

Sportsmanship

McKenzie Pediatrics

Emily was crying by the time the softball game ended. It wasn't because her team had lost. It wasn't because she was unhappy about her own playing. It wasn't even because of anything the other team had said or done. Emily's tears came after her dad yelled at her — in front of all her teammates — for missing the fly ball that could have saved the game. Emily is just 8 years old.

If your child has ever participated in a sport, you've undoubtedly met people like Emily's dad, parents who behave inappropriately and upset their kids. These parents get so wrapped up in winning and losing or how well their own kids perform that they lose sight of what's really important. They forget that one of the most important goals of kids' sports is to promote a sense of good sportsmanship.

Good sportsmanship is when teammates, opponents, coaches, and officials treat each other with respect. Kids learn the basics of sportsmanship from the adults in their lives, especially their parents and their coaches. Kids who see adults behaving in a sportsmanlike way gradually come to understand that the real winners in sports are those who know how to persevere and to behave with dignity — whether they win or lose a game.

Parents can help their kids understand that good sportsmanship includes both small gestures and heroic efforts. It starts with something as simple as shaking hands with opponents before a game and includes acknowledging good plays made by others and accepting bad calls gracefully.

Displaying good sportsmanship isn't always easy: It can be tough to congratulate the opposing team after losing a close or important game. But the kids who learn how to do it will benefit in many ways.

Kids who bully or taunt others on the playing field aren't likely to change their behavior when in the classroom or in social situations. In the same way, a child who practices good sportsmanship is likely to carry the respect and appreciation of other people into every other aspect of life.

Good Sports Are Winners

Ask first- or second-graders who won a game and they may answer, "I think it was a tie." It's likely the question isn't of any real interest at that age. Kids may be more eager to talk about the hits they got or the catches they almost made.

But as they move into older and more competitive leagues, kids become more focused on winning. They often forget to have fun. Without constant reminders and good examples, they may also forget what behavior is appropriate before, during, and after a sporting event.

Kids who have coaches who care only about being in first place and say that anything goes as long as they win, pick up the message that it's OK to be ruthless on the field. If parents constantly pressure them to play better or second-guess their every move, kids get the message that they're only as good as their last good play — and they'll try anything to make one.

Adults who emphasize good sportsmanship, however, see winning as just one of several goals they'd like their kids to achieve. They help young athletes take pride in their accomplishments and in their improving skills, so that the kids see themselves as winners, even if the scoreboard doesn't show the numbers going in their favor.

The best coaches — and parents — encourage their kids to play fair, to have fun, and to concentrate on helping the team while polishing their own skills.

Fostering Good Sportsmanship

Remember the saying "Actions speak louder than words"? That's especially true when it comes to teaching your kids the basics of good sportsmanship. Your behavior during practices and games will influence them more than any pep talk or lecture you give them.

Here are some suggestions for parents on how to build sportsmanship in your kids:

- Unless you're coaching your child's team, you need to remember that you're the parent. Shout words of encouragement, not directions, from the sidelines (there is a difference!).
- If you are your kid's coach, don't expect too much out of your own child. Don't be harder on him or her than on anyone else on the team, but don't play favorites either.
- Keep your comments positive. Don't bad-mouth coaches, players, or game officials. If you have a serious concern about the way that games or practices are being conducted, or if you're upset about other parents' behavior, discuss it privately with the coach or with a league official.
- After a competition, it's important not to dwell on who won or lost. Instead, try asking, "How did you feel you did during the game?" If your child feels weak at a particular skill, like throwing or catching, offer to work on it together before the next game.
- Applaud good plays no matter who makes them.
- Set a good example with your courteous behavior toward the parents of kids on the other team. Congratulate them when their kids win.
- Remember that it's your kids, not you, who are playing. Don't push them into a sport because it's what you enjoyed. As kids get older, let them choose what sports they want to play and decide the level of commitment they want to make.
- Keep your perspective. It's just a game. Even if the team loses every game of the season, it's unlikely to ruin your child's life or chances of success.
- Look for examples of good sportsmanship in professional athletes and point them out to your kids. Talk about the bad examples, too, and why they upset you.
- Finally, don't forget to have fun. Even if your child isn't the star, enjoy the game while you're thinking of all the benefits your child is gaining — new skills, new friends, and attitudes that can help all through life.