

COACHES

Making Youth Sports

A POSITIVE EXPERIENCE



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 provides information to assist coaches in fostering a positive climate that enables children and youth involved in sports to enjoy themselves and reach their full potential. Two related bulletins provide similar information for parents.

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. 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.



Benefits of Sports for Children and Youth



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.

Risks of Athletic Participation

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 whether the team wins or loses; rather, it depends on how the coaches and parents handle themselves, and the philosophy of the program. A child who is exposed to repeated failures and who receives criticism without useful feedback is not likely to thrive in 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 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.”



Competition vs. Cooperation

Fortunately, there are ways to avoid these risks and create a positive atmosphere in a sports program. For example, sports programs should 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.

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 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.

Sport programs should 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. Introducing competition gradually can allow children and youth to enjoy themselves while learning.



Coaches as Adult Role Models



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, coaches may have goals for the youth different from those of the youth themselves. Regardless of these goals, it is critical for coaches to nurture the youth’s ambitions. Coaches must continuously communicate with youth to assist them and support their dreams.

A coach is one who instructs a team of players or performers. As an instructor, a coach needs to be aware that what he or she says and does in this role can have an important impact on the youth. Researchers have found that a coach’s feedback is critical to the development of children’s self esteem and perceived competence. For this reason, it is important that coaches monitor their own behavior when working in youth sports. Coaches should establish learning goals for their players and for their team. These goals should be about having fun, learning new skills, and developing friendships; they should not be about winning. Coaches can determine if their behaviors are too focused on winning and competition by asking the following questions:

- How do I speak with my players? Do I scream or yell at them often? Or do I talk with them and help them understand their mistakes?
- Do I show respect to officials? Have I ever blamed a loss on an official?
- Do I promote dislike between two teammates to motivate them?
- Do I treat my players differently after a loss than after a win?

- Do I promise team members playing time regardless of how well they do?

Using these types of questions, coaches can begin to assess if their approach is developmentally appropriate. If coaches find themselves yelling at players, blaming officials for losses, giving preferential treatment to certain players, and/or giving unequal playing time, they may want to re-evaluate their style.

Positive coaches are supportive of their players; that is, they reinforce good skills and encourage youth who make mistakes. To reinforce good skills, coaches should be specific in their praise, not general. For example, a coach who tells a ten-year-old soccer player, “Nice job dribbling the ball down the field,” is providing supportive and specific information, as opposed to the coach who simply says, “nice job.” Positive coaches are also instructive; that is, they spend time with players to show them how to correct their mistakes. Here are some other characteristics of positive coaches that are consistent with the National Standards for Athletics Coaches, as developed by the National Association for Sport and Physical Education:



Players come first.

Positive coaches see themselves first and foremost as educators. They enjoy the sport and they love teaching. A positive coach understands the development stages of children and youth and uses developmentally appropriate coaching strategies.

Positive coaches develop character as well as skill.

Positive coaches make use of “teachable moments.” These are game situations in which something significant has just happened (e.g., a nasty foul, a false start, or an accidental collision). Coaches who stop the game and ask their players to think about how they could have behaved in that situation are taking advantage



***Positive coaches
foster mastery.***

of a teachable moment. Using these teachable moments can build positive character traits in athletes such as determination, courage, empathy, and commitment.

***Positive coaches
foster internal
motivation.***

Positive coaches have strong technical knowledge about the sport. They use skill-building drills during practice, reinforce correct skills, and correct mistakes. Positive coaches give technical feedback to youth in an encouraging way. Positive coaches demonstrate technical skills, because children 5 to 12 years old have a difficult time learning through verbal instructions.

***Positive coaches
foster critical
self-observation skills.***

Positive coaches encourage players to develop internal motivation, rather than rely on external punishments and rewards. Positive coaches listen closely to their players to tap into their internal motivation.

***Positive coaches
focus on the
learning process.***

Positive coaches help a child discover answers to problems by facilitating the child's problem solving. They ask questions like, "How was that for you?" "How did you feel doing that?" "What did you notice while you were doing that?"

***Positive coaches
treat their players
with respect.***

They focus on skill development rather than on the outcome of winning. Positive coaches reward skill improvement.

They do not attempt to motivate through fear, intimidation, or shame. Positive coaches remain positive in good times and bad times. They gain the cooperation of their players through encouragement, and treat them as partners working together to achieve their goals.

Positive coaches honor the game.

Positive coaches love the sport and share their love of the sport with their players. Positive coaches show respect to their opponents, knowing that a worthy opponent will push them and their team. Positive coaches understand the important role the officials play and strive to show respect, even when they do not agree with the official decisions. Positive coaches demonstrate personal integrity and would rather lose than dishonor the game and their players.

Sports Programs Providing a Positive Atmosphere

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. As coaches, you have an important role to play in influencing sports programs and organizations. Listed below in bullet format are some important strategies that youth sport programs and organizations can employ to promote a positive climate.

- Be inclusive so that everyone has a chance to sign up and to play.
- Have educational workshops for coaches to increase their knowledge about the development of children.
- Provide to players, parents, coaches, and officials a clear code of conduct that is enforced. In addition, develop a clear written method for dealing with conflict.
- Balance teams so they are more equally matched in terms of skill level.



- Involve youth in developing and implementing the youth program. Encourage youth to be a part of the decision-making process, and listen to them carefully.
- 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.



Conclusion

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. As a coach, 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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