

SportParent Survival Guide

How to excel at being a youth sport parent

Dropout Rates in Youth Sport*

- ⇒ 70% drop out by age 14
- ⇒ 50% drop out by age 12

Values Kids Learn Through Sport*

- ⇒ Appreciation for an active lifestyle
- ⇒ Positive self-concept through mastering skills
- ⇒ Teamwork
- ⇒ Social skills
- ⇒ Leadership
- ⇒ Responsibility
- ⇒ How to handle success and disappointment
- ⇒ Fair play and sportsmanship
- ⇒ Respect for others

Why Kids Drop Out*

- ⇒ Too much criticism from coaches
- ⇒ Lack of fun
- ⇒ Overemphasis on winning
- ⇒ Lack of playing time
- ⇒ Lack of success
- ⇒ Injuries
- ⇒ Conflicts with other activities

Your Responsibilities as a SportParent

This guide should help you do much more than survive youth sport. It should enable you to enjoy it to the fullest and help you make it fun and valuable for your child. To do that, first you need to understand your responsibilities as a SportParent:

1. Encourage your child to play, but don't pressure. Let your child choose to play and quit if he or she wants.
2. Understand what your child wants from sport and provide a supportive atmosphere for achieving those goals.
3. Set limits on your child's participation. Don't make sport *everything* in your child's life; make it *part* of life.
4. Make sure the coach is qualified to guide your child through the sport experience (see Evaluating Your Child's Coach).
5. Keep winning in perspective, and help your child do the same.
6. Help your child set challenging but realistic performance goals rather than focus only on winning the game.
7. Help your child understand the valuable lessons sports can teach (see Values Kids Learn Through Sport).
8. Help your child meet responsibilities and rules of the team and the coach.
9. Discipline your child when necessary.
10. Turn your child over to the coach at practices and games. Don't meddle or coach from the sidelines.
11. Supply the coach with information on any allergies or special health conditions your child has. Make sure your child brings any necessary medications to practices and games.

Family Time

Consider family time and your child's health and well-being when choices come up as to participation. Don't cancel the family vacation because of a baseball game or force your child to play in a game when injured or ill.



Being a Role Model

Children learn behavior from many different coaches, teachers, other adults and peers. The people they learn the most from are their parents.

Your child not only soaks up what you say, but she soaks up what you *don't* say. Nonverbal messages, such as a look of disgust or disappointment, often speak louder than words. Your attitudes toward your child and other people are not as easily hidden as you might believe. "Do as I say, not as I do" is an unnatural maxim for children to carry out, because their tendency is to follow your example, not your instructions.

If you tell your child he must respect others, that's great. But the message is lost if you don't model that respect. As your child plays sport, you'll have many opportunities to model good behavior and attitudes. By putting your child's development and welfare ahead of winning, you'll be better able to display a healthy attitude toward sports and life and so will your child.



Modeling Good Sportsmanship

It's especially critical that you model good sportsmanship for your child. Being a good sport is much easier said than done. Just look at the examples of some professional and college coaches and athletes who do the opposite. It's crucial that you maintain a cool head and a healthy attitude toward sport if you expect your child to do the same.

Here are ways to model appropriate attitudes and behaviors when you're at your daughter's or son's games:

- ✓ Encourage *all* of the players.
- ✓ Control your emotions in frustrating situations.
- ✓ Abide by referees' or officials' decisions. Remember that most officials in youth sports are only teenagers.
- ✓ Congratulate opponents when they win.

Congratulating Opponents

Provide a good example for your kids by congratulating the opponents yourself when they win.

Helping Your Child Enjoy Sport

You can help your child enjoy sport by doing the following:

1. Develop a winning perspective
2. Build your child's self-esteem
3. Emphasize having fun, developing skills, and striving to win
4. Help your child set performance goals

Developing a Winning Perspective

Every decision parents make in guiding their children should be based first on what's best for the child, and second on what might help the child win. Stated another way...

Athletes First; Winning Second

Maintaining this proper perspective can help some children achieve even more than they would if they were consumed with the idea of winning. An obsession with winning often produces a fear of failure, resulting in below-average performances and upset children.

Building Your Child's Self-Esteem

Building self-esteem in your child is one of your most important parenting duties. It's not easy and it's made even more difficult in sport by the prevailing attitude of "winning is everything." Athletes who find their self-worth through winning will go through tough times when they lose.

An athlete can be successful without winning. Success is a measure of an athlete's competency; winning reflects the outcome of a contest. Your child won't be able to control all the factors that go into winning a game, but he or she can find success in developing and improving skills.

It takes more than encouragement to build self-esteem. You need to show your child approval and unconditional love. It's easy to show that approval and love when a child succeeds; you might be challenged to do the same when your child fails. Don't praise dishonestly; children can see through that. If your child strikes out three times and makes an error in a baseball game, don't tell him he played well. Just show the same amount of love and approval for *him* (not his performance) that you showed before the game.

Emphasizing Having Fun, Developing Skills, and Striving to Win

The reason you should emphasize fun is quite simple: Without it, your child may not want to keep playing. Children don't have fun when they stand around in practice or sit on the bench during games, when they feel pressure to win, and when they don't improve or learn new skills. Conversely, they *do* have fun when practices are well organized, they get to play in games, they develop new skills, and the focus is on striving to win.

A focus on developing skills and striving to win takes the pressure off winning, which as we say, no one child is in control of. But all children can improve their sport skills. And when they see that improvement, they are usually motivated to improve more. Developing skills is one of the most satisfying aspects of playing a sport.



Helping Your Child Set Performance Goals

Performance goals, which emphasize individual skill improvement, are much better than the outcome goal of winning for two reasons:

1. Performance goals are in the athlete's control.
2. Performance goals help the athlete improve.

Performance goals should be specific and challenging, but not too difficult to achieve. For example, if your child plays soccer, you might help her set the goals of making short, crisp passes, of staying between the ball and the goal on defense, and of keeping the ball close to her while she dribbles.

You (and your child's coach) should help your young athlete set such goals. Help your child focus on performance goals before a game which will help make sport an enjoyable learning experience.

If you can't attend one of your child's games, don't just ask "Did you win?" afterward. Ask performance-related questions. If your child plays tennis, you might ask "Did you get your first serves in?" or "Were you able to shorten your stroke as you got closer to the net?"

Talking With Your Child After a Poor Performance

Sometimes it's hard to know what to say to a child after a disappointing performance. When children know they did not play well, they don't want to hear, "You played great!" And when they have just lost a game they don't want to be told, "It's really not important." At that moment, it *is* important to *them*, and parents should respect their kids' feelings of disappointment.

In short, praise generously and criticize sparingly, but don't be a phony.



Questions to Ask Your Child After Practice or Competition

Don't feel that you always have to "debrief" after the big game. It's okay to NOT talk about the game. Below are some good questions to keep you aware of what's going on with your child's athletic experience without being overly competitive.

- Did you play better this week?
- What did you learn in practice?
- What do you feel you need to work on?
- Can I help you improve any skill?
- What did the coach emphasize after the game?
- Did you have fun playing today?
- Was your opponent a good sport? Were you?
- Are you getting in better shape?
- What was your favorite part of the game?
- What's the best part of being on the team?
- What do you like most about your coach?
- Were you nervous competing today? If you were, why?
- How can your coach help you improve?

Keeping Things Balanced

It is important to balance sport with other areas of life. This balance needs to come both from your child and from you.

Is Your Child Too Involved?

With the great emphasis on sports in our society, some children become so involved in athletics that they neglect studies, family, and social responsibilities. If you feel your child is too involved in sport, remind him or her that sport is only one part of life.

Overemphasis From Parents

Sometimes children overemphasize sport because their parents do. Ask yourself if you're giving unbalanced attention to your child's participation in sport. If so, slack off and show interest in other areas of your child's life. Otherwise your child will be getting the wrong perception about the role sport plays in life, may feel too much pressure to succeed and eventually burn out and quit. While sports are a very memorable part of childhood, don't forget that so are birthday parties and family vacations.



SportParents' Checklist for Success

Consider these questions before your child begins to play a sport. If you can honestly answer yes to each one, you and your child are likely to have a favorable experience with youth sports.

Can you share your son or daughter?

This means trusting the coach to guide your child's sport experiences. You must be able to accept the coach's authority and the fact that she or he may gain some of the admiration that once was directed solely toward you.

Can you admit your shortcomings?

Sometimes we slip up as parents. Our emotions cause us to speak before we think. We judge too hastily, perhaps only to learn later that actions were justified. It takes character for parents to admit when they make a mistake and to discuss it with their children.

Can you accept your child's disappointments?

Being a parent means being a target for your child's anger and frustration. Accepting your child's disappointment also means watching your child play poorly during a game when all of his or her friends succeed, or not being embarrassed into anger when your 10-year-old breaks into tears after a failure. Keeping your frustration in check will help guide your daughter or son through disappointments.

Can you accept your child's triumphs?

This sounds much easier than it often is. Some parents, not realizing it, may become competitive with their child, especially if their son or daughter receives considerable recognition. When a child plays well in a game, parents may dwell on minor mistakes, describe how an older sibling did even better, or boast about how they played better many years ago.

Can you give your child some time?

Some parents are very busy, even though they are interested in their child's participation and want to encourage it. Probably the best solution is never to promise more than you can deliver. Ask about your child's sport experiences and make every effort to watch at least some games during the season.

Can you let your child make his or her own decisions?

Decision making is an essential part of any young person's development, and it is a real challenge to parents. It means offering suggestions and guidance but finally, within reasonable limits, letting the child go his or her own way. All parents have ambitions for their children, but parents must accept the fact that they cannot mold their children's lives. Youth sport offers parents a minor initiation into the major process of letting go.

Can you honestly say that you are modeling and providing consistent positive messages?

Take a step back before the season begins and evaluate your own motives for your son's or daughter's participation. If you are truly putting your child's desires and development ahead of your own ego, then it will be easier for you to model appropriate behavior.



Be Involved...

Every youth sport program needs volunteers. Volunteering not only helps your child's program, but it's also an enjoyable way to meet other adults. Here are just a few ways to become more involved.

- ⇒ Be a coach
- ⇒ Be an official
- ⇒ Keep time or score
- ⇒ Maintain equipment or facilities
- ⇒ Coordinate registrations
- ⇒ Be an announcer
- ⇒ Be a fundraiser
- ⇒ Act as a business manager
- ⇒ Be a first-aid attendant
- ⇒ Be a league representative
- ⇒ Coordinate refreshments
- ⇒ Take tickets
- ⇒ Be an usher or janitor
- ⇒ Be a publicity director
- ⇒ Coordinate transportation

...But Not *Too* Involved

No youth sport coach wants to be, or should be, second-guessed by parents on strategy moves or other coaching decisions. Signs that you are being too closely involved include:

- ⇒ You are overly concerned with outcome of games
- ⇒ You monopolize the time of the coach about game plan, player skill levels, and/or management of practice/games
- ⇒ Your child has stopped enjoying the sport or has asked you to stop coming to games or practices
- ⇒ You require your child to take extra practice

Be involved, show interest, help the coach where he or she needs help, encourage your child—and enjoy the sport yourself.

