

Basic Rules for Parents

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Every year, 20 million children register for hockey, football, baseball, soccer, and other competitive sports. If you're the parent of one of those young sports enthusiasts, like most people, you want to be a good parent. The "don'ts" are clear—no fighting with the other parents, no attacking the coaches, no screaming at the kids. The "do's" are a little less clear and sometimes parents, attempting to do good, are the biggest impediment to a successful season.

According to the National Alliance for Sports, of the 20 million kids who sign up, 70 percent quit playing league sports by the age of 13 and never play again. The media points to enraged parents and bad sportsmanship as the biggest problem in youth sports. But, obviously, 70 percent of these kids' parents aren't assaulting each other or attacking the referees. So, there must be other reasons why kids drop out of sports. In many cases, it's the well-intentioned moms and dads that take the fun out of sports for their young athletes.

A Michigan State University survey looked closely at why kids play sports. The survey of 10,000 children, grades 7 - 12, found that the most important reason kids cited as to why they to play was to have fun. This was followed by to improve my skills, and to stay in shape. Winning (much to the surprise of many adults) was 10th on the list. The same survey also looked at why children stopped playing sports. I was not having fun, I lost interest and it took too much time were top of the list.

For most children, a successful game is one in which they had fun, didn't embarrass themselves and got a great snack afterward. Of course, nobody really likes to lose. But parents need to understand that winning doesn't automatically mean their child is happy, either. Parents, don't realize how important their attitude is in keeping kids on the right athletic track.

The secret, most experts agree, is to be an involved and conscientious sports parent, walking that fine line between being overly demanding or too nurturing. As any parent knows, you can encourage your young star to work harder, play smarter and be better. But push too hard and you'll create a resentful and reluctant player who loses all interest in sports. On the other hand, parents must realize that indiscriminate praise does not build self-esteem; it simply creates children who cannot distinguish between poor and real effort.

So how can you be a good sports parent? Start by following these basic rules:

Know and respect your coach. Most youth coaches are under- or unpaid. Many are volunteers who invest an enormous effort in your child's athletic activities. Take the time to talk to your coach, understand their coaching style and find out how you can help. Understand that winning is a nice by-product of good coaching but by no means is it the only goal. Working with your coach will help make the season much more enjoyable. Treating coaches with respect will make them more receptive to your questions and concerns.

Listen to your child. Talk to your child about what happens at practice and at games, not just about the wins and losses. Carefully listen to what they say about their own performance or that of their teammates and coaches. If your young player is upset about a bad game, help them figure out what went wrong—don't just give them a list of all the problems you saw or gloss it over with empty praise. Help them find a better strategy for the next time or set aside practice time away from the team.

Remember context. Everyone has off days, including your child and your child's coach. One bad incident should not cloud your opinions for the rest of the season. Rather, look at the event in the context of the whole season. Ask yourself if the event is an isolated occurrence. If so, move on and focus on the positive.

Encourage effort and reward hard work. One of the most valuable lessons that sports can teach our children is that hard work and team effort can bring great rewards. Good sports parents help their children see that a valiant effort can be just as important as winning.

Practice good sportsmanship in the stands. A girl's soccer league in Ohio instituted "Silent Sunday" to eliminate spectator cheers and jeers and sideline distractions. The experiment was wildly successful and a sad commentary on parents. Instead of being forced into silence in the stands, use your own conduct to teach your child that gracious winning and losing; not annihilating the other team, builds character.

Don't create divided loyalties. Disagreeing with coaching decisions in front of your child may make you think that you are sticking up for your player. In reality, it simply sends your child confusing messages as to who is in charge. By dividing his or her loyalty, you make it that much harder for your child to listen to the coach and be part of a team. Instead, voice your concerns to the coach in private. If you have grave concerns about the coaching, talk to the head of your sports organization. But keep your child out of it. Check your own ego at the door. For many parents, the end result (winning) seems to matter more than the process (becoming better athletes, enjoying physical activity and learning how to play as part of a team). You may thrive on competition but always remember that it's your child who's playing, not you. And their accomplishments (and failures) are just that—their own. Support your child, cheer your child and encourage your child but don't confuse what you want with what's best for your child.

Following these steps won't guarantee a parent the next sports legend. However, these steps can take something that kids want to do (play sports) and turn it into something that parents want for their kids (healthy living and life lessons). Remember, the goal of youth sports isn't about building a career, it's about building a life.