



Learning to be a Good Sport

By Laurie McLaughlin

With fall sports in full swing, there is no better time for parents, kids and coaches to reflect on what good sportsmanship is all about. Adult expectations about winning are often the biggest obstacle when it comes to teaching kids how to be good sports.

We're all familiar with the one or two parents in every league who stand on the sidelines yelling at players who don't complete perfect plays. "Ninety-five percent of parents are not like that," says Lenny Wiersma, co-director of the Center for the Advancement of Responsible Youth Sport at California State University at Fullerton. But, he adds, even the most well-intentioned mom or dad may unwittingly focus on the box scores more than the experience of playing.

"I'm not saying winning isn't important. But winning and losing are not the same thing to a child as they are to a parent," says Wiersma. "Children are more concerned with playing." As a result, he says, sports are an excellent way to underscore the great feelings that come from working as a team, taking on responsibility and having a good attitude – versus simply wanting to win.

Wiersma offers these reminders for cultivating good sportsmanship in kids:

- One of the most important parts of the game is the ride home. Instead of focusing on a win or loss, ask your child if he had fun, who he met, what he learned. Don't offer advice about how to do it next time. Let the coach do the coaching.
- If a kid takes a loss particularly hard, parent often feel the need to do the talking. Instead, a parent may say, "That was kind of a rough game. What was that like for you?" This lets the child work it out verbally.
- Parents remember the score a lot longer than kids do so avoid putting too much emphasis on it. Wiersma was involved in a study that found that by the next day's practice, kids couldn't tell coaches what yesterday's score was – win or lose. Kids focus on the task at hand.
- To help foster a love of the game, engaging kids in no-score play is generally appropriate up to age six. Developmentally appropriate competition varies with each child, and some kids are ready before others.
- Don't coach from the sideline; it's confusing to your child. If parents want to coach, they should sign up and do so. If not, they should learn to live with being a spectator.

Kids will take cues from how their parents react, says Wiersma. "In the grander scheme of things, when has a win or loss, no matter how big, ever changed a kid's life? Never."



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