

Building All-Star Kids

**Keep Your Kids Playing Longer and
Better in Youth Sports**

Written by: Jeff Farris

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Introduction: Are You a Good Sports Parent?

Without any other guidance, we handle our kid's sports activities the same way our parents did or the way we see other parents do. Most times, we get it wrong. With over 70% of kids quitting organized sports by age 13, our sports parenting skills are not something we often brag about. But, maybe we are lucky that almost 30% keep playing.

Being a good sports parent is not a natural skill. In fact, being a good sports parent often conflicts with natural parenting instincts such as protecting, educating and supervising. Standing on the sidelines, we are forced to resist the urges to help and must watch our kids learn to act independently and become the adults we wish them to be. Being a good sports parent is hard!

How do you know if you are a good sports parent? One simple test is if your kids are eager to go to practices and love the game. Although this sounds like a test that requires

little parent support, it is a test that actually requires a great deal of parent involvement. A child's development is never a straight path of constant improvement. At various times, kids will develop quickly, slowly, not at all or even regress. Sometimes, kids will believe they are the best player on the team and at other times the worst player. Parents need to be there to help kids understand this process which is further complicated by growth spurts and hormonal changes. As in everyday life, kids in sports need positive parental education, guidance and role models.

Kids are always their own worst critics. They are naturally self-critical, self-aware and self-conscious. Parents don't help by being more critical or comparing their child's activities with those of their teammates. Criticism is not education. Education is patient, encouraging, consistent, nurturing and repetitive. Education is constantly tested, not to demean skills, but to focus efforts on building skills.

Helping a child with sports is often an emotional and difficult path. If parents are too pushy, then kids feel too much pressure and are likely to burn out. If parents are too nurturing, kids fail to learn the lessons of self-motivation and hard work. Parental praise encourages further effort, but indiscriminate praise can create children who cannot objectively measure their own efforts. Finding the balance in these activities is necessary for youth sports success.

Not every child wants to play sports or will want to play sports over a long period of time. If kids decide to quit playing, parents should at least feel comfortable that their behavior did not influence that decision in a negative way. Parents can help overcome the effects of a negative coach;

however, a coach cannot overcome the effects of a negative parent.

Sports Esteem was founded to address these difficulties and provide parents, coaches and players with resources to help everyone better understand and benefit from their youth sports experience. Becoming a good sports parent is not an overnight possibility anymore than becoming a good athlete is an overnight possibility. Fortunately, time is on everyone's side.

Jeff Farris
CEO
Sports Esteem, Inc.

Why Kids Play Sports

Kids play sports to have fun. Primarily, this means being with friends. But, fun also includes being active, improving skills and gaining confidence in abilities. Winning, a common goal of coaches and parents, isn't one of the top reasons that kids play sports. In fact, in a survey of over 10,000 children, winning was number 10 on their list.¹

To kids, sports, Playstation and watching television are essentially equivalent activities that offer a needed dose of fun away from school. To parents, these activities are not equivalent. Parents appreciate the life lessons, creativity, physical activity and self-confidence that sports provide their children. While parents might spend hours taking kids to and from practices and games, few parents will spend hours to make sure their kids can play video games.

Youth sports represent a compromise between parents and kids. Kids get to have fun while parents take satisfaction knowing their kids are involved in a worthwhile activity. While kids are busy having fun, parents know their

kids are “working” to improve themselves. If parents forget this compromise, problems occur and kids quit.

Why Kids Quit

Bad parent behavior during youth sports events can make the news in terrible ways. Fortunately, these extreme examples do not represent the typical youth sports experience. The typical experience is that 70% of young kids enrolled in organized youth sports quit by age 13 and never play sports again.² If 70% of parents are not extreme, then why do so many kids quit? When asked, kids’ answers usually include some variation of “no fun” with “too much pressure” also a popular answer.³ The basic compromise between kids and parents is often broken and kids turn to other, often low-parent involvement, activities for fun.

Being a good sports parent is more than not hitting another parent or not yelling at an official. A kid’s dissatisfaction with playing, the coach, teammates or the team often begins at home. Many of the things that bother parents do not bother kids until parents make an issue of them. Being a good sports parent means that a child wants to continue to play sports as long as possible. Sometimes this means letting children identify and resolve their own issues with parental guidance but not intrusion.

Benefitting from Youth Sports

The chances of a child’s playing college or professional level sports are better than winning the lottery but not by much.⁴ Though the dream of playing professionally motivates many young players, parents should be clear that

the goal of youth sports is about building better kids, not about building a career. Kids active in sports are more likely to:⁵

- Avoid regular or heavy smoking
- Avoid drugs
- Stay in school
- Have good conduct
- Attain high academic achievement

For girls in particular, the benefits of playing sports can be tremendous.⁶ Girls playing sports:

- Like themselves more
- Have more self-confidence
- Suffer less depression
- Have a 60 percent lower likelihood of breast cancer
- Have fewer unwanted pregnancies

These benefits come from the fact that sports teach many life lessons. Active parent involvement gives parents the best chance of shaping these lessons for their kids. Life lessons from sports can include:

- Respecting others (including opponents)
- Exercising self-discipline
- Playing fairly
- Being a good winner
- Being a good loser
- Developing teamwork and trust
- Overcoming challenges and frustrations

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- Learning to deal with constructive criticism
- Responding positively to disappointments
- Building health and physical fitness
- Feeling the pride of accomplishment
- Taking responsibility for mistakes
- Showing leadership
- Making friends
- Learning to resolve conflicts
- Learning to deal with stress
- Setting goals
- Following rules

These life lessons benefit kids in whatever course they set in life. They provide parents with strong incentives to motivate their kids to play longer, whether or not these efforts land their kids scholarships or contracts.

Managing Your Child's Experience

For most kids, sports are an organized activity. Urbanization and concerns about child safety leave fewer opportunities for kids to just go play. As youth sports become more organized, parents often feel an increasing need to get their money's worth and may inadvertently over-emphasize performance and skills development. These goals may not give kids the opportunity they need to have fun. However, with the right approach, organized sports also provide the opportunity for parents to help their child navigate the experience and gain the fun, skills and confidence to play longer.

Developing a love of the game, a good attitude and other mental aspects of sports can begin at any age. However, real physical development does not occur until after puberty when muscle and bone mass become sufficient for strength. In fact, the majority of top athletes did not get serious about their sport until after puberty.⁷ However, with most kids quitting before puberty, the majority never

play long enough to reach anything close to their physical potential.

Unfortunately, some coaches and leagues look at the high drop out rates and assume that the best approach is one that minimizes parental involvement. As in school, kids benefit greatly from positive parental actions. While sports provide a framework for learning, it is up to the parents to make sure their child learns the needed physical skills and life lessons. Leagues focus on administration and coaches focus on teams. Only parents focus exclusively on their child's needs and can put everything into perspective.

To use professional sports as an analogy, parents are their child's managers. Parents help make sure their child is:

- Having fun
- Properly equipped
- Receiving good training
- Understanding the sport
- Approaching practices and games with the right attitude
- Not overdoing
- Learning life lessons
- Playing for as long as possible

Successfully managing a kid's playing time involves a lot of tasks and activities. In the course of a typical season, a parent does many things, including:

- Praise and criticize
- Comment, discuss and explain

- Motivate
- Set examples
- Practice
- Influence the type of sport
- Influence team choices
- Influence league choices
- Interact with other team parents
- Suggest changes and improvements
- Judge the quality of the officiating
- Judge the quality of the coaching
- Judge the quality of the league programs
- Judge the success of the team
- Influence attitude
- Focus or distract
- Acquire and maintain equipment
- Supervise rest, diet and conditioning
- Provide transportation
- Influence practice schedules
- Mediate conflicts

There are positive and negative ways to carry out each of these activities and parents must understand the short and long-term consequences of their own actions. If the short-term goal is to make sure a child plays the best game ever, each activity is approached one way. If, on the other hand, the long-term goal is to make sure a child enjoys playing and continues playing as long as possible, a different approach will be required.

Serving as Role Models

Parents are the ultimate role models for their child and their reactions help shape their child's perceptions of sports. Their actions, comments, lack of comments and tone of voice all communicate their feelings. For example, a child will be positively influenced if parents:

- Think it is fun to exercise and participate in practice drills
- Express positive comments before and after a game
- Avoid blaming coaches, officials or teammates when things go wrong
- Have fun
- Actively work to learn the game
- Talk to other parents and teammates
- Help out with team needs
- Share experiences
- Do not rate the success of a game on whether the team wins or loses

The biggest challenge for parents is that they cannot do things directly for their child. They must provide an environment that lets kids "discover" the sport and associated lessons for themselves. With this approach, kids can continue to apply the correct behaviors without parental supervision. Providing the right role model for kids goes a long way to providing the right environment for discovery.

Providing the Right Competitive Situation

Parents need to match their child to the right competitive situation. Playing on a team with kids who share similar skills is the best way for kids to maintain their own self-esteem and improve. Playing on travel and more competitive teams may not always be best for a child's development. If other players are too advanced or there is too much pressure to win, a child will stop having fun and will quit playing.

Regardless of the level of play, parents need to make sure the environment facilitates the best long-term development for their child. A team or league environment that emphasizes winning can greatly reduce the chances of a player's long-term development. In fact, a "win at all costs" atmosphere can have negative long-term effects on children.⁸

Working with the Coach

While parents help their child navigate and learn from the youth sports experience, coaches provide the instruction and supervised practice and game time that let kids learn and test their skills. Parents and coaches naturally complement each other in providing for the needs of young athletes. Parents provide the emotional, mental and financial support. Coaches provide the structure and technical support. Together, they build better kids.

Parents do not always have a choice of coaches, but they always have the choice of keeping their child with a team. First and foremost, parents have the responsibility of

making sure their child's coach is providing a positive and supportive environment. There are many teams and coaching styles and parents need to make sure that the coach is the right fit for their child. After verifying a coaching fit, parents should then:

- Expect professional conduct. Coaches are educators and parents should hold them to the same standards of conduct they would expect from any teacher.
- Support the coach and help their child get the most from the training.
- Communicate regularly and positively with the coach.
- Have their child ready and on time for games and practices.
- Inform the coach of any major life issues facing their child, such as health or family concerns.
- Avoid second-guessing the coach's decisions during games or practices.
- Never provide instruction to their child contrary to the coach's instruction.
- Wait 24 hours after any game or practice before discussing any concerns about particular events.
- Encourage their child to work with the coach. No matter the player's age, if something is bothering the player, he or she should talk with the coach directly.

Parents should avoid the temptation to step in and help.

- Express thanks to the coach for his or her efforts.
- Never criticize or demean the coach in front of their child.
- Help with team needs to free the coach's time for practice or game preparation.

Youth sports would not exist without the efforts of coaches. Often parents themselves, coaches share many of the same desires for kids as other parents. However, where a parent focuses exclusively on one child, a coach must focus on a team full of children. These different approaches give kids a balanced environment for learning.

Getting the Most from Game Days

To keep games in perspective, it is important to remember what games are all about. In youth sports, games are better viewed as practices which focus more on positions and strategies rather than on fundamental skills. Games test a player's development and help point out areas for future efforts. Unlike practices, games can carry an emotional element that sometimes confuses participants about the game's purpose.

Since many people are watching a youth sports event, parents may feel pride or embarrassment based on the performance of their child. Although these are normal reactions, both must be put in perspective. At games, parents spend so much time waiting for or watching their child play, they may not be paying close attention to the efforts of other children. The parents of these other players are doing the same thing. Thus, the efforts of one child on the field, either good or bad, are not often observed or really thought about by anyone other than immediate family. Before feel-

ing too much pride or embarrassment, parents must first think about how much attention they paid to the other players on the team.

Remembering Why You Are There

Games and practices are opportunities to build a kid's self-esteem. Esteem also provides a good acronym for the reasons why parents should attend.

- E Enjoy the opportunity to watch your child develop. From the sideline, you can watch your child learn and apply skills.
- S Share experiences and build memories with your child. Shared sports activities provide a bridge over generation gaps.
- T Talk with other parents and players to build friendships and understanding.
- E Encourage your child by paying attention and expressing positive support.
- E Educate yourself so that you can help educate or arrange to educate your child about ways to improve enjoyment or performance.
- M Monitor the experience to ensure that your child is playing with teammates and coaches who share your commitment to your child's overall development

Parents should always be asking themselves whether their actions before, during or after a game or practice are increasing or decreasing the chances of their child's wanting to play again. Although it might seem that some things that occur are "wrong" and need addressing, a bigger goal of all parents is to help their child look forward to the next event. While a mistake at a single game by a player seldom precludes this possibility, a mistake by a parent can have drastic consequences for a child's future desire to keep playing.

Preparing Your Child with Nutrition and Rest

Before starting a game or practice, kids need to have their bodies ready with fuel and adequate rest. Unfortunately, trying to fix these issues just before game time won't work. Food takes time to digest before it can be used as fuel. With too little rest or poor nutrition, a child's performance can vary considerably from past efforts.

During a game, a player needs lots of energy. To produce this energy, the body needs the right kinds of food. Foods high in complex carbohydrates contain energy that are easier for the body to use.⁹ Foods containing protein are essential for proper growth and development but are harder for the body to quickly convert to energy. Foods high in complex carbohydrates include:

- Pasta
- Breads
- Rice

- Oatmeal
- Beans
- Potatoes
- Bananas

Although these foods are all good for producing energy, too much of a good thing can cause a player to feel sluggish during a game. Players should avoid eating big meals too close to game time. To be effective and to allow time for digestion, larger meals should be eaten at least three to five hours before a game. Within two hours of a game, players should have just a light snack that is high in energy (carbohydrates) and easy to digest.

After a game, players should eat a snack to restore lost energy and wait approximately one hour before eating a full meal. Excessive fatigue after a game may be a sign of improper nutrition before a game.

Water and Sports Drinks

Water is an important part of the energy process. Players should drink as much water as they can before, during and after a game without causing stomach discomfort. Sports drinks have a limited amount of value when players are not sweating a large amount. However, if players are sweating enough to lose body weight, then a sports drink may provide some benefit.

Nutritional Supplements

The use of caffeine, power bars and other items that promise quick energy usually indicate insufficient attention to other areas such as rest, nutrition and exercise. A rested

player in good physical condition should not require these energy shortcuts. Other supplements that promise muscle development or extra strength typically have side effects and should be used only after consultation with a doctor. Like so many other things about sports, there are no shortcuts when it comes to nutrition. A consistent diet of good foods in balanced meals, combined with exercise, is the best way of having sufficient energy during a game or practice.

Nutrition Timelines

Proper nutrition and rest need to be monitored prior to a sports event. The following timelines can help plan eating and resting before any heavy physical activity.

Afternoon or Evening Event

- Good Night's Rest (day before)
- Healthy Meal (3-5 hours before)
- Lots of Water
- Light Snack (1-2 hours before)
- Game or Practice

Morning Event

- Healthy Dinner & Good Night's Rest (day before)
- Lots of Water
- Moderate Snack (1-2 hours before)
- Game or Practice

Playing with Pain

Although kids are naturally flexible and limber, their muscles and bones are still developing and require proper care. Pain prior to a game is not normal for young players. It can represent anything from a minor sprain to a fractured bone. Pain is the body's way of saying "Stop!" It is not unusual for a child to be sore after a game, but it is unusual for the pain from a prior game to still be a factor in the next.

In professional sports, it is common to hear stories of athletes playing with pain. However, young players lack the associated team doctors and trainers who help professional athletes make informed decisions. Youth players also lack the understanding of the consequences of playing with an injury. Kids only get one body and no childhood sports event is worth risking a lifetime of problems.

Providing Teammate Time

The better the experience kids have with all things related to sports, the more they want to keep playing. For many kids, the time before and after games or practices is a big part of the experience and parents can take away from their child's enjoyment by arriving late or rushing out afterwards. Parents should view the time around these activities as a part of the total youth sports experience.

In addition to fun, pre and post-game chatter among teammates also helps improve team chemistry and team play. When teammates can relate well with each other outside of a game, they are more likely to work together during

a game. Kids who keep to themselves or are less involved may act more independently. Good team play comes from sharing and working together and good player interactions go a long way to accomplish these goals.

Parents can help facilitate this environment by getting kids to games and practices in plenty of time to prepare and then by not pressuring the kids to hurry afterwards. By talking with the other players, parents can reach out to those kids who are not as comfortable talking with teammates. When it comes to building team chemistry, parents often have as big an impact as the coach.

Supporting From the Sidelines

Parents are comfortable giving instructions to their child and this comfort naturally spills over into athletic competitions. However, when it comes to game time instruction, coaches, league staff, officials and sports psychologists all have one word of advice – “DON’T!”

Although it may seem like a good idea to yell “pass” or “hustle” from the sidelines, studies show that these instructions cause more distraction than help. These instructions interfere with coach-to-player and player-to-player communications and, more importantly, interfere with children’s ability to learn to think for themselves.

Kids are going to make mistakes while playing sports. But professional athletes do too. Michael Jordan missed three times as many game winning shots as he made and Joe Montana completed only about half of his pass attempts. Kids still learning their sport are not going to

perform any better and there are many more games ahead in which to improve.

So what can parents do along the sidelines? The answer is that they can cheer and not much else. Parents must let their kids play the game for themselves and develop their own experiences working with peers and coaches. If children make mistakes, learning to deal with those mistakes with their teammates, coaches and officials is just part of the process of growing into a better adult.

Handling Bad Calls

Parents are going to see bad calls. Some of these calls will actually be bad calls but most will just seem that way. Officials have a difficult job to do and cannot see everything that happens. Sometimes this is because they were not looking where the problem occurred or were not focused on watching for the penalty. Officials cannot call all penalties, just the ones they see. To keep the game moving along with younger players, officials may also take into account a player's intent and avoid calling every penalty.

Officials are often kids themselves learning skills just like the players. The turnover for youth officials often approaches 50% to 70% annually. After just one year, many youth officials find something better to do than deal with adults.

Yelling at an official in a youth game should never be allowed or condoned by parents, coaches or league officials. Not only does it set a bad example and create potential embarrassment for kids, it also increases emotions

and greatly increases the risks of a confrontation. If parents see something they believe is unfair, they should express those concerns to league officials after the game. However, if parents see something they believe is unsafe, they should express those concerns to the coach and let the coach handle the situation.

Honoring the 24 Hour Rule

Youth sports would not exist without the efforts of volunteer coaches. Each year 2.5 million people volunteer their time to help coach kids.¹⁰ However, parents should still expect volunteer coaches to behave according to league standards of professionalism. Coaches should offer a positive developmental environment for a child and should help serve as role models for game skills and sportsmanship. However, parents will sometimes disagree with a coach's decision or approach, especially when it involves their child.

Parents have to understand that the coach does not represent a player. The coach represents the team and must make decisions from a team perspective first and a player perspective second. For parents, it is important to separate their child's sports development from game emotions. For this reason, many leagues and coaches have adopted the "24 Hour Rule" which simply states that coaches will not discuss a game or situation until at least 24 hours after the fact. This important rule does two things. First, it moves the discussion away from the presence of the players. Second, it allows all parties to have time to put things in perspective and "cool off", if necessary.

If parents will respect the 24 Hour Rule, their concerns are more likely to be fully addressed in reasoned discussion. More importantly, the kids' enjoyment of a game will not be marred by an ill-timed confrontation.

Handling Losses

Losing is an essential part of a young person's development. Without losses, it would be impossible to teach many of life's lessons. Losses can include team losses or the individual losses players feel when they must compete with teammates for playing time, starting position or recognitions. Helping kids understand and develop a plan for dealing with a loss, without quitting, is something only parents can handle well.

When teams emphasize the right things, losses can be irrelevant and have little impact on a player's enjoyment or development. When teams focus on winning, even a win may not be enough since there is always a risk of losing the next game. Parents need to emphasize to kids, coaches and other parents their priorities of kids first and wins whenever.

Car Coaching & Other Conversations

The time before and after a game can be a focused time between parent and child. There is no TV to interfere and children are a captive audience. This special time often gets used by parents to make specific points about play. While most parents try to use this time constructively, many kids, when asked in private, often view this time as

destructive. If parents want to help, they will need to keep these points in mind:

Before a game, comments should:

- Reiterate that it is all about having fun, building skills and playing as a team player
- Dwell on positive things that build confidence
- Increase a player's energy level
- Increase a player's focus

After a game, comments should:

- Reiterate that it is all about having fun, building skills and playing as a team player
- Remind your child how proud you are of him or her for making the attempt and working hard
- Praise the attitudes and efforts that you would like to see repeated in future games
- Recognize the hard work demonstrated by all players on both teams
- Focus on the life lessons learned through both success and adversity

No matter how many positive things parents say, kids will dwell on the negative ones. Sometimes the best thing to say after a game is nothing except "Good job"

and leave any other conversation until later. If kids want to discuss the game, they won't hesitate to bring it up. There is plenty of time to correct problems. Not everything needs to be discussed right after a game.

The more careful parents are about the focus of their conversations, the more children will feel comfortable discussing games and practices. Parents must stay patient and remember that players do not develop all of their skills in one game or practice. Kids have bad games just like parents have bad days. They want to make their parents proud and parents can greatly help their child's sports development by being proud of the right things.

Helping Your Child Improve

Parents can have a tremendous impact on helping their child get into and stay with sports activities. Kids develop at different rates and even though two kids are the same age, there can be as much as six years of physical difference between them.¹¹ Differences in physical ability and skills can affect the confidence that young kids have. This confidence then has a big influence on a child's attitude towards playing.

From the sidelines, many things that parents often attribute to lack of “hustle” or perhaps a bad attitude are often due to problems in other areas. Parents need to be open to looking at these other areas that might be affecting their child's enjoyment and performance. After a game, some areas to consider are:

- Were there external distractions, such as problems at school or with friends or siblings?

- Were there physical difficulties, such as an illness, lack of proper nutrition or insufficient rest?
- Is there a diminished lack of interest in the sport caused by burnout or a lack of time for other activities?
- Is physical conditioning in areas such as stamina or strength adequate for playing an entire game?
- Does a lack of fundamental skills hinder more advanced play?
- Is there a good understanding of strategy and positioning so that a young player knows how to react in specific situations?
- Is the child playing at the right level of competition? Playing with kids who are much more or much less talented can be demotivating and slow improvement.

If it is not clear what the problem is, parents should have a positive conversation with their child or with the coach to better identify the problem and the necessary corrective actions. Sports are learned activities and require time to master. Parents must be patient in helping their child and must avoid over correcting. The age of the player and the length of time between events give parents plenty of opportunity to take the right actions.

Encouraging Multiple Sports

Michael Jordan played baseball in high school and even left the NBA briefly to pursue a baseball career. Joe Nieuwendyk, MVP of the 1999 Stanley Cup NHL championship, was an all-star junior lacrosse player. Troy Aikman, three time Superbowl quarterback, played football, basketball and baseball while growing up and only began focusing on football in high school. Cal Ripkin, Jr., the legendary Iron Man of baseball, played multiple sports in high school and did not specialize in baseball until he was drafted by the Baltimore Orioles. In professional sports, there are numerous examples of players who did not specialize until much later in their youth development. In fact, early specialization actually decreases the chances of later sports success.¹²

Between the ages of 10 and 14, the human body undergoes tremendous physical changes. Players at these ages often struggle to regain coordination lost through growth spurts or to take advantage of new abilities arising from an increase in muscle, height and bone mass. During this time, it is vital that players seek a broad diversity of athletic experiences to fully develop their capabilities. As body changes slow past the age of 14, players can begin more specialization. Paul Hornung, Heisman Trophy winner and member of the Pro Football Hall of Fame, advises young athletes to delay specialization for the following reasons:¹³

- Each sport develops different physical skills, coordination and conditioning -- all of which will result in overall athletic growth.

- Each sport requires a different mental approach, yields a variety of experiences, and breeds discipline which can be applied to other sports.
- A variety of coaches, in different sports, can provide a broader background of fundamentals, strategies and performance tips.
- Playing different sports can help youngsters avoid mental burnout, injuries and a sport becoming work, instead of fun.
- Playing different sports early on can give athletes an edge ,because of their well-rounded experiences, when they are forced to specialize later on.
- Besides playing different organized sports, young athletes should have time to play plenty of pick-up games for fun and peer competition, with no adult supervision, because these promote creativity and freedom to improve, instead of the pressure to always perform successfully.

The sports learning process should be similar to the one that kids go through in school where class time is divided among many subjects. Parents should encourage their kids to seek this variety of sports education knowing that the more well-rounded they are with all skills, the better kids will play in any sport they choose.

Supporting Practices

Games provide a great environment to test skills but a poor one for developing them. For example, in hockey a player averages about 8 seconds of “puck time” during a game.¹⁴ With this limited time, players cannot perfect any of their basic skills. Games in other sports have similar limitations. As such, games are used primarily to gain knowledge of situations and positions and test fundamental skills already learned.

To excel in any sport, skills must be perfected in practice. For many kids, practice is something to do between games and the “fun” comes from playing. However without practice, kids will eventually fall behind their teammates. Then as the skill differences become obvious, they will stop enjoying the sport.

Parents must balance their child’s desire to have fun with their understanding that without hard work the child’s enjoyment of the sport will diminish. Some positive ways parents can deal with this are:

- Support the coach’s efforts to make practices fun.
- Show as much enthusiasm at watching your child at practice as at games. If both parents go to games, both parents should consider going to practice. Remember, practices offer opportunities to express interest and support, not to be critical or corrective.

- Praise the learning of new skills and the improvement of existing ones.
- Pay attention to what goes on at practice and talk about the various drills afterwards. Ask what drills were the favorites and help explain the need for the ones that weren't as much fun.
- Allow extra locker room time for your child to visit with friends at practices.
- Be positive in the car ride heading to practice and avoid negative commentary on the way home from practice.

Parents need to help coaches as much as possible by encouraging their child to have a good attitude towards practice. But more importantly, parents need to have their own good attitude towards practice so young players can enjoy going to practice to improve skills and to spend time with friends.

Motivating and Paying for Results

Kids begin playing sports to have fun and fun is often all they need to continue playing well. Too many rewards actually undermine a player's progress.¹⁵ Players will continue to play well because they love the game and enjoy the feeling of satisfaction which comes with improvement.

A frequent mistake parents make with their young players is rewarding points or specific activities with money or some other incentive. Although it sounds similar to

rewarding a good report card, paying bonuses often does more harm than good.

Scores in a game should be the result of a team's working together and outworking its opponent. A score often starts with hard work by the defense and culminates with a coordinated attack by the offense. A score generally has many players sharing the credit. The player who actually gets credit for the score should always be thankful to everyone else on the team.

Parents should encourage their child to be a part of the effort rather than just to be the one to get the credit. Players motivated to score points will often either play selfishly or, for fear of losing an opportunity to score, simply stand around waiting for someone else to pass to them.

Paying for goals can diminish a child's sense of accomplishment and pride in his or her own efforts throughout the game. Teams may not win and players may not score. If a player's only measure of success is being paid, then it will be difficult to learn the importance of being satisfied with individual efforts in spite of what else happens during the game. The best motivation parents can instill in their child is the motivation that comes from within based on efforts, desires and a love of the game.

Providing the Right Resources

Just like children bring home homework that is beyond what a parent can help with, young athletes often progress beyond the abilities or knowledge of a parent. If the problem is not addressed, young players' frustration at their own lack of progress will increase until the solution is

to quit sports altogether. Fortunately, like in school, there are a variety of experts to help with almost every aspect of mental, physical, skill and strategy development.

When parents are not able to help directly, they still have a large role to play in selecting and overseeing the experts. Whether a player is 5 or even 15 years old, parents should:

- Ask if their child wants help. Kids will apply themselves only if they are motivated to learn. Forcing instruction on a child with limited interest will have little benefit.
- Locate instructors who like instructing. Not all instructors have the same passion for teaching the same subject over and over. Only instructors who enjoy seeing another's progress can teach enthusiastically.
- Watch to determine if the instruction is organized. Spending time with a student is not the same as instructing. Parents should notice how the practice is organized and if the practice builds on previous lessons.
- Remain open to all areas of instruction. Sometimes a problem is caused by a breakdown in a more fundamental area and will not improve until the fundamental issue is resolved.

- Expect results over time. One lesson is not going to make a major impact on a child's performance. If a child wants and enjoys the instruction and the instructor is enthusiastic and organized, then lessons will help if enough time is allowed.

It is never too early or too late to consider expert help. Lessons, early on, can provide a level of confidence that lasts over a long period. In addition to helping the player, private instruction can also give parents valuable one-on-one feedback about their child's progress and insights into drills and activities that would be helpful at home. Teaching, whether in school or in sports, works best when parents respect the role of the educator and stay involved with monitoring progress and results.

Recognizing Burnout

School, homework, chores and family activities all take their toll on a young person's time. Add in an active sports schedule and little time is left for downtime when kids can refresh and recharge their emotional batteries. When this happens, something has to give or kids begin to suffer from "burnout". Parents and kids may not even be aware that burnout is a problem. Symptoms of burnout include:

- Moodiness or irritability
- Fatigue or difficulty waking up in the morning

- Poor performance in sports, school or other activities
- Loss of interest
- Lack of emotion after a win or a loss
- Loss of appetite
- Sadness
- Unusual focus on aches and pains
- Problems with friends

Parents should use their own experience and talk with their child to determine the level of burnout. If burnout is a problem, parents should consider limiting their child's activities, including skipping a practice or two, to let a child gain the downtime necessary for a balanced life. If a child is playing sports year round, parents should seriously consider skipping a season. The long-term benefits of skipping a season and avoiding burnout always outweigh the short-term benefits of skills development.

Kids who are emotionally and physically fresh learn much faster and work harder than those on the edge of burnout. Though kids often push to play as much as possible, parents must have the insight to limit too much of a good thing for the long-term benefit of their child.

Helping the Team Support Your Child

Helping the team gives parents the opportunity to ensure the environment in which their kids are playing. By actively participating, parents can help set the tone at practices and games and influence events in ways that have long-term benefits to their child.

Although few leagues require parent tasks, the teams that are the most fun are often the ones where the parents interact well together and form their own team to support their child's team. Sometimes this is because the parents already know each other from another activity, such as school. But more often, this is because one parent put in the extra effort to coordinate events which helped parents to get to know each other better and break the ice toward better team chemistry.

Some coaches fill the role of team organizer. But, their time is better spent preparing for practices. Teams work better when one parent steps forward and volunteers to be a Team Activities Coordinator who takes on the re-

sponsibility of coordinating tasks among the other parents. In this proactive environment, there are many tasks which can be done by parents that won't help with skills development but can have a big impact on team chemistry and the memories of the season. These tasks include:

- Arranging team meetings
- Coordinating team parties
- Helping with practices
- Helping with player management
- Helping with snacks
- Helping with water
- Taking pictures for a team scrapbook
- Taking video for a team film
- Contacting parents about schedule changes
- Helping with team events
- Helping with team trophies
- Helping with uniforms
- Raising funds
- Researching opponents
- Coordinating activities for parents during practices
- Keeping statistics

One of the life lessons which parents want their child to learn is the need to invest time in order to gain a benefit. Being involved with team activities is a great way for parents to be role models for their child.

Being a Good Sports Parent

Participation in youth sports is a shared experience between parent and child that both can be equally as proud of. Watching a son or daughter play well is one of the best memories parents can have of their child. But, the road to youth sports success is not always obvious to the participants and constant attention to the long-term goals of involvement is required.

Tracking wins and losses is easy when there are countable things like game outcomes. It becomes much harder when it comes to things such as fun, passion and skills progression. This sometimes leads parents and coaches to believe that winning in youth sports concerns game outcomes rather than life outcomes.

The saying “Losing only teaches someone how to lose” doesn’t apply just to games. It applies to all areas of life such as learning, sportsmanship, friendship, teamwork and self-discipline, to name a few. If kids lose in these areas but win in games, then kids will not have much to show for

their youth sports experience. However, if kids win in these areas but lose games, their experiences will benefit them for a lifetime.

The chances of any child's playing college or professional sports are extremely slim. So if winning is determined by this standard, most kids will end up as losers. If winning is determined by positive life lessons, there is an opportunity for every kid to be a winner. And, there is an opportunity for every coach and parent to make a difference.

The mistaken focus on winning games threatens to leave parents with kids who value the appearance of winning over true personal success. Parents have a huge role to play in helping their kids learn the right lessons from youth sports and use their youth experiences to become better business, community and family leaders. Winning is an important part of youth sports, but parents must always keep focused on what their kids are trying to win. Keeping this perspective makes it much easier to see game outcomes as interesting but irrelevant.

It is easy to get caught up in competition with other kids, other parents or other teams and lose sight of the fact that the only real competition in youth sports is against ourselves. The true competition of youth sports is about making ourselves better as a result of participating. And better doesn't really mean faster or stronger. It means being a better person. When the season is over, trophies are awarded and then often forgotten. The only things that truly last, for either parent or child, are the memories.

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