



You Win Some, You Lose Some – Good Sportsmanship

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Winning is everything in our society. This "take no prisoners" philosophy pervades the media. Dreadful unsportsmanlike behavior of athletes and coaches in professional sports is condoned. It is not at all surprising that parents and coaches of our youth show a parallel increase in outrageous acts of violence and trash talking. Our children are influenced by the professionals they idolize. But, more directly, they learn poor sportsmanship from their own parents and leaders.

All too often, coaches choose winning over building character. Competitive sports can offer a unique opportunity to teach kids ethics that can guide them both on and off the field. As a parent, you have a responsibility to offset the win-at-all-costs approach by instilling in your children good sportsmanship principles right from the start.

Step One: Know yourself well.

Before you can expect your children to show good sportsmanship, you need to examine how important winning is to you. How much are you willing to sacrifice in order to win? Be honest with yourself. Winning is a "high." You may feel that your child's success is your success. It's hard to resist the urge to live vicariously through your child's accomplishments.

Step Two: Emphasize effort, not outcome.

"It's not whether you win or lose, it's how you play the game" is easier to say than it is to put into practice. The goal is to emphasize the process rather than the final product (the win or the loss). Get in the habit of praising steps in the right direction rather than the end result. For instance, rather than praising your child when he hits a line drive, commend him for improving his swing.

Step Three: Don't fall into the parent trap.

Remember that you are the parent, not the coach. Watch out for the following Parent Traps. Your child models behavior after seeing your sportsmanship behaviors. These negative behaviors communicate to your child that it is okay to be disrespectful and exhibit poor sportsmanship.

Five Parent Sportsmanship Traps:

1. Coaching and criticizing children from the sidelines
2. Arguing with referees
3. Telling the coach what to do or criticizing the coach's decisions
4. Trash-talking the opposing team
5. Using profanity

Step Four: Offer incentives.

Take note of good sportsmanship behavior. If you see your child help an opposing player get up after a trip or fall, give them verbal kudos at the end of the game. Highlighting excellent behavior may be enough of its own reward, but you can also reward intermittently with a gift certificate for an ice cream or a slice of pizza as an added incentive for good sportsmanship behavior.

Step Five: Keep winning and losing in perspective.

Even when you are able to keep winning and losing in perspective, there is still going to be disappointment at defeat. Allow yourself and your child to feel the disappointment that comes with losing. It's only after experiencing these feelings that your child can move on and figure out what lessons to take from the defeat. There is an expression: "The blessings of a skinned knee." A key to learning is going through the process of falling, getting back up, brushing yourself off, and moving forward armed with new information.

Your child is learning new skills, making friends, and developing resiliency while playing. You can help him develop good sportsmanship by remembering that "Playing games is all about having fun!"