

# A Guide for Sports Parents

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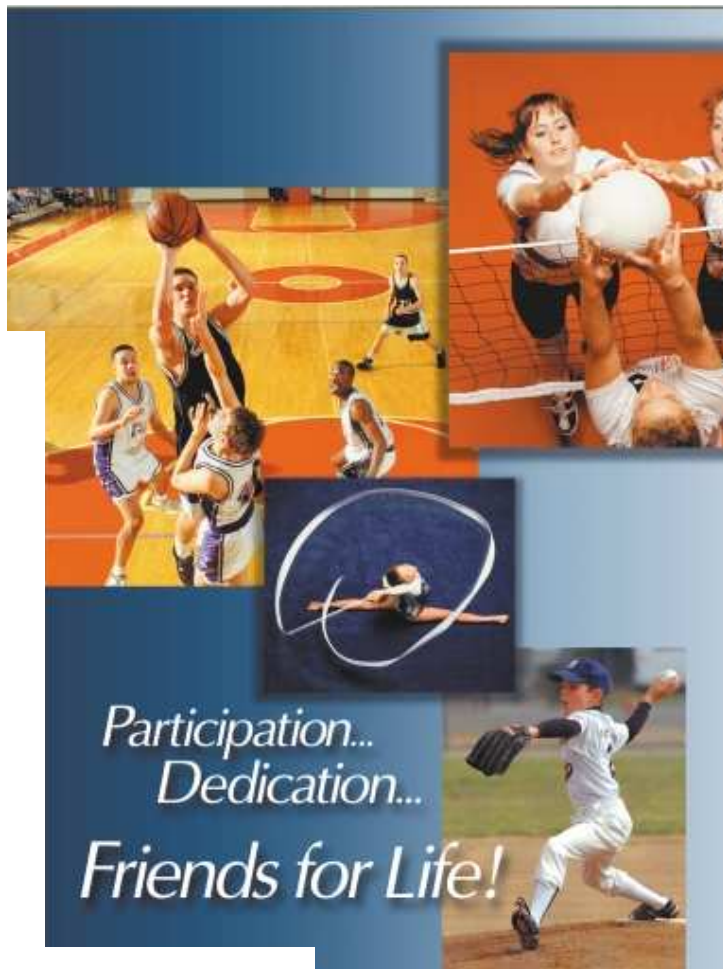
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*Everything a parent should  
know about youth in sports*

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## **A Parents Code:**

- ✓ I will remember that my child plays for his or her enjoyment, not mine.
- ✓ I will teach my child that doing one's best is more important than winning, so that my child will never feel defeated by the outcome of a game or event.
- ✓ I will never ridicule or yell at my child for making a mistake or losing a competition. I will provide positive comments that motivate and encourage continued effort.
- ✓ I will make my child feel like a winner every time by offering praise for competing fairly and trying hard.
- ✓ I will remember that children learn best by example. I will applaud good play/performances by both my child's team and their opponents.
- ✓ I will show respect for my team's opponents, because without them there would be no game or competition.
- ✓ I will respect the officials' decisions or judgment and will encourage participants to do the same.
- ✓ I will respect the volunteer coaches, who give their time to provide sport activities for my child, and show appreciation for their efforts.
- ✓ I will not use bad language, nor will I harass or abuse, verbally or physically, athletes, coaches, officials or other spectators.
- ✓ I will not have unrealistic expectations.
- ✓ I will remember that child athletes are not miniature professionals and cannot be judged by professional standards.

## **Motives of Young Athletes**

Research has consistently found that most children participate in sports because of the following:

- ✓ *to have fun*
- ✓ *to do something they are good at*
- ✓ *to improve skills and learn new skills*
- ✓ *for thrills and excitement*
- ✓ *to be with friends or make new friends*
- ✓ *to get exercise and become fit*
- ✓ *to learn to be a team player*
- ✓ *to win*
- ✓ *for moral development.*

Take time to explore your child's interests and preferences. And keep these motives in mind when discussing your child's involvement in sport. Also consider these four human needs:

- 1. Acceptance**
- 2. Enjoyment**
- 3. Success**
- 4. Choice**

When these needs are met, your child will have the base, confidence and perspective to pursue excellence, be a "team" person, and enjoy life and all that it has to offer.

Check in regularly with your young athlete – a good sports program should provide some need fulfillment in all four areas.

# **Common Problem Areas for Sports Parents**

Parents who create problems seldom do it intentionally. While we do not set out to create a negative experience for our children, it can happen. Here are ways it happens.

## **1. Misplaced Enthusiasm**

Parents sometimes place an overemphasis on outcome goals or on winning or losing, rather than on their children's enjoyment, growth and development. They want to be enthusiastic, but aren't sure how to express their enthusiasm effectively. Astute coaches often channel such parents' energy by giving them important support roles or tasks. In the process, the parents are often educated regarding the complexity of the coach's task.

## **2. Inducing Guilt**

Parents can spend thousands of dollars and countless hours on youth sport participation. It is very easy for children to begin to notice the "sacrifice" and feel tremendous guilt and pressure to do well. Parents need to regularly remind their children that they enjoy providing the opportunity and there are no strings attached. Children do need to appreciate their opportunities, but must not be made, even unintentionally, to feel guilty about them.

## **3. Living Vicariously Through Our Children**

Parents sometimes push children in order to make up for their own past frustrations and limitations. Too much vicarious involvement by the parent can become a tremendous burden to young athletes and be the cause of acute embarrassment.

## **4. Glimmer of Gold**

For too many parents, gold medals and rich contracts become the main focus. It's fine to be ambitious, but the reality is that less than 1% of children who start a sport will go on to make a living at it. Be supportive but stay rational – there is probably much more upward social mobility in other fields than there is in sport. If your children happen to excel through the vehicle of sport, great – but don't let outcome expectations become a burden or a distraction.

## **5. Losing Perspective**

Parents sometimes lose sight of what is important for children and themselves. Growth and development and preparation for life need to be the priority. Parents and children should regularly discuss values in sport and life. Knowing who we are, what is important in life, and how sports fit in are all part of achieving a perspective. With the "bigger picture" in place, both parents and children are less prone to youth sport problems. Any of these tendencies hurt our children and destroy the potential of sports programs. Look carefully for where you may be prone, even unintentionally, to these kinds of concerns.

## **Parent's Roles and Responsibilities**

### **Encourage Your Child to Participate**

Children should be encouraged to participate in a sport; however, they should not be pressured, intimidated, or bribed into it. For children to continue pursuing an activity, they need to find it enjoyable and intrinsically motivating. By researching opportunities and making their own choices, children can learn a great deal. Parents can be a big help by being open-minded and encouraging.

### **Enjoy Your Child's Participation**

Participation in a sport can be an important component of children's lives. Resolve to simply enjoy their participation as much as you can.

Parents who acquire an understanding of their young athletes' sports (basic rules, skills, and strategies) are better able to understand their children's performance. Realize and trust that in most programs, physical, technical, tactical, psychological and social development are all being worked on. During this process, your children's focus should be on acquiring new skills, improving performance and, of course ... **have ... fun!**

### **Support Your Child Emotionally**

Sport programs have many demands – children need to know parents are always part of support resources.

Help young athletes to constructively manage the stress associated with training and competition by offering support regardless of the outcome. Listen and empathize. Try to understand how children feel about what is happening to them. Fear, anger, guilt, embarrassment, surprise, sadness, happiness and enthusiasm are all emotions of life – sport is a great place to learn to manage them!

Learn to accept the full range of emotions that are being experienced by both young athletes and yourself. Help children share, interpret and process their feelings and don't be afraid to do the same with your own feelings.

Finally, support children by going to as many of their games and competitions as possible. Be there for their triumphs and their defeats.

## **Key Issues for Sports Parents**

### **Your Child's Performance:**

#### **Tryouts to Make the Team**

Tryouts can be a nerve-wracking time for children (and parents) as the upcoming season approaches. Children may become anxious and begin, especially as they grow older, to focus on the possibility that they may not make the team. It is important to remind them to focus on their own performance and not worry about what the coach is thinking of them, or compare themselves to their teammates.

Encourage young athletes to set one or two daily goals for each day of training camp and review their progress at the end of each day. The more they focus on the process of performing to their potential, the better their chance of making the team.

Parents can help children realize that during tryouts, their self-worth is not on the line. There are many paths to excellence, and while not succeeding at a particular tryout may be momentarily demoralizing, it should be kept in perspective. Even Michael Jordan was once cut from his high school basketball team.

### **Winning, Losing and Playing the Game**

Winning is nice, losing is tough, but for children (and you) what should be most important is how they played the game. After the game, avoid asking competitive-based questions such as:

- 1. Did you win?**
- 2. Did you score a goal?**

You may be just trying to show interest but the effects can often be detrimental to your child. Competitive-based questions can trigger feelings of failure, guilt, embarrassment and shame, and cause confusion in your child's mind about what the primary purpose of participation should be.

Instead, help children to objectively evaluate their performance. Ask performance-related questions such as:

- 1. What went well?**
- 2. What needs to be improved?**
- 3. How can these improvements be achieved?**
- 4. What were some of the highlights?**
- 5. Did you have fun?**

Feedback is extremely important – the primary focus should be on learning and improving, not on winning and losing.

### **Working with Teammates**

Encourage young athletes to communicate with teammates. By communicating perspectives, they may defuse a difficult situation; by saying nothing the unresolved situation may eat away at them for a long period of time. If children learn to be good communicators, they will be able to concentrate on developing their performance skills to the benefit of themselves and the team.

Likewise, every team should have a code of conduct that encourages frank and open sharing of feelings before they become too emotionally loaded. The intent is to deal with the molehills before they become mountains. Good communication among team members should improve the team's performance both in practice and during competitions. Poor communication can only lead to misunderstandings, hurt feelings, anger and poor team performance.

## **Relating to Key People:**

### **Your Child's Coach**

Your child's coach and you are on the same team and you will both share many of the same goals. But your priorities can be different. The coach's priority will be the team; your priority will be the development of your child. Do your job of supporting and encouraging your child and let the coach do his/her.

Not everyone has an "ideal" coach. If you have concerns, make sure they are discussed with the intent of helping the situation to get better. At all times, avoid undermining the coach – it puts both the coach and your child in a very difficult situation.

If difficulties remain, help your child use the situation as a growth experience. If the problems are serious (harassment, abuse, etc.), report them to the sport's governing body or appropriate authority and remove your child from the program.

Finally, if you think that you do know more than the coach, maybe you should be coaching! Organizations can always use more coaches who are willing to donate their time and energy towards providing quality sport experiences for children.

### **Officials**

Believe it or not, but you and the officials are also on the same team – except your roles are different. The role of the officials is to know the rules of the game and to enforce those rules as they see them, for the benefit of the game and the competitors. Your role is to support and encourage your child, your child's team, the opponent's team, the officials and good sportsmanship.

Support the officials when they are working and consider how your actions influence them. More sport parents should have the experience of officiating. They would realize how difficult the job is and how abusive behavior by parents usually makes performance worse rather than better.

Also consider how your child must feel if the coach and program has standards regarding "behavior with officials" and you as a parent are out of control in the stands. Make sure that as a sport parent you "get with the program."

### **Other Parents**

The majority of parents whose children are involved in sports are good people who want the best for their kids. Unfortunately, the majority, by not speaking up, can allow a minority group to take charge and dominate the program planning and setting of priorities.

When there is good communication among parents, healthy priorities for children and the program usually emerge. If you have concerns, don't be afraid to share them to see if others feel the same as you do. Try to be supportive of the coach, and encourage everyone to share his or her concerns and suggestions. Don't let a minority ruin things for everyone.

If possible, review the program objectives with the coach early in the season. Encourage other parents to do the same; then monitor progress as the year unfolds.

Whenever possible, try to encourage a healthy dialogue with the parents of opposing teams. It helps kids and coaches maintain perspective and positive rivalries.



# **Maintaining a Balanced Schedule**

## **Your Child Participates in Two or More Sports/Activities**

Children can be torn by a number of loves, and if they do not manage activities carefully, it can lead to physical, mental, and emotional exhaustion as well as academic problems. On the other hand, variety can be highly beneficial for overall athletic development, and it may not be clear for young athletes which is their “best sport” until their late teens.

Involvement in two or more sports is an undertaking that requires tremendous understanding from coaches and teammates. It is important for children to try to meet the commitments and expectations of each sport and to communicate with the appropriate coach as early as possible whenever a schedule conflict occurs.

As a parent, your role is to facilitate opportunities as fully as possible and to monitor your child carefully for signs of fatigue and/or burnout [for “Burnout,” keep reading].

## **Sport and School – Making it Work**

Young athletes should be encouraged to maintain a balance between the demands of school and the demands of sport. On the one hand, school should always be an important focus. But on the other, the time and energy that children invest in sport make their role as athlete central to their self-identity.

If children are having difficulty finding the right balance between school and sport, and if they have the time, encourage them to pursue other roles or interests. If time is limited, encourage planning effectively for upcoming practices, games, or road trips so they can stay on top of the demands of school. Consider seminars on time management and effective study habits if they are available.

There is nothing wrong with children having a dream athletic goal. But they must be made aware of the limited likelihood of having a career as a professional athlete. Education, on the other hand, can be a key to the future. With a solid education, they can make the most of their abilities and ensure a successful transition into a meaningful career. And, for all of us, even if we are good at something, it is still a good idea to cultivate a balanced identity and variety of interests.

## **Burnout**

Burnout is “a condition produced by working too hard for too long in a high-pressure situation.” Burnout symptoms can be physical, mental and/or emotional. Watch your child carefully for symptoms such as: constantly feeling tired, easily becoming frustrated, not wanting to go to practice or training sessions, increased irritability, headaches or minor body aches.

If fatigue has built up, significant rest and emotional renewal may be necessary. Be prepared to act quickly!



# **Dealing with Challenges**

## **Fluctuating Playing Time**

Young athletes can become very frustrated if they feel that they are not getting enough playing time or they have not gained a desired role on the team. The more upset or resentful they become, the further they will be from being in the appropriate frame of mind for a good performance (and the right frame of mind is often the essential ingredient to becoming a starter or getting that desired role on the team).

Life is about learning to manage current roles, whether they are support roles or desired roles. Help young athletes focus on what is within their control. Help them set performance goals. By focusing on their performance, they will have a better chance to achieve more playing time, that starting position, or a specific role on the team. If you react constructively, the mental, emotional, and team skills that your child develops can be the key to a successful future in sport and in life.

## **Understanding Growth Spurts**

Parents should realize that every child grows and develops at a different rate. Some may mature early and have many early successes and experience frustration later. Others may be late developers who, if supported, will go on to have excellent experiences.

Parents should also appreciate that the time when young athletes are going through a growth spurt can be particularly difficult. They suddenly have longer levers, bigger feet and less co-ordination. They can also be slightly more injury-prone until the rest of their body catches up.

Children need sensitivity and support at all times – but try to have extra empathy if a child is a late-developer, is going through a growth spurt, or has developed early and feels frustrated later when others start to catch up or go by.

Life can be cruel – and because sport is so public, has so much status, and is so competitive and emotional, we have to make sure that inner development is also accomplished and that we show some empathy and support at critical times.

## **Injuries**

Being injured can be traumatic for young athletes, and they will experience a range of emotions from anger to sadness. Help them process each emotion by listening and empathizing. Try to be confident, optimistic and yet realistic.

Support children in striving for the rehabilitation goals set by the therapist or doctor. Encourage participation in any therapeutic activities that are possible during rehabilitation, e.g. upper-body exercises when the lower body is injured. Continue to monitor their progress toward full recovery, with the ultimate goal of being able to perform at the level where they left off.

Injury rehabilitation can be an excellent time to work on perspective, balance, and mental, emotional and team skills. Just like a healed fracture, the young athlete can come out a stronger and more complete person and performer.

Finally, both children and elite athletes often have to be reminded to respect their therapist's or doctor's guidelines. Delay doesn't have to mean denying the pursuit of their dreams.

## **Cost of Sport**

In reality, some sports are beyond the financial resources of some parents. These parents may feel considerable guilt, frustration and embarrassment about not being able to afford their child's preferred activity.

Parents faced with financial obstacles should explore alternative means of support or sponsorship. Some sport governing bodies have support programs for those in need and some community centers have policies to reduce or waive fees for those who cannot afford the total cost. Also, sponsors can be approached to make programs more accessible.

If you are in this situation, do not feel embarrassed about seeking support and exploring all options. Your child's development should be your priority – and the sport experience may help your child grow and make a meaningful contribution to society.

## **Your Child's Future – Keeping the Options Open**

Children can sometimes be persuaded at a very young age to pursue sport at the elite level or to work towards a professional career. A balance must be realized by parents between encouraging their children's dreams in sport and protecting their future career and educational options.

It's true, we should encourage kids to "dream big dreams" and have high goals – we never know how much potential can be realized by achieving goals. It is, however, simply unfair to children to encourage dreaming without discussion of how long it might take, how hard they might have to work, what the odds are, and how many factors might be beyond their control.

A good discussion with children along these lines inevitably leads to discussing how they will complete their education and maintain their options in today's busy and demanding social environment. In looking to the future, beware of programs promising a quick fix to development and professional possibilities. Athletic development usually takes time, and planning should be supplemented by considering educational options.

If young athletes are not sure what route to take, encourage them to keep all their options open as long as possible, so they have the best chance of knowing what is right for them and their future development.