Push too hard, too young…

Intense training schedules. Pressure to win and be the best. Painful injuries.

Given all these factors, it’s not surprising that some athletes simply burn out on their sport. But what is shocking to many in the field are the young ages at which this is increasingly happening — sometimes as early as 9 or 10.

The scenario often goes something like this: Eager to nurture the next A-Rod or Michelle Kwan, parents enroll their 5- or 6-year-olds in a competitive sports league or program. Over the next few years, training intensifies and expands to the off-season, making practice essentially year-round. Youngsters may join more than one league or a traveling team. They may have to sacrifice other interests and give up most of the down time that allows them to just be kids.

Soon the stakes get higher because many parents and coaches play to win. Winning means recognition and that could lead to lucrative opportunities -– high school championships then college scholarships and perhaps a shot at the pros.

“Kids sports have become much more competitive,” says Dr. Jordan Metzl, medical director of the Sports Medicine Institute for Young Athletes at the Hospital for Special Surgery in New York City.

“And in general, high-level competition for young kids is not a great thing,” says Metzl, co-author of “The Young Athlete: A Sports Doctor’s Complete Guide for Parents.”

With more kids than ever in organized sports, an estimated 30 million of them up through high school, Metzl and other experts in sports medicine and youth athletics say they are increasingly concerned about the pressures put on some children to excel. Not only are these youngsters at risk for emotional burnout, they may also develop injuries that plague them for a lifetime. Some will turn to steroids or other performance-enhancing substances to try to gain an edge. And some may give up on sports -– and exercise — altogether.

‘It’s not fun anymore’  
Kids with a strong internal drive may thrive on the competition. But the pressure can be too much for others, particularly grade-schoolers who aren’t as equipped to deal with the stress as older athletes.

And the goals of sports for young kids can differ dramatically from those of their parents and coaches, says youth fitness researcher Avery Faigenbaum, an associate professor of exercise science at the University of Massachusetts in Boston.

“Most children would rather play on a losing team than sit on the bench of a winning team,” he says.

When Faigenbaum asks kids who’ve quit why they’re no longer interested in sports, their typical response: “It’s not fun anymore.” They wanted to have a good time, make friends and learn something new, he says. But make the game all about hard-core training and the final score, and many kids will sideline themselves.

“They’re getting turned off of sports at a young age -– and that’s a sad tale,” says Faigenbaum.

There’s ample evidence that sports participation can have important benefits for kids, including improved physical health and emotional well-being. Hopefully, they’ll also learn life lessons in teamwork, discipline, leadership and time management. But kids can’t profit from these benefits if they’re quitting sports early on.

A new ball game  
While parents may have spent much of their early childhoods riding bikes around the neighborhood, playing pick-up games of baseball or basketball with the local kids and maybe joining Little League, today’s youngsters often fall into two disparate groups: those who sit inside playing video games and those who participate in organized competitive sports like soccer, ice hockey and basketball.

A big difference today is that kids involved in sports play harder and younger than ever, says Steve Marshall, an assistant professor of epidemiology and orthopedics at the Injury Prevention Research Center at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. And with dreams of college scholarships and multi-million dollar professional contracts, the competition can get out of hand, he says.