

## Sportsmanship & Children

We look to sports to build young people's character, self-esteem and self-discipline, not just muscle. Research indicates that competing in athletic activities benefits children emotionally and socially. They learn to be part of a team, to respond to pressure and to motivate themselves—all valuable skills, whether put to the test on the ball field or in the classroom. They also develop their ability to cope with adversity and to bounce back from defeat, two more essential tools for life.

Ultimately, the values that sports instill in young people reflect the attitudes of the adults in charge. When the desire to win corrupts the principles of sportsmanship, it turns what should be a positive experience into a negative one. A win-at-all-costs atmosphere can also lead to injuries by leading youths to feel pressured into playing when hurt.

Sometimes it seems as if kids maintain a healthier perspective on the importance of winning than their parents and coaches. Let's never lose sight of the purpose of amateur athletics: to help boys and girls grow and to have fun. Below are tips for helping your son or daughter get the most out of sports participation.

### Attend as many games and practices as you can

Children may not always admit it, but they get a charge out of seeing Mom wave to them from the bleachers with a proud smile on her face.

### Work with your children on improving their skills

Your six-foot-four eighteen-year-old will never forget the evening Dad or Mom donned a catcher's mitt and let him practice hurling his eighty-mile-per-hour curve ball the day before he was to start in the division championships. Judging by Dad's/Mom's bruised shins and throbbing hand, the memory will stay with them for some time too.

### Measure your child's performance by the yardstick of effort

Children respond better to positive encouragement for trying hard than to criticism for their shortcomings. In a survey of 658 coaches from 43 sports, many noted that the most damaging aspect of sports on young athletes was constant negative feedback from parents (and coaches). Occasionally a child may need a psychological nudge ("I know you can hustle harder than that"), but before you do, be certain of two things: (1) that your expectations are realistic and (2) that you make it clear that you love her whether she succeeds or fails.

"Kids need their parents most of all when things don't go well," observes Dr. Luckstead. "Some mothers and fathers—and I've been guilty of this myself—are their child's best buddy when they win, but when the child loses, the parents take out their frustrations on the child. That's obviously not the right thing to do."

### Don't be one of those parents who berate officials from the stands

A key lesson that sports imparts to kids is respect for the rules of the game and those whose job it is to enforce them. If you don't agree with a referee's call or a coach's benching your child in favor of another player, keep it to yourself. Learning how to accept seemingly unfair decisions is useful preparation for everyday life.

### Monitor your child for evidence of sports-related stress

Some amount of stress is inevitable prior to an important athletic event. But if you see your youngster placing undue pressure on herself to excel or taking losses too hard, it's time for a talk.

Help her to view defeats in the proper light. Point out that even the best hitters in baseball fail to reach base roughly seven out of every ten times at bat, future Hall of Fame quarterbacks connect only 60 percent of the time, and so on.

### Be alert to signs of unhealthy weight-control practices or use of performance-enhancing drugs

The quest for excellence can be carried too far, as when athletes attempt to improve their production with stimulants or bulk up with anabolic steroids or legal substances that act similarly on the body.

Extreme weight-loss measures are associated mainly with sports where “making weight” is deemed crucial to success: bodybuilding, cheerleading, distance running, diving, figure skating, gymnastics, rowing, swimming, weight-class football and wrestling. Methods of rapid weight loss include over-exercising; prolonged fasting; self-induced vomiting; repeated episodes of bingeing and purging; taking laxatives, diuretics, diet pills, other licit or illicit drugs and/or nicotine; wearing rubber suits; and immersing oneself in steam baths and saunas.

In two surveys of 208 female collegiate athletes, 32 percent and 62 percent admitted to engaging in at least one unhealthy weight-loss behavior. Male athletes, too, sometimes go to drastic lengths to drop a few pounds. Of 171 collegiate wrestlers taking part in another study, 82 percent revealed that back in high school they’d fasted for more than twenty-four hours.

Though these teens may not fully meet the diagnostic criteria for anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa, they risk making themselves seriously ill. If you suspect your child may be malnourished or secretly abusing substances, notify your pediatrician immediately.