

Five Ways For Sport Parents To Set A Good Example

By Shane Murphy, Ph. D.

The Blame Game

If you have spent a lot of time as a youth sport parent during the past year (as I have), you probably feel a bit battered and bruised right now. It seems that everyone is ready to blame "out-of-control parents" for all the ills of youth sports. We are the crazy ones screaming on the sidelines, abusing the kids, yelling at the officials, and displaying poor sportsmanship. What's a parent to do?

One piece of advice that is handed out regularly to parents is to "set a good example" for our children. And most parents I know DO try to be positive and to encourage to our children as they climb the competitive sports ladder. But I have discovered that in order to have a positive influence on those around us, including children and other parents, we need to do more than just clap and cheer for our kids.

Teaching Sportsmanship

Here are five things you can do that will really show your children (and other parents) what being "a good sport" is really all about:

1. Cheer for all the children, even those on the other team

This may seem a bit radical, but I have seen what a surprising difference it can make on the sidelines and in the stands when parents make an effort to applaud a good effort or a fine play - no matter whom makes it. If you focus obsessively on your own child at a sporting event you are giving a clear signal that you don't really care about the team or the event - you just care about your son or daughter.

By contrast, parents who shout and cheer for all the children set a great example for the kids, by sending the message that youth sports are about giving one's best effort and enjoying the game, not about winning and losing.

2. Thank the officials

If you find a few moments to compliment the officials for their hard work after a game (especially if your child's team loses) you will be rewarded with the pleasure of seeing a surprised smile in return. Youth sport officials tell me that such positive feedback, rare as it often is, goes a long way in motivating them to stick with their volunteer work and keeps them going through the bad times. All too often the only words a volunteer official hears (and remember, these are often young people themselves), are harsh words of criticism such as "you blew the call," "get some glasses," or even "you're ruining the game ump." Make sure that the officials for your child's game always hear at least one parent thanking them after every game: you! If you keep it up, your example is sure to spread to other parents on your team.

3. Talk to parents of the other team: they're not the enemy

Last year I attended a state championship baseball playoff game for U11 boys. The winner would advance to the league's state final. After regulation play, the game was tied. The tension in the stands among the parents kept rising as each extra inning passed. Mothers would cover their eyes as their sons came to the plate, or hold hands tightly with the parents sitting next to them. Finally, in the bottom of the 10th, the home team broke through and scored the decisive run.

There was more relief than jubilation from the parents of the winning team. Naturally, the parents of the other team sat in stunned silence. Then, one of the parents on the winning side went over to the parents of the losing team and began shaking hands with them, telling them what an exceptional and competitive game their sons had played. I watched closely and noticed smiles break out on the faces of these parents, saw their shoulders lift and their energy return at this simple gesture from a member of "the enemy."

Sometimes we get so caught up in an in-town rivalry, or a big match against another school, that we forget that the other team is really just like our kids. Their parents care about their children just as much as we do. Showing our children that we can interact with parents from the other team in a friendly manner sets a good example for them to congratulate or commiserate with the other team after every match.

4. Be a parent, not a coach: resist the urge to critique

Some of the young athletes I work with tell me that they dread the ride home with their parents after a game or match. That's because, win or lose, they know their parent will go over their performance in detail, pointing out all their mistakes.

Typical is Susan, a 12-year-old gymnast, who sat in my office recently with tears rolling down her face as she recounted her father's reaction to her most recent competitive performance at a gymnastics meet in Pennsylvania. On the four-hour drive home, her father, Dennis, went over her routine in excruciating detail, listing all the errors she made. He wasn't angry, he didn't yell. In fact, I am sure he had the best of intentions: he just wanted her to know how she could improve.

The problem, of course, was that Susan already knew each and every error her father pointed out, and also recognized some additional missteps and faults that he hadn't listed. She didn't need him to remind her of the obvious. Dennis mistook her quiet stoicism in the face of a poor performance for a lack of caring. The fact was that Susan cared a great deal about gymnastics and hated to do poorly at important meets. The resulting resentment and miscommunications lead to Susan quitting gymnastics, which was unfortunate and unnecessary.

The urge to critique a child's performance is very natural for parents. Yet many of the most successful athletes I work share something in common: their parents' lack of criticism of their sporting performance. "They just wanted me to play and have fun," is a typical comment from an Olympic basketball player. Another told me "Mom and Dad never had much say in how I played. They left that to the coach. But I knew they were always there for me, no matter how I did." Sometimes just being there shows your children what being a good parent is all about.

5. Stay Physically Active

You will probably not be shocked to learn that your child learns more from observing you than anyone else. If you strongly encourage your child to participate in a sport, but aren't physically active yourself, you are sending a mixed message. How can we expect our children to grow up to be active and healthy adults if we ourselves are couch potatoes?

The psychological advantages for parents to remain actively involved in sports and physical activities while their children participate in sports are many. It promotes an outer-directedness that helps parents look beyond their child and see the big picture. Being emotionally involved in your own sport helps avoid spoiling your child with attention. It is difficult to be very critical of your child's progress in a sport if you are constantly being confronted by how difficult it is to move forward in your own sport. I know that, since I have taken up golf, I have gained tremendous appreciation for how difficult it is for any child to learn the complex motor and cognitive skills of a sport. This gives me more patience for helping my children learn their sports.

In fact, I think the best sport programs of the future will be those that include the whole family. What better way for children to learn to have fun and enjoy sports than by sharing activities with their parents, siblings and friends?

I hope my ideas are helpful to you, and as always, I look forward to any comments or ideas you have. Have fun in sports!