

# TEACHING KIDS TO BE "GOOD SPORTS"

by Dr. Darrell J. Burnett

*"Sports do not build character. They reveal it."* - **Heywood Hale Brown**

## ***Youth Sports: The Last Vestige of Sportsmanship***

We're living in an age where the preservation of traditional values can no longer be taken for granted. It seems we need to have reminders (books, movies, newspaper articles, etc.) to maintain our awareness of the importance of preserving the basic human values which are essential to the survival of a community.

It's no different in the world of sports. The traditional value of sportsmanship is being challenged from all sides: professional, college, high school, and even in youth sports. There are some who say sportsmanship is becoming a lost art and that unless we remind ourselves of the essentials of sportsmanship and strive to maintain the basics of sportsmanship it will gradually fade as other values have done in our society.

In the midst of all this, it seems doubly important that we recommit ourselves to guiding our youth, reminding them what sportsmanship is all about, rewarding them for showing good sportsmanship and showing, by our example, that sportsmanship is still alive and valued in youth sports today.

Here's a 10-item checklist for kids to follow as they try to develop a habit of good sportsmanship.

### **1. I abide by the rules of the game.**

Part of good sportsmanship is knowing the rules of the game and playing by them. If a player decides to play a given sport, it is the responsibility of that player to learn not only how to play but how to play according to the rules which have been established and standardized to allow competitive games to be played in an orderly fashion. The more a player knows the rules the more that player can enjoy the sport.

### **2. I try to avoid arguments.**

Part of good sportsmanship is anger management. Arguing with officials, coaches or opponents is often simply a misguided effort at "letting off steam" in the heat of competition. A good sport knows that anger can get in the way of a good performance. A good sport knows how to walk away from an argument and to stay focused on the game at hand.

### **3. I share in the responsibilities of the team.**

Good sportsmanship implies that the player on a team is a team player. In other words, the player understands that his or her behavior reflects on the team in general. Moreover, a team player does not condone unsportsmanlike conduct from teammates and reminds players that they all share in the responsibility of promoting good sportsmanship.

### **4. I give everyone a chance to play according to the rules.**

In youth recreational sports the more talented players, if they are good sports, will look out for and encourage the less talented players on the team, cooperating with coaching plans to let everybody play. Unfortunately, some coaches may become so preoccupied with winning at all costs that they never play some players, regardless of the time and effort they put in at daily practices, even when the score warrants clearing the bench.

### **5. I always play fair.**

Honesty and integrity should be an integral part of sports. A player with good sportsmanship does not want a hollow victory which comes as a result of cheating ("dirty" fouls, ineligible players, performance enhancing drugs, etc.)

### **6. I follow the directions of the coach.**

A player with good sportsmanship listens to and follows the directions of the coach, realizing that each player's decisions affect the rest of the team. If a player has disagreements with the coach, the player discusses the disagreements privately in a civil manner, away from the public eye.

### **7. I respect the other team's effort.**

Whether the other team plays better, or whether they play worse, the player with good sportsmanship does not use the occasion to put the other team down. In the field of competition respect for opponents is central to good sportsmanship. If an opponent out-performs a player that player accepts it, learns from it, offers no excuses and moves on. If a player out-performs an opponent, that player enjoys the victory, but does not gloat, does not belittle, and does not minimize the opponent's effort.

### **8. I offer encouragement to teammates.**

A sign of good sportsmanship is a player who praises teammates when they do well and who comforts and encourages them when they make mistakes. Criticizing teammates in the heat of battle simply distracts from the focus of working together and gives the advantage to the opponent who develops a sense of confidence when seeing signs of weakness or a lack of unity in the midst of the competition.

### **9. I accept the judgment calls of the game officials.**

Part of the human condition is making mistakes. Arguing with an official over a judgment call simply wastes energy. The player with good sportsmanship knows that errors may be made, but the player also knows that a game is made up of all the plays and calls from the beginning to the end of the game, not just the call in dispute. The player with good sportsmanship may be upset, but that player also has learned to focus his/her energies back on the game and on doing the best he/she can do for the rest of the game.

### **10. I end the game smoothly.**

When the game is over, pouting, threatening, cajoling have no place in the life of the players with good sportsmanship, who emphasize the joy of participating, regardless of outcome. They're not devoid of emotions but they know that their efforts to end the competition smoothly, without antagonistic emotional display, will help ensure that the games will continue in the future.

On a final note, a word of caution. We can't be so naive as to think that by teaching and valuing sportsmanship in our youth we will ensure that they will take these values with them into their young adult and adult sports lives. However, if we don't expose them to the essentials of sportsmanship, and if we don't guide them in developing a sense of good sportsmanship, we can all but guarantee that they will fall prey to the young adult and adult world of sports and athletics, with its continued tendency to minimize sportsmanship, and maximize winning as the only real value in competitive athletics.

### *Sportsmanship Checklist for Kids*

1. I abide by the rules of the game.
2. I try to avoid arguments.
3. I share in the responsibilities of the team.
4. I give everyone a chance to play according to the rules.
5. I always play fair.
6. I follow the directions of the coach.
7. I respect the other team's effort.
8. I offer encouragement to my teammates.
9. I accept the judgment calls of the game officials.
10. I end the game smoothly.

### ***Sportsmanship is the ability to:***

win without gloating  
lose without complaining  
treat your opponent with respect.

### ***Sportsmanship Tips***

If you make a mistake, don't pout or make excuses. Learn from it, and be ready to continue to play.  
If a teammate makes a mistake, offer encouragement, not criticism.  
If you win, don't rub it in.  
If you lose, don't make excuses.

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