



CHILD'S PLAY

Make a splash this summer by creating an atmosphere of fun and encouragement in bringing a junior golfer to the game.

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IT'S SUMMERTIME, WHICH MEANS IT'S TIME TO SPEND TIME WITH THE FAMILY AND ENJOY THE OUTDOORS AND A VARIETY OF SPORTS, INCLUDING GOLF.

The game is one for all ages and with the correct approach on the part of parents and youths, it can be a sport for a lifetime. For parents and kids, it's important to be introduced to golf in a friendly atmosphere where kids have a chance to interact with other youths in their age range. Additionally, playing golf with mom and dad can be a great family activity.

Bringing youths to the game is a gradual endeavor that requires a step-by-step process that should start with the very basics and build at the junior golfer's pace – not at the rate of parents, friends or golf instructors.

At a very young age, my parents were very supportive of my interest in golf and I went on to play competitively in high school and college. Certainly, my path

isn't for everyone and it's important that kids be honest in assessing their interest in the sport. A good start for parents and kids is to find a nearby course with an active and well-organized junior golf program. Do your homework, ask questions of the local professional such as, "What do you have for juniors?" and find one preferably with a PGA or LPGA professional leading the sessions.

Ultimately, whatever the decision, golf is an important teacher of life skills and helps connect generations to one another. The game has the ability to impact a variety of populations and I've seen it provide hope to everyone ranging from children, amputees, career professionals and Special Olympians.

After my mother passed away a few years ago, my father and I took a golf trip to the Old Course in St. Andrews, Scotland. The therapeutic journey reminded me of the great gift that they gave me in introducing me to golf. There's still some friendly debate between my father and me about who won the matches, but for the record, it was 4-2 in my favor!

On the following pages, please find a step-by-step guide that I hope will help you develop an outline for bringing your youngster to the greatest of all games.

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PHOTOS BY SCOTT K. BROWN



RIGHT: As a youngster gets acclimated to the game, introduce easy-to-use equipment and start basic instruction, focusing first on short shots.

LEFT: Pitching water balloons to a target can aid a junior's hand-eye coordination early in their golf development.



AGES 3-6

At this young age, kids tend to be more instinctive and the focus of anything golf-related should be on having fun with the game. In introducing a child to the game, the emphasis should be on being as visual as possible and establishing a rewards system right away.

GETTING STARTED

Years ago, kids first coming to the game used to start by hitting mom or dad's cut-down clubs. In reality, I think that's one of the worst ways for a child to get the feel for the correct swinging action. Those clubs tend to be too long and heavy and can ingrain permanent deficiencies in one's swing.

Technology has evolved in a variety of areas and U.S. Kids Golf and other major manufacturers are making lightweight clubs and it's best to start with two or three of these clubs, such as a wood, 7-iron and putter. I'd also encourage parents to check out SNAG Golf (www.snaggolf.com), which uses a color-coded system, soft materials and friendly clubs to get entry-level players started in an appropriate manner.

Visit your local golf shop and consult the PGA or LPGA professional to learn more about shopping for these clubs, which take into account a player's height and skill level as they progress in the game.

KEEP IT LIGHT

In case you haven't noticed, young children tend to have a short attention at this stage and putting golf and a 5-year-old together can provide the perfect recipe for boredom.

Thus, we like to introduce some drills that promote hand-eye coordination by using props that kids identify with such as water balloons and hot dogs. One popular drill is to encourage the proper pitching motion by giving a child a water balloon and asking them to toss it underhand to a specific area (using it on fellow golfers' merits disqualification from the drill). Other times, we'll ask a young person to make a motion and make contact with an air-filled balloon just to get the sensation of the swing.

As the child progresses, you might ask them to chip whiffle ball or tennis ball toward a target while just off the putting green. No matter the results in the end, make sure to leave the child with a smile and something tangible like a colored golf ball, ice cream or a Webkinz toy as a reward for their efforts.

Most children are not as focused on results at this age and neither should their program nor parents.

AGES 7-10

Introducing the fundamentals and encouraging activity should be at the forefront as a child begins to form their impressions of the game in order to determine whether or not they want to stick with golf.

FUNDAMENTAL APPROACH

At this stage, it's appropriate to add a few more clubs to the bag and an increased amount of time should be spent on basic tenants of the golf swing such as grip, stance and posture. During practice, targets should start to be introduced and as a youngster gets closer to 10 years old.

Also, it's OK to start with limited private lessons with a PGA or LPGA professional you both trust and think would be a good match in developing your youth's game. As a general principle, ideally I like to introduce a child to the game starting at the green and we work our way back to the teeing ground, so we start with putting, move on to chipping and pitching and work on the full swing last. In starting this process, introduce identifiable targets like a small kiddie pool and ask a junior to pitch toward a good-sized target.

During these impressionable years, I encourage kids to take part in a variety of sports; focusing only on golf can lead to early burnout. In other words, don't create drudgery where golf is a determining factor in shaping a child's self-esteem. Though I'm all for a multi-sport experience, I also believe in golf's importance as a teacher of life skills like sportsmanship, responsibility and honesty.

DECISION TIME

Communication is one of the keys for any parent-child relationship and that principle is no different in golf. Parents should be able to tell a lot about their conversations with a child in regard to their early experiences in the game.

Open-ended questions tend to elicit the best responses such as, "Tell me what you like about the game" or "Tell me about today's lesson." Avoid too many questions that allow for one-word answers such as: "Did you have fun today?" (The answer is either going to be "yes" or "no.")

Also, if you notice the child is excited about the game introduce more clubs on a reward-based system. If he or she wants a new club, new ball or new glove, make sure it is because they love the game and are willing to dedicate additional time to practicing and not just because their best friend has the latest goodies in their golf bag.

AGES 11-15

When thinking about a youth's development in the game at ages 3-6, we were only interested in getting a child to pick up a club; at ages 7-10, we started to see the framework of a swing start to develop and now a youth's game is starting to take shape with their golf swing evolving and one's level of maturity growing.

ALL-ENCOMPASSING EXPERIENCE

As a young golfer starts to move into their teenage years, it's time to fine-tune the fundamentals in the golf swing and depending on the level of interest, introducing a series of individualized private lessons with the aid of a PGA or LPGA professional.

With a junior golfer's game growing, they should start keeping score on a regular basis. Additionally, some middle schools

young and old to take part in parent-child events that some clubs offer.

SENDING THE RIGHT MESSAGE

It's oft-repeated but true: Playing the game of golf is a privilege. Even though I'm a PGA and an LPGA professional now, at a young age I had no idea about the proper procedure for dropping a golf ball under the *Rules of Golf* and it's important to gain early know-how regarding the rules and some basic history of the game.

Golf is a game of honesty and integrity, so it's important to know basic tenants of etiquette and proper care for the course such as how to fix a divot or repair a ball mark on the putting surface. The one great separator in golf as that it's one of the few sports where fellow competitors support one another and compliment one another on well-executed shots. This principle is no different for PGA and LPGA professionals, who should constantly encourage their students.

If there's the slightest hint that a junior golfer might not respect the game by not repairing ball marks or taking a shortcut out on the course, it's important for the aspiring golfer to know that the privilege of playing can be taken away.

have golf as a part of their physical education curriculum. These initiatives are often appealing to juniors who want to play the game recreationally and not competitively as a part of a high school team in later years.

Both parent and child should be starting to get a strong indication of youth's interest in the game. Depending on one's development especially during their pre-high school years, you'll want to make a decision on participation in competitive junior golf tournaments. That said, this is a great time for

If an emerging golfer shows interest, start them in a series of lessons with a PGA or LPGA professional.





Allow a junior to get the feel for the swing by having them pitch to a small pool.

LPGA-USGA GIRLS GOLF PROGRAM

As an introduction to the game for junior girls, I'm a big fan of the LPGA-USGA Girls Golf program. The initiative, in its 20th year in '09, caters to young girls ages 7-17 and prepares them to enjoy the sport for a lifetime.

LPGA-USGA Girls Golf sites are coordinated by site directors who are LPGA or PGA professionals, members of local

golf associations, VSGA and USGA members, Girl Scout leaders, Hook A Kid On Golf directors, Executive Women's Golf Association members, volunteers, moms or dads.

In Virginia, there are offerings in the central Virginia as well as the Harrisonburg and Roanoke areas. Visit www.girlsgolfonline.org or www.lpga.com to learn more.



Once instruction starts on a regular basis, teacher and student should soon begin forming a sound rapport.



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After establishing fundamentals, rising players getting serious about the game should ensure that they have properly-fitted equipment.

high school practices these days start prior to Aug. 10 to get ready for the fall season.

For the more competitive junior player, I recommend they take a golf lesson every six weeks with regularly scheduled practice in between each session. In regard to equipment, except on the extremes, stay away from trends; choose your clubs wisely and stick with those sticks.

As a side note, most high schools don't have girls golf teams, so girls are forced to try out while being surrounded by a group of boys. This was true in my case and is the situation that many of my students encounter.

Though this can be intimidating, a new endeavor can show the willingness to step out of one's comfort zone, something that can serve a junior girl well later in life.

That said, the game is a great social builder. In other sports, competitors tend to know each other only by the participants' face. In golf, you tend to know one another by the relationships that you build over a round of golf.

AGES 16-18

For the serious junior golfer, high school golf and a possible shot at a college golf scholarship beckons. This is also a time for junior golfers to stay connected to the game regardless of whether they want to continue with golf beyond their prep years.

DEVELOP A GAME PLAN

Knowledge is power at this age. With the juniors I work with hoping to play high school golf, as soon as they're getting ready to enter eighth grade, I strongly encourage them to speak to the high school golf coach and find out what's required to be a part of the team and when tryouts are being conducted. Most

A WORD ABOUT

Parental Involvement

Generally speaking, during these years parents tend to get actively involved in their kids golf, sometimes to their own detriment and that of the junior golfer. At this time, it's important to support and encourage rather than forcing a youngster's enjoyment of golf.

I've seen parents make it too difficult on their kids until the child ultimately quits or worse, cheats, to make their parents happy. At this stage of a junior golfer's develop-

ment, hearing another voice other than from mom or dad is important; many youths try to be contrarian with their parents at times, but if a piece of advice comes from a PGA or LPGA professional, hearing those words from some-

one else, a new voice, can sometimes be of great help.

For the more dedicated golfer, it's important to find a professional that you both trust, agree on an approach and stick with it through good times and bad.

