

Whose Game Is It, Anyway?: A Guide to Helping Your Child Get the Most from Sports, Organized by Age and Stage

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Organized sports, perhaps more than any other typical childhood experience, with the possible exception of school, provides ample opportunity for the building of character because of the conflict inherent in competition, the necessary enforcement of rules, the threat of losing, and the demand to control intensely aroused passions. In our culture, parents are likely to be more directly involved in a child's sports activities than in the child's schooling. Sports give us ample opportunity to witness and potentially influence our child's character development as well as athletic progress. We are there when our 8-year-old son slams his batting helmet against the dugout wall after a strikeout, or when our daughter, a high school senior, loses a bitterly contested tennis match despite bravely mustering her best game ever, or when our Pee Wee hockey player taunts the opposition following a game-breaking goal. What, then, shall we do when events like these occur?

Here's where character comes in. The mastery of any sport requires the consistent control of body, mind, and spirit. Over the long haul, success in any endeavor demands the daily application of good habits, or good character traits, if you will. As parents, we should encourage our children to attend practice consistently, listen attentively to the coach, adhere to the rules of the game, and be a positive and supportive teammate. We should emphasize the importance of sacrificing individual accomplishment for the good of the team and controlling emotions and behavior in the face of conflict or potential defeat. Finally, we should remind our child of the importance of persevering and overcoming adversity while mastering a difficult skill, such as hitting a baseball or driving a golf ball straight down the fairway. Thus parents simultaneously promote a strong character and improved athletic performance. These goals are a joint endeavor; a parent must help a child reach them.

Turning a blind eye when our children indulge in behaviors that disrespect coaches, opponents, officials, or fans corrodes the mutual respect that makes the game meaningful. All competition demands that the individual willingly accept the rules and limits of the game. Three strikes and you're out. Hit the ball into the water, and you take a one-stroke penalty. Elbow the other player, and you get two minutes in the penalty box. The successful athlete learns to master the body and the emotions. Character helps us master emotions. When emotions get the best of athletes, they quit, take stupid penalties, skip good training habits, cheat to gain an edge, play for individual glory rather than team goals, and generally lose their cool. Poor character equals poor control and ultimately equals a poor performance. Emphasizing the commitment to maximum effort, the building of skill and mastery of the game, and the willingness to accept and relish difficult challenges is a sound practice likely to succeed over the long haul. Accurate praise and positive reinforcement, not just for good plays or successful outcomes but also for virtuous behavior, will build skillful, resilient, confident, coachable, team-oriented kids.

Play is child's work; it's a kid's job to play. It's how they naturally explore, learn, and grow. The essence of good play involves a joyful immersion in activity, with freedom, a lack of critical observation, and even a loss of the sense of time. Organized sports are, in reality, just a serious form of play. Sports structure play; there are rules to obey, skills and positions to learn, and plays to follow. The demands required to become good at any sport, combined with the intensity of competition, introduce our

children to the pursuit of excellence. In their demand that children channel their behavior according to rules, organized sports provide a natural place for many life lessons. The hunger for mastery and worthy achievement, the willingness to accept one's own strengths and limitations, as well as the recognition of the needs and rights of others are all crucial aspects of responsible, mature adulthood. Sports can help develop these areas of competence, but it does not happen without guidance, direction, and strength from caring parents and coaches.

Children must be taught. There is a right way and a wrong way to spell, to play the piano, and to swing a baseball bat. The learning of new complex behavior, such as riding a bike, frequently tests the patience, will, and endurance of teacher and pupil alike. However, learning and playing at one's best can coexist with the ability to enjoy the moment. Practice involves discipline, long hours, and hard work, but it also engages joy of movement and freedom of expression. The challenge for all adults involved in youth, high school, and even collegiate sports is to preserve the enjoyment of playing while introducing the structure and discipline of proper teamwork, skill, and technique. Because children are vulnerable and still growing, they need our ongoing help in mastering this struggle.

Yet as parents, we face our own struggles: knowing when to push our child and when to back off, when to stick to principle and when to be flexible, and when to maintain control and when to let go and let a kid simply play. Many of us have heard the following complaint from a 9- or 10-year- old child: "Mom, I don't want to go to practice. I'm too tired." It takes discernment, and some trial and error, to sense when to be firm in honoring a commitment and when to prevent a child from physically and emotionally burning out. As parents, we must live with the anxiety and uncertainty of those decisions while trying to teach our kids the crucial lessons of life yet allow them the freedom to make mistakes.