

Defining and Measuring Early Specialization

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Background: Several major national and international sport and athletic associations have released position statements advising against the practice of early specialization with youth athletes (e.g., International Society of Sport Psychology, International Federation of Sport Medicine). Interestingly, further investigation into the basis of these statements suggests the evidence against early specialization may not be as robust as these position statements would lead one to believe. Further, there is no consistent definition of early specialization in the field or across studies (e.g., Buckley et al 2017; Wiersma, 2000).

Objectives: (1) To clearly define “early specialization,” and (2) to develop a valid and reliable instrument to measure early specialization in sport.

Methods: The first objective will be completed using a systematic literature review and synthesis of information. The second objective will involve multiple steps. Step 1, a previously collected dataset of athletes of varying sports and ability levels will be used to determine the key markers of early specialization. Step 2, information collected from the information synthesis and analysis of key markers will be used to create a new instrument to measure early specialization in sport. Structural equation modeling will be used to develop this new tool. Step 3, the validity and reliability of the newly created instrument will be tested using a sample (n= 200) of athletes of varying ages and sports in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). Potential analyses include measures of predictive validity, content validity, test-retest reliability and/or internal consistency of subscales.

Significance: The first step in explaining *why* early specialization may (or may not) be harmful, is to define and understand *what* early specialization is. The end goal of this dissertation is to create an instrument that will reliably and validly classify athletes for researchers, practitioners and coaches.