spirit
* Responsibility
* Self Discipline
* Goal Orientation
* Confidence

In order to keep this in perspective, one must realize that character development is a slow process, driven by a variety of positive and negative influences with varying degrees of impact. Sports can play a significant role in character development, but other influences may have an even greater impact. Wrestling, in itself, is not a character development solution, but years of participation can provide positive influences. A person's overall character includes many other dimensions, such as integrity and compassion, which may have little if anything to do with sports.

Muscle types are categorized as fast-twitch and slow-twitch. Fast-twitch muscle fibers deliver power, and are favored in explosive sports such as football. Slow-twitch fibers are superior in endurance activities such as long distance running. Training can compensate for some of this difference, however, it's a known fact that the ratio of slow-twitch to fast-twitch fibers varies from person to person, providing some with a "natural" advantage over others in particular sports.

Would my child be required or expected to lose weight?

**No!** There's no weight cutting in youth wrestling programs. It's true that weight cutting does exist at the high school and collegiate levels, but there are quite a few public misconceptions.

Some parents automatically associate wrestling with excessive, out-of-control weight loss, akin to anorexia and bulimia. In reality, the opposite is true - wrestlers gain control of their body weight and body composition, and are able to set and achieve reasonable goals with respect to muscle mass, fat percentage and body weight.

This form of weight control is more of a factor in later years, when competing at high school or collegiate levels, but coaches and wrestlers at that level are well aware of health and safety factors, and not likely to engage in unhealthy or risky forms of weight loss. Furthermore, state and national governing bodies, such as USA Wrestling, now prohibit any form of rapid or unsafe weight loss.

To some, the practice of any sort of weight control for the purpose of competing in a sport may still seem extreme and unnecessary, however, at the appropriate age, with proper education, planning and discipline, weight control can be a good thing that caries into other sports and can be an asset in maintaining one's health later in life. Proper weight control results in optimum body composition, allowing athletes to compete in peak physical condition, with the greatest ratio of strength, energy and power to body weight. These are factors in virtually every sport at the Olympic level.

With young wrestlers, it is only appropriate to discuss concepts. It can be a good time to explain how healthy eating can have an impact on performance, or to discuss the difference between healthy foods and "junk foods". Virtually all kids can learn and benefit from this information, even at a young age.

Can wrestling be an aid in self-defense?

Who would win in a fight between a world-class boxer and a black belt kung-fu expert? How about an NFL linebacker versus a world-renowned jiu-jitsu champion? Opinions vary widely, but the truth of the matter is that each sport, or self-defense discipline, offers its own unique advantages that become more or less important depending on the situation. For example, boxing skills are quite valuable in a fistfight, but are practically useless if attacked from behind.

Most fight situations begin as a fistfight, but end up on the ground in a grappling contest with the better wrestler being the victor. Grappling, or wrestling skills, are actually more important in most self-defense situations, than the ability to punch or kick. The highly controversial sport of Ultimate Fighting proves this point.

Ultimate fighting, much like organized street fighting, began in 1993 with contestants of virtually every discipline. More than thirty forms of martial arts have been represented including everything from aikido to wing chun kung fu. Win/loss statistics compiled since inception list wrestling as the most effective discipline. Always able to take their opponent to the ground and remain in control, wrestlers with no other martial arts training fared extremely well against world renowned experts in Karate, Jiu-jitsu and other similar martial arts disciplines. Although wrestlers are relatively rare in the sport, past champions have included several excellent wrestlers such as Dan Severn and Mark Shultz, whom easily won matches against much bigger and stronger, internationally acclaimed martial arts champions.

Involvement in wrestling is a great way to build confidence and the ability to defend one's self, without resorting to the violent tactics inherent in most other forms of self-defense. Wrestling skills are an enormous asset in a schoolyard brawl or even a street fight, however, wrestling's non-violent nature does not prepare one for other aspects of self-defense such as disabling or disarming an assailant.