

A parental guide for nurturing a young athlete

Much has been written and said in the media recently concerning the role parent's play in their children's sporting life. Much of it has been negative, stories of fistfights between coaches and parents at Little League games, and overbearing parents so over-involved in their children's sports that they undermine growth and performance. In fact, approximately 73 percent of children who compete in organized sports quit by age 13. Many drop out because they say the pressure from coaches and parents simply takes all the fun out of playing and competing.

So how can we keep our kids motivated and help them achieve their sports goals without burning them out? We need to shift the emphasis from competition and winning to fun and play and we need to let our children take the lead in defining their sports commitments. The job of parents is to help set healthy limits and reasonable expectations. While there are no recipes for creating star athletes, we can nurture elite talent and promote healthy exercise habits in young people

Sheila King, an exercise physiologist at UCLA provides a set of guidelines that I have found useful as a coach, and feel can be a practical aid to parents as they share sporting experiences with their children

- Lose the attitude of winning at all costs. Many children do not enjoy organized sports because coaches and parents put too much pressure on winning. Fewer than 1 percent of the children participating in organized sports today will qualify for any type of athletic scholarship in college and an even smaller number of those will go on to professional sports or the Olympics, according to the National Center for Educational Statistics. Coaches and parents who instill a life-long love of fitness and sports are the real winners
- Providing good coaching can help children develop the skills and abilities they need to excel and succeed in sports. The best coaches are positive and offer lots of encouragement, emphasizing both skill development and good sportsmanship. They are organized and set limits for both players and parents. They do not chastise or punish players for making mistakes. Instead, they praise the effort and emphasize fun, not winning at all costs. Most youth league coaches are volunteers and have not had professional training but that doesn't mean you have to put up with a verbally abusive coach or one who arrives late and doesn't organize practices. If you end up with one, try to move your child to another team as soon as possible. If you can't get a transfer, discuss your concerns with the coach in a private, non-threatening conversation
- Be sure your children are playing at the appropriate level for age and skill development. Nothing can be more discouraging to children than playing over their heads. Confidence is key — especially for girls, who more often express lower perceptions of physical competence than boys. Emphasize effort over result. By the same token, nothing can be more frustrating than playing below your potential. If your children are highly skilled, make sure they're challenged on the field or on the court. If they're playing above their peer level, find groups that meet their needs because a child with the potential to be an elite athlete deserves special attention and consideration. There are plenty of resources out there; it's up to you to take full advantage of them.
- Don't rehash every detail of the game with your child. Over-analyzing play can take the fun out of it. And focusing only on mistakes can backfire: Some kids will do anything to avoid making another mistake, including not doing anything at all. Children need to develop their instincts and learn to trust them. They don't need to dwell on every misstep. Let the coach provide feedback during practice when children can readily make change
- Some children are ready for competition at an early age. But from a developmental standpoint, competition is best introduced in adolescence when children are more comfortable testing themselves against others. Most pre-adolescents do not enjoy the competitive nature of sports. The emphasis in this age group should be on fun, movement variety, social and skill developments

- Children have to have the desire within themselves to compete and excel at sports. Parents cannot force children to succeed as athletes. The best approach is to expose kids to a variety of sports. Then let *them* choose the sport. Examine your personal motives for wanting your child to compete. If you are trying to live vicariously through your child, reassess what your child wants and needs and put those desires ahead of your own
- Never let your child hear you criticizing the coach or other players. Let your child know it's not the end of the world if they lose an important game. It could be their most important lesson. Parents who shout obscenities and criticisms embarrass children and squelch their desires. Keep the sideline comments positive and encouraging. Refrain from blaming umpires and referees for "bad" calls. Teach your children that such judgments are part of the game and must be overcome. Realize that most of the referees and umpires are volunteers who provide a service for your children

Help children learn to balance sports in their lives. Keeping children well rounded will provide them with the confidence and skills to adapt to the challenges they will face in life, keep them fit and healthy, and provide memorable experiences for the entire family to share.