

Developing a Positive Youth Sports Culture

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This past season, I attended a Little League Baseball game to watch a nine-year old player I had coached. In addition to watching the game, I was interested in watching the parental interaction. I sat beyond the community field's designated fan area. Along with what was happening on the field, I was attentive to what was happening off the field, which included:

- Conversation among fathers comparing their sons' statistics;
- Parents exclaiming "Don't strike out!" and "Don't hit it to shortstop!" from the stands towards their child before an at-bat;
- The immediate negative reaction (head-shaking, dirt-kicking) and harsh verbal response of one team's coach after his left fielder committed an error;
- The expensive apparel and sporting equipment paid for by moms and dads as well as the exorbitant fees associated with participating on one of the teams.

All of this further confirmed for me that, although well-intentioned, parents and coaches contribute to the increasingly winning-obsessed, stat-focused, talent-glorifying youth sports culture of today. While it may seem harmless, such a culture can lead to young athletes experiencing less enjoyment, heightened performance anxiety, and increased risk of burnout.

In considering the toxicity of today's youth sporting environment, parents may quickly turn to the sensational headlines revealing off-the-field father brawls and coach-vs-umpire physical altercations. However, these violent physical confrontations, thankfully, are rare. The subtler, nonviolent everyday interactions between parent and child or coach and athlete are far more common and perhaps just as harmful. This article will address how to assist youth in developing different perspectives on sports and provide tips to parents and coaches to facilitate this alternative approach.

To create the ideal environment for young athletes, let's consider why kids themselves enjoy sports. Youth sports organizations have surveyed thousands of children on why they play their sport, and two themes continually prevail: fun and self-improvement. Kids form a connection to a sport or activity when it is enjoyable and they feel that their skills are improving.

While children have a natural curiosity to learn and will respond positively to being successful, young athletes rarely identify winning as a motivator for playing their favorite sport. "Being the best" and "obtaining a college scholarship" are seldom mentioned. Those desires are often adult-constructed and media-driven.

As children are the central participants in youth sports and have candidly reported on why they play their sport, it is important to align the goals of the team, coach and parents with those of the children. Most important at the youth level are the following goals:

- Fun
- Safety
- Personal growth and development (this includes learning such skills as working well with teammates, sportsmanship, leadership, building friendships, accepting defeat, and physical skill development)

The primary focus, then, should not be on a young athlete enjoying an undefeated season, nor must it be on the player excelling at such refined skills as perfectly executed double plays and drag bunts. Those are undoubtedly important, perhaps primarily so at higher levels. However, at the youth level these are not as significant as helping the athlete develop a sense of passion for the sport. Many elementary school-aged children lose their passion for sports during these years because they feel unable to live up to the pressure-filled expectations that accompany a winning-oriented competitive environment. This typically results in a high dropout rate, occurring most frequently at the middle school level. These negative outcomes can be minimized by shifting the focus to happiness, not performance.

Young athletes' goals can change in a positive way over the course of a season when their coaches create a focus on personal excellence rather than a focus on winning. This means that when parents and coaches stress positive communication, teamwork and doing one's best—acting excellently—a child will believe that he or she can accomplish more challenging goals. The opposite happens in a zero-sum, results-oriented climate, typified by many professional sports coaches, which focuses on winning at all costs. It is understandable why children whose sense of self-esteem and worth are placed solely on winning would have trouble demonstrating good sportsmanship after a loss.

So, stressing a climate of personal excellence and reinforcing positive episodes for your children—for instance, good performance, good hustle, good examples of sportsmanship or leadership—will help build confidence and increase their passion for participating. Asking young athletes questions like, “What did you do well today?” or “What was the most exciting

or fun part of the game?” rather than “Did you win?” sends a powerful message. After all, in a child's eyes, when a parent's or coach's love and approval depend on the adequacy and competency of performance—in other words, “the better I play, the more love I'll get”—sports are bound to be highly evaluative and highly stressful.

Shifting toward a culture of enjoyment, self-referenced growth and personal effort and away from a culture narrowly focused on winning and statistics may effectively cultivate passion within our youth athletes. This passion can lead to success on the field. But more important, passion results in sustained performance, rich social experiences and positive self-esteem.

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