

Character Counts

From the book: "Whose Game Is It, Anyway? A guide to helping your child get the most from sports, organized by stage." By Richard D. Ginsburg, Ph.D., Stephen Durant, Ed.D., and Amy Baltzell, Ed.D.

A 9-year old Little League pitcher struggles mightily to hold back his tears. He has just walked a player, with the bases loaded, in the last inning of a one-run ball game in the playoffs. He is close to losing his battle to contain his anger and frustration at the umpire's calls and his humiliation at hearing the cheers and jeers of the opposing team. He had struck out the first two batters with ease, but then the ump made a few questionable calls and now it's crunch time. His father, the coach, has called time and is approaching the mound.

The boy is the team's best pitcher. His arm is a bit tired. He knows the team depends on him, but it is a struggle. He is too young to appreciate that the joy of competition takes place in the midst of that struggle. But deep down he knows he has to dig in, throw some good pitches, and get on more out. The tears quiver but hold at the rim of his eyes. He tugs his cap down low and keeps his eyes locked on his feet, waiting for his father's words. How can the father help his son face this challenge with confidence and spirit?

Young athletes and their parents face situations like this one every day. This little league pitcher embodies the worthy struggle that every athlete and, in fact, every person must endure: the attempt to master skill and control emotion in the face of adversity. In this way, organized sports give children the opportunity to face challenges that will help them learn important lessons about themselves and the world.

Some might hope that this young baseball player will use this opportunity to improve his technical skills under pressure---to gain control of his pitches and increase his ability to change both their speed and placement in order to fool the batter. Others might hope that he will learn something about handling adversity: "No matter what, son, keep your cool and be a man about it. There's no crying in baseball." Some parents genuinely might not care about the game itself but only about a son's emotional well-being: "It's okay, son. It's only a silly game. It's no biggie if they hit a walk-off grand slam. Don't be upset." But others might teach the boy a darker lesson---he must learn to do whatever it takes to succeed, to win. "Son, success in sports and in life is determined by the answer to one question: did you win? That's all people will want to know. Life is unfair and that's the way it is."

What, then is the right thing to say and do? The best response would take into account the child's age, gender, temperament, past history or performance, overall ability, the circumstances of the game, the child's level of fatigue, other problems that child might be experiencing, and his or her current emotional state, just to name a few factors. No magic words will guarantee a triumphant, strikeout performance. In a given situation, a coach or parent might use encouragement, passionate challenge, technical reminder, humorous distraction, sensitive support, or an "it's only a game" defusing of the pressure. However, certain approaches will more likely build confidence, promote a desire to improve, increase our child's overall enjoyment of sports, and reduce the risk of dropping out of athletes. Research clearly demonstrates that children who have fun and enjoy sports generally play longer, work harder at the game, and are more likely to have

a productive athletic experience. In the case of the 9-year-old pitcher, a good coach would likely reassure him and try to take some pressure off, perhaps by reminding the boy of a technical component of pitching success, such as “Remember to lift your front knee above your belt before you push off your back leg.” But most important, the best coaches and parents would see a single pitching showdown as a very small piece of a much larger mosaic. They would keep the bigger picture in mind.

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 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.

As sports psychologists, we believe that striving to excel and win in competition is always important. For competition to bring out our best, wanting to win is vital. However, other crucial factors must balance this drive. One of them is character---caring about doing the right thing. But some Americans might privately say to themselves, “Who knows what ‘doing the right thing’ means for children? We just want our kids to be happy and successful, and in our society that means winning a lot more than losing.” But deep down, we all know that we should care about teaching kids to do the right thing. Lack of character education can lead to destructive, even tragic consequences, not just in sports but also in life.

As clinical psychologists who deal with depression, trauma, abuse, and emotional turmoil in children, as well as people of all ages, we observe the results of character flaws every day. A visit to the emergency room in any metropolitan hospital in America will demonstrate how flawed character leads to emotional and physical destruction in the form of substance abuse, risky sexual practice, sexual abuse, violence, murder, and suicide. Daily newspapers frequently report stories showing how character defects undermine athletes at a rate that more than keeps pace with the general population.

Character has been defined as “the ability to take rational control of passion or emotion on a consistent and dependable basis.” In general, character disorder is associated with the inability to consistently control emotion and behavior in an appropriate, nondestructive way. As parents we must address the character development of our children. Beyond providing food, clothing, shelter, and affection, our most important job is to teach kids right from wrong. The gift of a sound character is the best insurance policy that children can carry into the future.