

Nurturing good sports

Parents and coaches play a major role in defining the sports world for children. Here are some tips for parental sports fans:

☞ De-emphasize winning by asking, "Did you have fun?" If she offers the score, fine; if not, don't ask.

☞ Remind the star who's gloating at his three-point winning shot, "You made that shot and it was great, but don't forget the whole team played a great game just to get to that point."

☞ Be gently honest with the non-star who complains that he spends too much time on the bench. "Some of these kids have already gone through puberty, they're bigger and stronger." Or: "You haven't played for as many years. You're still learning."

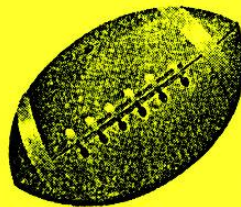
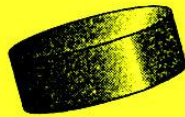
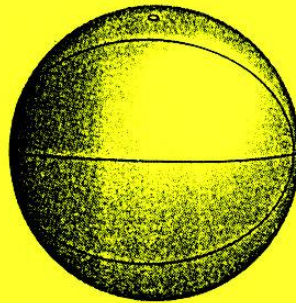
☞ Before a game, remind her of previous successes. Research shows that being in a positive mood helps the brain connect with peak motor performances, which makes a person play better.

☞ Don't ignore it if your child throws equipment, uses bad language, etc. Tell him: "I know you may have some feelings welling up inside you, but that's not acceptable behaviour. You need to find some other way to get them out."

☞ By pre-teen ages, specializing in a sport can lead to an imbalance and oversaturation. If she plays soccer from September to June and wants to play in the summer, that's fine, but stay away from a camp where soccer is what they do all day.

☞ Help a non-star feel good about himself by finding something he's doing better today than he did two weeks ago.

☞ It's up to a coach, not a parent, to tell a child what he did wrong in a game or a play.



Pressure points

There are several kinds of pressure kids feel when they are part of a sports team:

☞ **Social:** Even a team's weakest player who gets little playing time will enjoy a team as long as it's fun to be with the coach and teammates, says educator Ed Brazee of the University of Maine, a specialist in pre-teen sport education.

"Kids are happy just to be in the mix," he says. But if star players are allowed to dominate and weaker ones feel left out, not just of the game but also of the socializing, it stops being fun.

"It's also no longer developmentally appropriate for any of them, even the stars. "It's one of the reasons it's so important for coaches to work to create respect for each kid and team spirit," he says.

☞ **Physical:** A child of any ability level continues to have fun as long as she is learning new skills and seeing improvements.

"It doesn't matter if she's a non-star as long as she has a sense of accomplishment," says child psychologist and researcher Shari Young Kuckenbecker.

What tends to happen, however, is that less-talented kids don't get appropriate help with skills and lose a sense of personal accomplishment while talented kids are pushed beyond their developmental levels.

In one study of 1,100 six- to eight-year-olds, 49 per cent were unable to perform minimum skills of catching, throwing or kicking, said Fred Engh, president of the National Alliance for Youth Sports, an advocacy organization for safe and fun sports.

In other words, he says, "half the kids don't have the skills they need to play the game we design for them."

☞ **Parental:** Six- to nine-year-olds typically don't pay attention to how much time they're on the bench or what the score is. Parents do.

When we complain about lack of playing time, unfair coaching or poor playing by another child, we colour our child's ability to go back to that team as a full team player, says Kuckenbecker.

Connecticut sport psychologist Shane Murphy says star players feel an additional pressure: "Even if you're very supportive, when you get up at 5 a.m. and drive 45 minutes for a travelling team, a child can't help but conclude, "This is very important to Dad.' Because all kids want to please their parents, that translates to, 'Am I good enough for Dad?'"

That worry can eventually overwhelm their emotional coping skills.

When children feel these pressures, they get bored or unhappy and want to quit. That's not necessarily bad.