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Making Youth Sports

A POSITIVE EXPERIENCE

Role Models

Sports can be a fun and engaging way for children and youth to learn some important lessons about life. Studies suggest that participation in sports can be very beneficial, fostering responsible social behaviors, greater academic success, and an appreciation of personal health and fitness. Participating on a team also can give children or youth an important sense of belonging.

The atmosphere set by organizations, parents, and coaches is a major factor in determining whether or not youth will have a positive experience in a sports program. A “win-at-all-costs” atmosphere can be harmful to a developing youth. This bulletin is the first in a two-part series written to assist parents in fostering a positive climate that enables children and youth involved in sports to enjoy themselves and reach their full potential. It focuses on the benefits and risks of youth sports, discusses parents as role models, and provides practical tips for parents. The second bulletin addresses the issue of parents as spectators and consumers of organized youth sports. A related bulletin provides advice for coaches.

Few children possess the talent to play competitive sports at the highest level—most will not grow up to be professional athletes. Therefore, in this series, we take the perspective that the primary goals of youth sports are to foster the development of general physical competence and to promote physical activity, fun, life skills, sportsmanship, and good health.

Benefits of Sports for Children and Youth



Risks of Athletic Participation

Sports that foster personal competence help youth develop their abilities to do life planning, to be self-reliant, and to seek the resources of others when needed.

Sports are opportunities for children and youth to learn; they provide a “practice field” for life. For example, learning to work as a team teaches young children social skills that will help them in their growth as people, not just as athletes. For youth, participating in sports may develop teamwork, leadership, self-confidence, self-discipline, and coping skills. Sports also can teach youth about sportsmanlike behaviors and respect for authority. In fact, according to a survey of teachers and school administrators, youth that participated in sports had better grades and behaved better in the classroom because of the associated discipline and work ethic. The evidence from research is clear—children and youth who are involved in physical activities such as sports fare better in school, have higher social skills, are more team-oriented, and are healthier as determined by fitness standards.

Participation in sports also has the potential to be a negative experience for youth, depending on the program’s atmosphere. This atmosphere has nothing to do with winning or losing; rather, it depends on how the coaches and parents handle themselves, and the philosophy of the sports program organization. A child who is exposed to repeated failures and who receives criticism without useful feedback is not likely to thrive within the youth sports environment. A lack of positive role models and pressures to perform also can create a negative atmosphere. The influence of a negative climate



Parents as Adult Role Models

is demonstrated by one study that examined approximately 5,800 children who recently stopped playing a sport. The researchers found that the top five reasons for stopping were “loss of interest,” “not having fun,” “too much time required,” “coach was a poor teacher,” and “too much pressure.”

Fortunately, there are ways to avoid these risks and create a positive atmosphere in a sports program. Parents should enroll their youth in programs that have clear positive goals about the sports experience, emphasizing fair play and sportsmanship as well as the skills to be taught and the lessons to be learned. With these goals, the “winning at all cost” attitude that leads to a negative atmosphere is held in check, and the learning process is emphasized.

Children and youth learn “how to play the game” from their coaches and parents. These adults are important teachers and role models, and the atmosphere they create determines whether a child’s sports experience is negative or positive. For example, parents and coaches may have goals for the youth different from those of the youth themselves. Regardless of these goals, it is critical for parents to nurture the youth’s ambitions. Parents and coaches must continuously communicate with youth to assist them and support their dreams.

Parents should play an important role in their children’s sports experiences. They can introduce their children to a sport by playing with them. During the preschool and elementary years, helping children develop basic skills such as running, jumping, kicking, and throwing is important for later skill development. During this time, sports should be focused on cooperative games that provide children a chance to explore their skills and talents and

develop a sense of success. The emphasis should be on fun, not competition. At this age, children are not yet prepared to understand winning and losing. Children think losing says something negative about them personally. Putting youth at this age in highly competitive situations may be detrimental to their development. Parents need to provide encouragement and praise for effort, not for winning. To foster a child's learning, parents should provide encouragement and direction about a specific skill.

As children get older, parents' roles change. When children are between the ages of five and twelve, parents should encourage them to try different sports. This enables them to develop different skills and to search for a sport they really enjoy. Parents should discourage children from becoming too wrapped up in any one sport, instead giving them the opportunity to explore options. Parents should educate themselves about sports in which their children express interest. In addition, they should support their child's decision to drop out of a sport. The notion that allowing a child to drop out of a sport teaches him or her to be a quitter is a myth. No evidence suggests that allowing youth to leave a sport in which they are unhappy leads to problems with commitment later. Of course, it is important that you encourage a child to give a sport a fair chance; but if the child is truly unhappy, then it is best that he or she quit.

Parental involvement in teaching sports usually decreases when children reach adolescence; however, adolescents still want their parents to be supportive by attending their sporting events. Parents also can show support by volunteering with tasks associated with the sports program. Here are some recommendations for parents of young athletes:





Conclusion

- Develop in your child a lifelong commitment to an active lifestyle.
- Encourage your child to try various physical activities.
- Encourage your child to play because he or she enjoys it, not because it may get him or her a scholarship. Intrinsic motivation is a key ingredient for lifelong commitment to physical fitness.
- Focus more on skill mastery and cooperation and less on winning.
- Communicate with your child's coaches. Be involved in the sports program and seek out coaches that have a positive philosophy focused on skill building.
- Focus on teaching life skills, and allow your child to be involved in the decision making about sports participation. Reinforce and support your child's decisions.
- Know your child's friends on the team.
- Focus on supporting your child, especially when he or she reaches adolescence. Do not instruct; let the coach instruct and teach.

When we are caught up in competition, it is easy to lose sight of the fact that sports are supposed to be a fun, rewarding, and learning experience for youth. Keep this in mind when you are providing sports opportunities for children, so they can get the most from their experience.

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Role Models



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