

Team Sports

Spring is in full swing! For many children this means that they are in the midst of the spring athletic season. Team sports can be a wonderful experience for children. It's great physical activity and can build a great sense of achievement. I have watched my own children build close friendships through their sports. They've learned the value of hard work, commitment, and perseverance. For the most part, it has been great for their self-esteem and self-confidence. They've also learned to cope with constructive criticism and disappointment. But their participation in team sports has sometimes been a difficult road to navigate. Not all sporting experiences have been positive. I have cringed at times at some of the behavior the spectator adults, coaches, and trainers exhibit both on and off the field.

I have seen the good, the bad, and the very ugly. During a game, I have overheard one coach parrot a sneaker commercial by telling children, "You don't win silver...you lose gold." I have witnessed the "trash talk" to opponents. I have seen arguments break out between parents, parents and coaches, and coaches and referees. I have seen the most loving, well intentioned, rational parents become completely unrecognizable at a game. Then there are those parents that coach from the sidelines and totally distract their kids. Still others who yell at their child's coach for not giving their child the lead spot on the team or sitting their child on the bench too long.

Once the game ends, I notice that most children seem to want some distance to decompress from their game. Those that want to talk about the game will usually initiate the conversation themselves. I am reminded of an article I read where hundreds of college athletes were asked to think back to their worst memory from playing youth sports. Not surprisingly, at the top of the list was some of the rides home from the games with their parents. They recalled comments from their parents such as "Why did you swing at that high pitch?" or "You didn't hustle enough." Those same college athletes were then asked what their parents had ever said to make them feel great after a game. The overwhelming response was when their parents simply said, "I love to watch you play."

In your child's athletic life, there may be some things that are out of your control. But, there are many things that you can control. After a game, you can change from the role of spectator/coach back to mom/dad. You can focus on individual accomplishment, pride in playing, and joy of the game. In competitive sports, you are the one who is paying the trainers to work with your child, and you can make sure that your trainers are picked carefully, and changed if necessary. You decide which teams your child joins. You are also the role model for your child's behavior during a game.

If you are one of those parents who are still depressed about a game loss when your child is already off the field and happily playing with friends, it's time for a Sport Parent Makeover. Take careful note of the following recommendations from Dr. Patrick Cohn, a Sports Psychology expert:

- Sports should be fun for kids. Treat sports as a game. It's not a business for kids. With all the money in professional sports today, it is hard for parents to understand that it's just good fun to young athletes. The primary goal should be to have fun and enjoy the healthy competition.

- Your own agenda is not your child's. Young athletes compete in sports for many reasons. They enjoy the competition, like the social aspect, engage with being part of a team, and enjoy the challenge of setting goals. You might have a different agenda than your child and you need to recognize that racing is your child's sport, not yours.
- Emphasize a mental focus on the process of execution instead of results or trophies. We live in a society that focuses on results and winning, but winning comes from working the process and enjoying the ride. Teach your child to focus on the process of the challenge of playing one shot, stroke, or race at a time, instead of the number of wins or trophies.
- You are a role model for your child athlete. As such, you should model composure and poise on the sidelines. When you are at a competition, your child mimics your behavior as well as other role models. You become a role model in how you react to a close race or the questionable behavior of a competitor. Stay calm, composed, and in control during games so your child can mimic those positive behaviors.
- Refrain from game-time coaching. During competition, it is time to just let them play. All the practice should be set aside because this is the time that athletes need trust in the training and react on the court or field. "Just do it" as the saying goes. Too much coaching (or over coaching) can lead to mistakes and cautious performance. Save the coaching for practice and use encouragement at game time instead.
- Help your athlete detach self-esteem from achievement. Too many athletes attach self-worth to the level of performance or outcomes. Help your child understand that they are a person FIRST who happens to be an athlete instead of an athlete who happens to be a person. Success or number of wins should not determine a person's self-esteem.
- Ask your child the right questions. Asking the right questions after competition and games will tell your child what you think is important in sports. If you ask, "Did you win?" your child will think winning is important. If you ask, "Did you have fun?" he/she will assume having fun is important.

Participation in team sports can be a wonderful experience for your child. But, as parents, we have to serve as a buffer to some of the negative experiences our children might be exposed to during team sports. We must not overemphasize sports at the expense of sportsmanship. We must teach our kids that success is not the same thing as winning and that failure is not the same thing as losing. Let's focus our after game comments on telling our children how much we enjoy watching them play. The truth is that most children probably have a better chance of owning a professional team than playing for one. As parents, we have the ultimate responsibility to make the right choices for our children and model the right behavior, because if and when they don't make it as a professional athlete, they still need to make it in life.

Elyssa Crimeni
School Psychologist

