

What Parents Can Do to Create a Positive Youth Sports Experience

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Parents have the greatest influence before 10 to 12 years of age. They can have a positive impact by encouraging their children's efforts, promoting realistic expectations of winning or losing, and involving their children in decisions about participation.

While parental involvement benefits most young athletes, some place their children under undue pressure to excel or focus on athletic achievement at the expense of other aspects of development, which can negatively affect social and psychological growth. Such parents include those with hidden agendas or unresolved needs, such as unfulfilled childhood athletic aspirations, who identify their self-esteem with the athletic success of their children, and those who regard successful sport participation as a symbol of social status or an investment in future rewards, such as athletic scholarships or financial gain.

Overzealous parents may behave aggressively at games or practices, yell at children or other parents, and fight with coaches. They may become angry at the child who loses, makes mistakes, or wants to drop out of a sport. They may push a child to participate despite injury, "shop" doctors for a favorable opinion, or even request surgical or hormonal treatments to enhance the child's performance. The balance between appropriate encouragement and over-involvement can be difficult to achieve.

What can parents do to create a positive youth sports experience?

- Support for your child must be unconditional.
- Be patient for the process, and enjoy it.
- Instill a sense of value for exercise and fitness regardless of structured competition.

- Support achievements as they occur. This will reduce pressure to achieve skills that are not quite ready.
- Beware of all the pressures to perform. Don't be a source of more pressure by trying to rush your child's accomplishments or by having unrealistic expectations. Most unrealistic expectations occur because parents forget that children are not little adults.
- Be knowledgeable that many of the developmental milestones for sports skills cannot be accelerated beyond their natural limit. Realize that physical, chemical, and mental development all affect ability and all progress along different timetables.
- Understand the extra changes that occur in the puberty transition from child to teenager. Don't overreact to normal developmental processes and changes that occur during puberty and may temporarily affect ability.

- Build excitement and enjoyment, not pressure and stress. Emphasize having fun, and de-emphasize winning. Model the philosophy that you don't always need to win to enjoy playing sports
- Redefine success and make sure performance disappointments are not seen as failures that the child might take personally. Kids need to understand that doing their best is a good thing, regardless of the result. Real success involves children improving compared to themselves, rather than to the other kids. As Mikhail Baryshnikov once said, "I don't dance to be better than anyone else. I only dance to be better than myself."
- Nurture realistic expectations. Only a handful of children and adolescents will ever make it to the elite or professional level in sports. Avoid the temptation to promote sports participation to achieve other goals (scholarships, financial gain, fame, social status).
- 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. Some mothers and fathers 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.

- Be aware that early and intensive participation in sports does not necessarily lead to future athletic success; it may, in fact, have detrimental effects.
- Encourage your child any way you can. Keep your comments positive without a lot of addenda or stipulations. Find more things your child is doing right than things to criticize.
- Support by being visible at their events. Attend as many events 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.
- Work with your children on improving their skills.
- Help your child set realistic goals (not your goals). When kids relax about outcomes, they tend to improve their skills, develop better physical fitness, and build more confidence that will help them in future sports and academics.
- Help your child build a strong sense of self-worth and identity that is not dependent on the sport itself or level of achievement.
- It's ultimately your responsibility to teach your children good sportsmanship, both as a participant and as a spectator. If you observe your child engaged in poor sportsmanship, regardless of whether his coach corrects him or not, you must discuss your child's misbehavior and insensitivity with him after the game. If a coach is ignoring, allowing, or encouraging poor sportsmanship, you need to make your objections known to the coach in a private discussion. Do not abandon your parental role or abdicate all control to the coach.
- 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.
- Offer praise and encouraging words for all athletes, including your child's opponents. Never openly berate, tease, or demean any child athlete, coach, or referee while attending a sporting event, or afterwards.
- During the elementary school years, expose your child to different activities, emphasizing participation and fun rather than outcome.
- Allow changes in sports, and encourage exposure to different sports. Remember, your child has his or her own likes and dislikes and should be able to participate without pressure to choose a certain activity.
- Watch for warning signs of burnout or avoidance.
- 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. 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.