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Making Youth Sports

A POSITIVE EXPERIENCE

spectators

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 second 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. The first bulletin (“Role Models”) focused on the benefits and risks of youth sports, discussed parents as role models, and provided practical tips for parents. This bulletin explores the issue of competition versus cooperation in youth sports, discusses the role of parents as spectators, and identifies some things parents should look for as consumers of youth sports programs. A related bulletin provides advice for coaches.

As was noted in the first bulletin, few children possess the talent to play competitive sports at the highest level. Thus, this publication takes the perspective that the primary



Competition Versus Cooperation

goals of youth sports programs are to foster the development of general physical competence and to promote physical activity, fun, life skills, sportsmanship, and good health. Youth 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.

Experts cannot agree on whether competition helps children develop essential social skills, or if it does nothing more than cause conflict and discrimination. Some feel that competition is part of human nature, something that is faced in everyday life. These scholars feel that competition helps children learn skills that will be important throughout their lives. Others feel that cooperation, not competition, is valuable to a positive youth sports experience. Cooperative games are those that encourage children to work together instead of against each other.

More than likely, it is some combination of competition and cooperation that promotes healthy development for children and youth. Competition in itself is not bad. It can serve as a means of social comparison, necessary for adolescents to see how they are unique from others. Taken to the extreme, however, competition can cause individuals to act in ways that are unacceptable and unsportsmanlike. As one researcher noted, "the mildest-mannered father or mother may scream like a maniac at the finals of the local soccer tournament." Most of us, if not all of us, have witnessed similar behavior. We see this type of behavior present from little league games all the way up to the professional level. The wise saying, "it's not whether you win or lose, it's how you play the game," is lost among the intense competition existing in some youth sports programs today.

When coaches and parents teach their kids that winning is everything, the ugliness comes out in everyone.

Parents should seek out or establish sport programs that emphasize cooperation and mastery during childhood and youth. A mastery perspective allows the young athlete to accept failures and learn from them, and to focus on improvement and not just on winning. Competition should be introduced gradually, for several reasons, during this period. First, competition restricts participation; such inactivity is inappropriate for children. Playing a sport is about learning and developing skills, which cannot happen if the young person is sitting on the bench all the time. Second, competition tends to emphasize the winning instead of the skill learning, creativity, and fun. If youth are going to improve their skills and enjoy themselves, they need to focus their energies on the playing and learning of a sport, not on the outcome of winning. Third, competition can create a high level of anxiety, which can make it quite difficult for youth to learn and have fun. It increases the likelihood that they will drop out of the sport. By introducing competition gradually, children and youth are able to enjoy themselves while learning.



Parents as Spectators

Parents are most visibly supportive in their role as spectators on the sidelines for youth sports. Of course, parents are excited and want to see their child play; however, it is important that they keep their emotions under control and set a positive example. Here are some things for parents to remember:

- Applaud and cheer for everyone on the team, not just your child.
- Avoid insulting other team members and those of the opposing team.



- Talk to the parents of the other team members.
- Be respectful of the officials during the game. After the game, thank the officials.
- Focus on the positive, and compliment players, coaches, and officials.
- Be positive and congratulate the winning team. Do not forget to congratulate the losing team on their efforts.

Choosing Wisely: Organization Sports

Consumers

The goal of most organized sport programs is to teach youth life's important lessons and to help them develop personal competencies. Evidence from research, however, suggests that far from encouraging sportsmanship, prolonged exposure to a "win-at-all-costs" atmosphere actually results in less commitment to values such as honesty and fair play. When searching for good sports programs for positive youth development, parents may want to keep the following guidelines in mind:

- Sports programs should have policies that are fair and equitable. Youth should be included in the creation of those policies. Make sure experiences are appropriate for the age of the participants.
- Sports programs should apply policies consistently—no players should "get away" with anything simply because they have the best ability.
- Sports programs should provide orientation to staff, coaches, parents, and youth so everyone knows what is expected ahead of time. (Expectations about conduct, fairness, and honesty should be included.)
- Sports programs should not allow coaches to play favorites.
- Sports programs should expect adults to keep emotions under control. Adults should set positive examples for youth.
- Sports programs should encourage youth to enjoy themselves as much as possible. Remember, youth play sports because they are fun; therefore, being fun is the goal of a quality sports program.
- Sports programs should help youth learn from their experiences. Coaches and parents should spend time after a game talking with youth about what they did well and what could use improvement for next time.



Conclusion

- Sports programs should conduct follow-up activities such as a post-season meeting to celebrate successes and make plans for future changes and improvement.
- Sports programs should encourage coaches to maximize the social aspects of sports by promoting interactions among team members and between teams.
- Sports programs should encourage coaches to make use of “teachable moments.” Teachable moments are game situations in which something significant has just happened (e.g., a nasty foul, a false start, or an accidental collision). Coaches that stop the game and ask their players to think about how they could have behaved in that situation are taking advantage of a teachable moment.
- Finally, sport programs should be conducted on a youth model rather than an adult model. The main reasons that youth ages five to seventeen play sports are to have fun and to spend time with their friends. When children play informally, they follow certain roles. First, the sport must be action-filled. Second, everyone must participate regardless of skill level. “Do-overs” are acceptable and keep the less-skilled players engaged. Third, the sport must be exciting. In fact, most of the time, games are organized not to determine a winner but to promote excitement. For example, if scores are being kept, rule modifications are encouraged and often serve to keep the game close and exciting.

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 that they can get the most from their experience.

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Penn State College of Agricultural Sciences research, extension, and resident education programs are funded in part by Pennsylvania counties, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

This publication is available from the Publications Distribution Center, The Pennsylvania State University, 112 Agricultural Administration Building, University Park, PA 16802. For information telephone (814) 865-6713.

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension Work, Acts of Congress May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Pennsylvania Legislature. T. R. Alter, Director of Cooperative Extension, The Pennsylvania State University.

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