

Noticing Progress: The Key to Keeping Kids in Youth Sports

"What's the use in trying? No matter what I do, it'll never be enough! My coach is never satisfied. My parents are never satisfied. I can't compete against other kids who are so much better than I am."

-- 9-year old boy who dropped out of organized sports

Research (Jeziorski, 1994) has shown that kids who stay in sports tend to stay in school, get better grades and show better behaviours. It makes sense then, for us to know something about what it takes to motivate kids to keep playing sports once they've started.

Two of the obstacles in motivating kids to continue playing sports are mentioned in the quote from the 9-year-old: 1) unrealistic expectations from coaches and parents; and 2) unrealistic self-comparison with other athletes.

Unrealistic Expectations from Coaches and Parents

Time and again I see kids who have lost their initial joy in sports because they are preoccupied with feeling that they have somehow let their coach or parents down by not living up to adult expectations.

Coaches and parents, especially those with kids at the younger levels, not attuned to the developmental level of a kid may inadvertently expect something from a kid which is not physically or emotionally possible, given the muscle coordination, attention span or level of dedication at a specific age level. The kid then struggles to live up to the expectations of coaches or parents, sees no progress and eventually gives up or quits, feeling like a failure in the eyes of adults.

I saw a 10-year-old boy in my office, referred by his father, who wanted me to "motivate" him. The boy broke into tears, relating how he used to love baseball but had grown sick of it because his dad had made him take 200 swings a day off the batting tee in his backyard, seven days a week. He said he had wanted to spend time with his buddies, but his dad had told him this was the only way to get to the big leagues! The boy eventually quit baseball, feeling that he had failed his dad.

Unrealistic Self-comparison with Other Athletes

Besides feeling unable to live up to unrealistic adult expectations, kids will often fall victim to making unrealistic comparisons between themselves and other athletes. After the initial novelty of the sport wears off, kids begin looking around at other kids and start comparing their skills to their peers. ("I can't run as fast, throw as hard, shoot as straight, hit as hard, swing as smoothly, skate as smoothly, etc. as the other kids!") The danger is that the fun of the sport disappears, confidence disappears and the kid sees himself/herself as unable to compete against team mates (peers, siblings, etc.) whose skills seem more advanced. Eventually, seeing no progress and feeling like a loser, the kid quits.

Progress: Competing Against Yourself

A key to keeping kids in sports then, is to get them 1) to stop the unrealistic comparisons with other athletes and the preoccupation with competing against others, and 2) to stop the preoccupation with not living up to coaches' and parents' unrealistic expectations. One major way to accomplish this is to get kids to start competing against themselves, with realistic goals. That way, each kid concentrates on his or her personal best, rather than making constant comparisons with others (peers, siblings, etc.) Also, if coaches and parents work together with the child to notice progress in reaching those goals, the problem of adult unrealistic expectations will be removed.

Measuring Progress: Frequency, Duration and Intensity

Progress is defined as movement toward a goal. Progress is any movement, no matter how small, toward any goal, no matter how small. If a coach or parent can help a kid notice and measure continued progress toward a goal, there's a good chance the kid will be motivated to remain in sports. Progress can be measured in terms of frequency, duration and intensity.

Frequency measures how often a desired behaviour occurs (one foul shot, tackle, hit, shot on goal, spike, ace, save, pass, rebound, interception, etc., compared to none in a previous game or practice), or how seldom an undesired behaviour occurs (one missed foul shot, missed tackle, strike out, missed shot on goal, out-of-bounds spike, missed serve, failure to box out, etc., compared to two in a previous game or practice.)

Duration measures how long a desired behaviour lasts (two consecutive foul shots, tackles, hits, shots on goal, spikes, aces, saves, passes, rebounds, interceptions, longer periods without mistake, etc.) I know one creative coach who praised his T-Ball right fielder for staying in position for three consecutive batters before chasing a butterfly! That was progress! Progress in duration can also be measured by how short an undesired behaviour lasts (shorter pouting period after making a mistake, shorter temper tantrum after a questionable call by a referee, etc.)

Intensity measures the amount of energy, focus and enthusiasm expended (hustle on and off the field, court or rink, hustle on every play during the game; hustle after a loose ball or puck; hustle up and down the field, court or rink; chatter from the sidelines or in the game; yelling encouragement to team mates; focus and awareness of time clock, score, etc.)

Some players who lack skills may continue to play if they see that they're making a contribution to the team by their energetic enthusiasm, determination and focus (that's what the movie "Rudy" was all about.)

Process vs. End Product

Sports psychologist Dr. Tom Tutko and others have made the point that kids are more concerned with the process of play than with the end product. They seem to enjoy the joy of simply participating in a sport. This is in contrast to adults who seem preoccupied with the end product.

It is rare to hear coaches or parents praise a kid just for participating in a sport. Praise is usually reserved for a specific skill shown by a kid, not for simply being there. After a game, adults ask questions like, "Who won? Who scored?" Kids ask questions like, "Who was there?" "How were the snacks?"

In an effort to keep kids in sports, coaches and parents would do well to capitalize on kids' tendency toward "process," and get them to see their continued progress as a process of learning skill, learning the rules of the game and learning how to handle victory and defeat.

Motivational sports psychologists have shown that kids who focus on their progress in learning tasks in athletics stay in sports longer than kids who are preoccupied with measuring their worth as an athlete only in terms of winning.

In other words, if a kid is preoccupied with winning, as long as they are on a winning team, they continue playing. But, if a team has a losing season, the kid may drop out of the sport.

In contrast, the kid who focuses on his/her progress in improving mechanics and skills is more likely to stay in sports regardless of the won-loss record.

None of us is so naïve as to think that keeping a child in sports is the answer to all life's problems. However, the lessons learned (self discipline, time management, decision making, problem solving, sportsmanship, team work, handling disappointment, etc.) have a definite carryover to everyday life.

And, if a child learns to stay motivated by keeping tabs on his/her progress in reaching small goals in each sport, that's a great habit to develop for life after sports.

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