



SUCCESSFUL SPORTS PARENTING

Sanity and Madness in Youth Sports Competition

Reprinted and adapted from *Parents' Complete Guide to Youth Sports*, (1989) with permission from the National Association for Sport and Physical Education (NASPE), 1900 Association Drive, Reston, VA 20191-1599

Growth in the popularity and scope of youth sports and in the role that they play in the lives of children is undeniable. But this expansion has generated ongoing and, at times, bitter debate. Serious questions have been raised about the desirability of organized sports for children. Unfortunately, answers to the questions are not simple.

Obviously this growth could not have occurred if people did not believe that participation in organized sports is beneficial. Those who favor sport programs emphasize that there are many aspects of the experience that contribute to personal development. Some supporters have pointed out that sports are miniature life situations; ones in which children can learn to cope with many of the important realities of life. Within sports, children exercise to cooperate with others, to compete, to deal with success and failure, to learn self-control and to take risks. Important attitudes are formed about achievement, authority and persistence in the face of difficulty.

Adult leadership can be one of the truly positive features of organized sport programs. Knowledgeable coaches can help children acquire physical skills and begin to master a sport. Higher levels of physical fitness can be promoted by such guidance. The coach can become a significant adult in the life of the child and can have a huge positive influence on personal and social development. Likewise, the involvement of parents can bring families closer together and heighten the value of the experience for young athletes.

Youth sports have more than their share of critics. Most notably, coverage by the popular media is dominated by attacks on sport programs. Because mistreatment of children is newsworthy, sport abuses are likely to be sensationalized and widely publicized. Distortions frequently occur. One prominent sport psychologist recently spent ninety minutes with a reporter. For eighty minutes he discussed the positive aspects of sport programs, and for ten minutes he talked about the problems in youth sports. The newspaper article dealt only with the problems. Furthermore, it misquoted the expert as saying that all organized sports should be eliminated for children under the age of sixteen. The media's overemphasis on the negative has understandably made some parents question the value of youth sports.

Undoubtedly problems can arise in sport programs, and some of these problems have been the focus of severe criticism. Newsweek once published a thoughtful editorial by former major league pitcher Robin Roberts, entitled "Strike Out Little League." This Hall of Fame baseball star pointed out that Little League Baseball can place excessive physical and psychological strains on youngsters, and that programs sometimes exist more for the self-serving needs of adults than for the welfare of children. Experts in child development have claimed that adult-supervised and highly organized programs can rob children of the creative benefits of spontaneous play. They suggest that children would benefit far more if adults simply left them to their own games and activities.

Many complaints center around the role of adults in youth sport programs. Critics have charged that some coaches are absorbed in living out their own fantasies of building sport dynasties and that consequently they show little personal concern for their athletes. Likewise, opponents of youth sports maintain that some parents live through their children's accomplishments and place some tremendous pressure on them to succeed. When coaches and parents become more focused on themselves than on the quality of the children's experience, something is undoubtedly wrong!

The negative involvement of adults in sports has been linked to such problems as the inappropriate use of drugs for training and conditioning purposes, physical injury due to excessive training and competition and blatant cheating and dishonesty. The Los Angeles Times reported that one misguided coach injected



SUCCESSFUL SPORTS PARENTING

oranges with amphetamines, then fed them to his ten- to twelve year-old football players to get them "up" for a game. The Washington Post carried a story about a mother who forged a phony birth certificate for her seventeen-year-old son so that he could star in a league for fourteen-year-olds.

Who's right? Are youth sports a symptom of a serious, widespread social disease? Or are they the salvation of our youth? The answer is neither. No reasonable person can deny that important problems do exist in some programs. Some of the criticisms are well founded and can be constructive. On the other hand, surveys have shown that the vast majority of adults and children involved in sports find them to be an enjoyable and valued part of their lives. The bottom line is that sport programs are what we make of them. They can become a source of joy and fulfillment in the life of a child, or a source of stress and disappointment.

We believe that sports have a strong positive potential for achieving important objectives. The question is not whether youth sports should continue to exist; they are here to stay as a firmly established part of our society. If anything, they will continue to grow in spite of the criticisms that are sometimes leveled at them. The real question is how parents can help ensure that sports will be a positive experience for their children. What can you do to help achieve the many desirable outcomes that are possible? Perhaps the key to unlocking the potential of youth sports lies in being well informed about their physical and psychological dimensions.

The Rights of Child Athletes

When children enter a sport program, they automatically assume responsibilities. But they also have rights. Adults need to respect these rights if young athletes are to have a safe and rewarding sport experience. The National Association for Sport and Physical Education's Youth Sports Task Force has developed a "Bill of Rights for Young Athletes." The rights identified by these medical experts, sport scientists, and national youth sport administrators are presented in the accompanying box.

1. Right to participate in sports.
2. Right to participate at a level commensurate with each child's maturity and ability.
3. Right to have qualified adult leadership.
4. Right to play as a child and not as an adult.
5. Right to share in the leadership and decision-making of sport participation.
6. Right to participate in safe and healthy environments.
7. Right to proper preparation for participation in sports.
8. Right to an equal opportunity to strive for success.
9. Right to be treated with dignity.
10. Right to have fun in sports.

Goals and Models in Youth Sports

What do you want your child to get out of sports? What are the goals that you would like achieved? Parental objectives can range from simply providing a worthwhile leisure-time activity for children to laying the foundation for becoming an Olympic champion or professional athlete. Of course, there are many other goals that may well be more appropriate. Some of them are physical, such as attaining sport skills and increasing physical fitness. Others are psychological, such as developing leadership skills, self-discipline,



SUCCESSFUL SPORTS PARENTING

respect for authority, competitiveness, cooperativeness, sportsmanship, and self-confidence. These are many of the positive attributes that fall under the heading of "character." Youth sports are also an important social activity in which children make new friends and acquaintances and become part of an ever-expanding social network. Furthermore, sports can serve to bring families closer together.

Whatever your objectives may be, it is important that you become aware of them. And you must realize that none of these objectives can be achieved as a result of mere participation in sports. Simply placing a child into a sport situation does not guarantee a positive outcome. The nature and quality of the program, which are very much dependent on the input of adults, are prime factors in determining benefits.

Unlike youth sports, the major goals of professional sports are directly linked to their status in the entertainment industry. Former Dallas Cowboys wide receiver Peter Gent recalled that at the end of rookie camp, a meeting was held to explain the responsibilities of a professional athlete. "The man to give the best advice was the team's public relations director," Gent said. "He told us, 'Boys, this is show business.'"

The goals of professional sports, simply stated, are to entertain and, ultimately, to make money. Financial success is of primary importance and depends heavily on a product orientation, namely, winning. Is this wrong? Certainly not! As a part of the entertainment industry; professional sports have tremendous value in our society.

The developmental model of sports has a far different focus. As its name suggests, the goal is to develop the individual. The most important product is not wins or dollars but, rather, the quality of the experience for the child. In this sense, sport participation is an educational process whereby children can learn to cope with realities they will face later in life. Although winning is sought after, it is by no means the primary goal. Profit is measured not in terms of dollars and cents but in terms of the skills and personal characteristics that are acquired.

We are firmly convinced that most of the problems in youth sports occur when uninformed adults erroneously impose a professional model on what should be a recreational and educational experience for children. When excessive emphasis is placed on winning, it is easy to lose sight of the needs and interests of the young athletes.

We asked earlier what you want your child to get out of sports. Perhaps we also should know about the objectives that young athletes seek to achieve. A sport psychologist, Daniel Gould, summarized the results of two scientific surveys conducted in the United States and Canada. The studies indicated that young athletes most often say they participate in organized sports for the following reasons:

- To have fun
- To improve their skills and learn new skills
- To be with their friends or make new friends
- For thrills and excitement
- To succeed or win
- To become physically fit

Concerned parents should ask their children athletes what they want from sports and why they wish to participate. Parents should not be guilty of forcing their own aspirations upon their children. Rather, they should make sure that young athletes have a say in determining their own destiny.

It is important to note that the primary goal of the professional-succeeding or winning-is far less important to children. In one of our own studies, we found that teams' won-lost records have nothing to do with how well young athletes liked the coaches they played for or with their desire to play for the same coach again. Interestingly, however, success of the team was related to how much the children thought their parents



SUCCESSFUL SPORTS PARENTING

liked the coach. The children also felt that the won-lost record influenced how much their coach liked them. It appears that even at a very young age, children begin to tune in to the adult emphasis on winning, even though they do not yet share it themselves. What children do share is a desire to have fun!

Fun. A term we use a lot. But what is it? Certainly, it's easy to tell when people are having fun. They show it in their expression of happiness, satisfaction, and enthusiasm. We've asked many children why sports are fun for them. Perhaps the most basic reason was given by a little eight-year-old girl who said, "Fun is when I'm doing something that makes me happy just to be doing it, like playing tennis." In other words, much of the fun in sports comes just from performing the activities themselves. One child played on a soccer team that almost never won matches. Yet the youngster could hardly wait for the coming season. Why? Because he had fun. He simply enjoyed playing soccer. Being with others, meeting challenges, feeling the drama of uncertain outcomes, becoming more skilled, all of these add to the fun of doing for doing's sake.

Winning also adds to the fun, but we sell sports short if we insist that winning is the most important ingredient. In fact, several studies reported that, when children were asked where they'd rather be-warming the bench on a winning team or playing regularly on a losing team-about 90 percent of them chose the losing team. The message is clear: The enjoyment of playing is more important to children than the satisfaction of winning. The basic right of the child athlete to have fun in participating should not be neglected. One of the quickest ways to reduce fun is to begin treating children as if they were varsity or professional athletes.

Perhaps most importantly, we need to keep in mind that young athletes are not miniature adults. They are children, and they have the right to play as children. In fact, we all do. The Dutch philosopher Johan Huizinga wrote that to play as an adult, everyone must become a child again. Youth sports are first and foremost a play activity, and children deserve to enjoy sports in their own way. Now, we are not suggesting changing the team names or taking away the uniforms. The youngsters enjoy these trappings. What we are stressing is the need to make sure that our programs remain child-centered and do not become adult-centered.

A Winning Philosophy for Youth Sports

In terms of the educational benefits of sports, children can learn from both winning and losing. But for this to occur, winning must be placed in a healthy perspective. We have therefore developed a four-part philosophy of winning designed to maximize young athletes' enjoyment of sports and their chances of receiving the positive outcomes of participation.

1. Winning isn't everything, nor is it the only thing. Young athletes can't possibly learn from winning and losing if they think the only objective is to beat their opponents. Does this mean that children should not try to win? Definitely not! As a form of competition, sports involve a contest between opposing individuals or teams. It would be naive and unrealistic to believe that winning is not an important goal in sports. But it is not the most important objective. To play sports without striving to win is to be a dishonest competitor. But despite this fact, it is important that we not define success only as winning. Not every child can play on a championship team or become a star athlete. Yet every child can experience the true success that comes from trying his or her best to win. The opportunity to strive for success is the right of every young athlete.

2. Failure is not the same thing as losing. Athletes should not view losing as a sign of failure or as a threat to their personal value. They should be taught that losing a game is not a reflection of their own self-worth. In other words, when an individual or team loses a contest, it does not mean that they are worth less than if they had won. In fact, some valuable lessons can be learned from losing. Children can learn to persist in the face of obstacles and to support each other even when they do not achieve victory. They can also learn that mistakes are not totally negative but are important stepping stones to achievement. Mistakes provide valuable information that is necessary for improving performance. Thomas Edison was once asked whether he was discouraged by the failure of more than three thousand experiments leading to



SUCCESSFUL SPORTS PARENTING

the development of the light bulb. Edison replied that he did not consider the experiments failures, for they had taught him three thousand ways not to create a light bulb, and each experiment had brought him closer to his goal.

3. Success is not equivalent to winning. Thus, neither success nor failure need depend on the outcome of a contest or on a won-lost record. Winning and losing apply to the outcome of a contest, whereas success and failure do not. How, then, can we define success in sports?

4. Children should be taught that success is found in striving for victory. The important idea is that success is related to effort! The only thing that athletes have complete control over is the amount of effort they give. They have only limited control over the outcome that is achieved. If we can impress on our children that they are never "losers" if they give maximum effort, we are giving them a priceless gift that will assist them in many of life's tasks. A youth soccer coach had the right idea when he told his team, "You kids are always winners when you try your best! But sometimes the other team will score more goals."

A major cause of athletic stress is fear of failure. When young athletes know that making mistakes or losing a contest while giving maximum effort is acceptable, a potent source of pressure is removed. Moreover, if adults apply this same standard of success to themselves, they will be less likely to define their own adequacy in terms of a won-lost record and will more likely focus on the important children's goals of participation, skill development, and fun. Parents and coaches will also be less likely to experience stress of their own when their athletes are not winning. When winning is kept in perspective, the child comes first and winning is second. In this case, the most important sport product is not a won-lost record, it is the quality of the experience provided for the athletes.

Parent Roles and Responsibilities

Two important sets of adults combine with the child to form the athletic triangle. They are, of course, parents and coaches. The relationships that exist among the points of the athletic triangle go a long way toward determining the quality of the experience that the child has in sports. Being a point in the athletic triangle implies both rights and responsibilities.

When your child enters a sport program, you automatically take on some obligations. Some parents do not realize this and at first are surprised to find out what is expected of them. Others never realize their responsibilities and therefore miss opportunities to help their children grow through sports, or actually do things that interfere with their children's development.

The right of the child to participate in sports also includes the right not to participate. Although parents might choose to encourage participation, children should not be pressured, intimidated, or bribed into playing. If youngsters feel forced, their chances of receiving the benefits of sports are decreased. Even more profound and long-lasting are the effects which feeling forced can have on parent-child relationships. An extreme and very sad example of this is the following statement made to one of us by a New York executive: "If it hadn't been for sports, I wouldn't have grown up hating my father."

It is possible to be very supportive of a child's athletic interests without placing demands or pressures on the youngster. For example, hockey great Bobby Orr was fortunate in having very supportive parents. He recalls, "My parents bought my equipment, drove me to the rink, rubbed my feet when they were cold. I can't remember them saying that I was going to be a professional hockey player."

Although coaches have the most direct contact with children within the sport environment, parents also involve themselves to varying degrees. Some parents assume an extremely active role, and sometimes their behavior and the demands they place upon children become a great source of stress for the child. Consider, for example, the following experience described by a youth coach:



SUCCESSFUL SPORTS PARENTING

One night last season my team lost a close game. I sat the whole team on the bench and congratulated them for trying, for acting like gentlemen. I said I couldn't have been prouder of them if they had won. Most of all, I said, it is as important to be a good loser as a gracious winner. As I talked I could see their spirits lifting. I felt they had learned more than just how to play baseball that night. But as I mingled with the parents in the stands afterward, I was shocked to hear what they were saying to the boys. The invariable theme was, "Well, what happened to you tonight?" One father pulled out a note pad and went over his son's mistakes play by play. Another father dressed down his son for striking out twice. In five minutes the parents had undermined every principle I had set forth.

It is natural for parents to identify with their children to some extent, to take pleasure in their triumphs, and to suffer in their defeats and disappointments. The love bond that exists between parent and child virtually guarantees this process. Like all good things, however, this process of identification can become excessive so that the child becomes an extension of the parent. When this happens, parents may begin to define their own success and self-worth in terms of how successful their child is, as in the following cases.

Tommy's father never was a good athlete. Now in his adult years, he is a "frustrated jock" who tries to experience through Tommy the success he never knew as an athlete. Tommy is pushed to excel, to put in long hours of practice, and to give up other activities. When he performs poorly, his father becomes withdrawn and gloomy. Dad takes home movies of Tommy during practices and games, and visitors to the home are promptly shown some of Tommy's triumphs. Tommy himself is a reasonably good athlete at age twelve, but he is unlikely ever to become a superstar. In fact, a schoolteacher has become very concerned because Tommy "doesn't seem himself" and is lagging in his schoolwork. The family's physician is concerned even more, because Tommy has been complaining of abdominal pains and the doctor is fearful he may be developing an ulcer.

Sheila's mother was a champion collegiate swimmer who won a bronze medal in the Olympic Games. It is clear that the mother expects Sheila to follow in her footsteps. Sheila was a "waterbaby" at six months of age and was "in training" by age four. She shows every sign of becoming a high-level competitor in her own right. She is now ten years of age and has won countless medals in age-group swim competitions. Her mother clearly is delighted with and totally engrossed in her athletic development. But her father is becoming worried. Lately, Sheila doesn't seem to enjoy swimming as much. Last week she announced that she wanted to stop training and go to summer camp with some friends for several weeks. Her mother flatly refused to consider this, and Sheila burst into tears, saying that she didn't want to swim anymore. Sheila's father is concerned that her mother is placing so much pressure on the child to excel that she is experiencing burnout.

Tommy and Sheila are showing clear signs of the stress caused when parents try to live through their children. Tommy is being pushed to become the great athlete that his father always wanted to be, and Sheila is having to measure up to the standards set by her mother as a champion athlete. These children must succeed or their parents' self-image is threatened and the children themselves are threatened with disapproval or loss of love. Much more is at stake than a mere game or swim meet, and the child of such a parent carries a heavy burden.

At some level both Tommy and Sheila must be aware that their parents' happiness depends on how well they perform. Children are accustomed to being dependent on their parents and are often unequipped to handle a reversal of the dependency relationship. This is especially the case when the parent is demanding winning results rather than the best effort of which the child is capable.

We should point out that sports are not the only activities in which this may occur. The performance arena



SUCCESSFUL SPORTS PARENTING

may be in academics, music, dance, or social popularity-any activity that has social or personal importance for the parent. But because of the importance of sports in our society, and particularly in the world of many parents, there is special potential for the dependency-reversal process to occur in the realm of sports.

One of the most important responsibilities of childrearing is the role that parents play in shaping their children's perceptions and understanding of their world. Sports can be a proving ground for later life experiences. Therefore, you have the opportunity to help your young athlete accurately interpret and understand sport experiences and place them in a proper and healthy perspective. For example, you can play a key role in helping your child understand the significance of winning and losing, of success and failure. You can help your child define his or her success in terms of effort expended instead of the score at the end of the contest. Moreover, winning or losing a contest may be the result of external factors beyond the child's control, such as officials, weather, other players, or luck. Or it may be the result of internal causes, such as the child's ability and effort. By helping children to accurately interpret the causes of sport outcomes, parents help youngsters view the world more realistically.

There are other important challenges that must be met by youth sport parents. To contribute to the success of a program, you must be willing and able to commit yourself in many different ways. The following questions serve as important reminders of the scope of parents' responsibilities. You should be able to honestly answer "yes" to all the questions.

Can you give your child some time? You will need to decide how much time you can devote to your child's activity. It may involve driving children to and from practice, going to your child's games, meets, or matches, and assisting the coach. Many parents do not realize how much time can be consumed by such activities. Some parents who expect sport programs to occupy their child's time and give them more time for themselves are shocked to find that they are now spending more time with their children than before. Conflicts arise when parents are very busy, yet are also interested and want to encourage their children. Thus, one challenge is to deal honestly with the time-commitment issue and never promise more time than you can actually deliver.

Can you accept your son's/daughter's triumphs? Every child athlete experiences "the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat" as part of the competition process. Accepting a child's triumphs sounds easy, but it is not always so. Fathers, in particular, may be competitive with their sons. This process is the opposite of the over identification discussed earlier. For example, when Jack played well in a basketball game, his father pointed out minor mistakes, described how other players did even better, and then reminded his son of even more impressive sport achievements of his own. This reestablished his role as a dominant parent and thoroughly deflated Jack.

Can you accept your son/daughter's disappointments? Disappointments are also part of sports and they may be keenly experienced by your child at times. Would you be embarrassed if your child broke into tears after a tough loss or after making a mistake? Could you put your arm around and comfort your child at such a moment? Can you tolerate becoming a target for young child's displaced anger and frustration when there is no other outlet for disappointment and hurt? When an apparent disappointment occurs, parents should be able to help their children see the positive side of the situation. By doing this, you can change your child's disappointment into self-acceptance. Again, emphasizing effort rather than outcome can be an important means to this goal.

Can you show your child self-control? Conduct at practices and during contests (games, meets, matches) can have an important impact on your child. Parents who yell at or criticize athletes, coaches, or officials set an incredibly poor example for their youngsters. You are a significant role model for your child in all aspects of life, including sports. It is not surprising to find that parents who exhibit poor self-control in



SUCCESSFUL SPORTS PARENTING

their own lives often have children who are prone to emotional outbursts and poor self-discipline. If we are to expect sportsmanship and self-control from our children, we need to exhibit the same qualities in our own behavior.

Can you let your child make his or her own decisions? One of the opportunities that sport provides is the chance for children to acquire and practice adult behaviors. An essential part of growing up is accepting responsibility for one's own behavior and decisions. This can become a real challenge for parents because once you invite your child to make decisions, you must support and live with those decisions. As a child matures, you should provide encouragement, suggestions, and guidance about sports. But ultimately, within reasonable limits, parents should let their children become more independent and self-reliant. For example, making commitments to a team or program is an important decision, as is a decision to quit a team. At times such as these, parents must accept that they cannot control their children's lives. Decisions about sports can offer parents an introduction to the major process of letting go and allowing their children to become adults in their own right.

Can you give up your child? A final challenge relates to the third point in the athletic triangle, your child's coach or manager: Can you give up your child to another significant adult? Many issues can arise in your relationship with the coach, including the way in which he or she is coaching the team or relating to your child. You are putting your youngster in the charge of another adult and trusting him or her to guide the sport experience. Beyond that, you must deal with the fact that the coach may gain admiration and affection that was once yours alone. It is natural for a coach to become a very important figure in a child's life. This occurs at a time when a tendency toward independence is causing the child to move away somewhat from parents. One father described his difficulty in adjusting to his child's coach

I was used to being number one in Mark's life, I was the man he looked up to, the man with all the answers, the man to be like someday. Things began to change a bit when he joined the basketball league. He was placed on a team run by the most popular coach in the league, a man who had played college ball and who has a real charisma with kids. All of a sudden, all we heard at the dinner table was, "Coach said this and Coach did that." It became more and more clear that my son had a new hero, and one whom I couldn't compete with. I've thought about it a lot and I can understand that what's happening is perfectly normal, but it's not easy to take a backseat in my child's life, even temporarily.

When parents cannot accept the entry into the child's world of a new and important adult, youngsters may suddenly find themselves in the middle of a conflict between parent and coach in which the child is subtly pressured to make a choice between the two. Like allowing your child more freedom to make decisions, sharing him or her temporarily with another valued adult (and one toward whom greater esteem seems to be shown at times) can be an important part of the process of letting go.

Sports offer your child many opportunities for personal growth and development. They also offer parent and child opportunities to interact in ways that enrich their relationship.