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## Taking SMART approach to kids' sports

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Inside Bay Area

EIGHT-YEAR-OLD Jasmine Benito is interested in all kinds of sports — swimming, soccer, softball.

But her parents, Ben and Sandy Benito of Pleasanton, just don't know which of these sports to sign her up for. One thing they know for sure, they don't want her to be one of those kids that has so many activities to do there is no time to relax, both for her or for them.

"She wants to try all of the sports, but that is just too many activities," Ben Benito says from the bleachers of Pleasanton Middle School's gymnasium, where Jasmine is participating in Sports Potential Inc.'s Sports Matching and Readiness Tool (SMART) program on a recent Sunday morning.

"One one-thousand, two one-thousand, three one-thousand," specialist Michelle Brown counts as Jasmine balances on the ball of her foot at one of the testing stations in the gym.

With Brown's encouragement, Jasmine steps from space to space then onto a balance beam where she walks, heel-to-toe, across the beam.

This is one of nine tests designed by Sports Potential to measure Benito's agility and potential sports ability.

She giggles and laughs during the testing while doing her best to complete all of the tasks.

Benito will also take a 45-minute cognitive test that will evaluate her knowledge of sports rules, tactics, strategy and sportsmanship.

When it is all over, Sports Potential will present Jasmine with a 500-page Web site that will tell her which sports she is ready to try and which sports she could appropriately train for at her age. She will also get tips on how to improve her skills as well as inspirational activities and articles and pictures.

Her parents will also be given a Web site. Their site will give them Jasmine's results as well as tips on how to pick the right sports program and coach and links to articles by experts on a variety of sporting topics.

Hopefully, says Steve Spinner, Sports Potential's chief executive officer, Benito and kids like her that take the test will then be matched to a sport they will fall in love with and continue to play throughout their lives.

Playing sports is an important part of a child's life, Spinner says. Sports have a positive effect on children's psychological, social and emotional development and teach them lessons on how to stay fit for life.

But when kids are not matched to the right sport, the results are crushing, Spinner says.

There is nothing worse than putting a child in the wrong level of a sport before they're ready for that level, Spinner says. It can be terribly devastating for a child and it need not happen.

According to Menlo Park-based Sports Potential's statistics, 33 percent of children drop out of sports each year, and 70 percent of children quit playing league sports by age 13 and never play them or any sport again.

Some kids lose their enjoyment of the sports they have been signed up for and some feel they are just not good enough to play anymore.

Parents, therefore, should do their best to match the demands of a sport or activity to the interests, maturity and skill level of their children to keep them interested, Spinner says.

You want to make sure you put your kid at the right level of sports at the right time, thereby increasing the chances that kid will have a positive experience, Spinner says.

In the SMART testing, at least two specialists take each child through the physical tests and measure their performance.

After the measurements are made they are put through a computer program and the results are matched to 38 different sports the child could try, based on their performance. The sports include everything from team games like soccer and baseball to individual sports such as cross-country skiing, fencing and equestrian sports.

Kids are never told what they might be good or bad at. They are simply told which sports best match their current abilities and their future potential.

We try to have enough choice in there so that everybody can get evaluated and everybody can come out with a clear understanding of the wide range of opportunities that are now available and with practice and training are near-term available to them, Spinner says.

SMART testing is done through local recreation centers and non-profit organizations. The one Jasmine participated in cost \$135 and was offered by the Pleasanton Parks and Community Services department.

To learn more about SMART testing, including who is hosting the testing service, visit <http://www.sportspotential.com>.

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