

Putting YOUTH Back Into Sports

Parents' Guide

Sports are the most prevalent organized after-school activity for 22 million youth ages 5 to 17 in the United States. Another 21 million children are involved in school athletics or organized weekend sports activities.

Sports can be a fun and engaging way for children and youth to learn some important lessons about life. Participating in sports can foster responsible social behaviors, greater academic success, and an appreciation for health and fitness. Participating on a team can also give children a sense of belonging that they need.

In contrast, research shows that a win-at-all-cost atmosphere in a youth sports program is harmful to a youth's development. In such a situation the benefits that sports have to offer are lost. In addition, negative experiences in sports are linked to low self-worth and fear of failure. Adults involved in youth sports play a crucial role in preventing this from happening.

What can you do as a parent

Respect your child's need for knowledge.

Take time to learn about youth development. Are your expectations too high? Too low? Your expectations should focus on effort and skills learned rather than on winning and losing. Are you putting too much pressure on your child?

Be careful not to push your thoughts, ideas, and dreams onto your child.

Make an effort to listen to what your child is saying, and try to meet his/her needs.

Remember that sports are primarily an opportunity to learn and have fun.

Most children will not grow up to be professional athletes as few children possess the talent or desire to play competitive sports at the highest level.

Ask these questions before committing your child to sports.

Mothers are frequently the initiator of a child's sports experiences while fathers typically influence the type of sport. To choose a sport for your child, parents need to understand their child's developmental level, interest in a particular sport, skills or talents, and emotional and physical needs. As a parent, you need to raise the following questions before making the commitment to enroll your child in a sports organization or program.

- How many practices and games per week are there?
- How long does the season last?
- Who provides transportation? Is there carpooling?
- What are my (our) responsibilities?
- Will my child be penalized for missing practices or games to be on our family vacation?
- Do practices and game schedules interfere with dinnertime, schoolwork, church, or other events in our family?
- Does the program have a written statement of goals and philosophy that is available to the parents?
If so, are they compatible with my family goals and values?
- Does the league emphasize giving all children an opportunity to play?
- Is everyone, including less skilled players, treated fairly?
- Are the players taught proper sportsmanship?
- Is the league ultra-competitive? Are children taught to win at all costs or to focus on self-improvement and having fun?

Remember that from 6 to 12 years of age, children should have opportunities to be in different sports. Concentrating on one sport is not appropriate in terms of physical and cognitive development.



(cont.)

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What type of sports parent will you be?

Level of Involvement	Type of Parent
Under-involved	Disinterested/misinformed parent
Moderately involved	The comfort zone
Overly-involved	Excitable/fanatical parent

Disinterested parents spend more time arranging a car-pool to take their children to the game than they do at the actual game if they attend at all.

The misinformed parents care about their children's sport choices, but they feel their appearance at a game or practice will be stressful for the youth.

The opposite of under-involved, disinterested or misinformed parents are the excitable and fanatical parents. The excitable parents want to be supportive of their children, coach, and the game, but at times may "lose control" and exhibit offensive behavior. Excitable parents may not be aware of their behavior.

Fanatical parents want their child to be a sports hero or heroine. The fanatical parent will harp on the coach, officials, and their child in an attempt to have their needs met. The child who has a fanatical parent may experience pre-game stress, competitive stress and/or feelings of inadequacy. Eventually the child may grow despondent and refuse to play.

Parents in the comfort zone contribute to the child's sports experience in a positive and supportive way and know when to back off. The moderate parent models having fun, encourages effort and improvements, and applauds all participants.

The preferred level of parental involvement is different for each child. To identify your child's comfort zone, ask the following questions:

- How involved do you want us to be?
- How do you want us to be involved, (i.e. sit on sidelines, coach, carpool, etc.)?
- Is it okay of us to cheer on the sidelines?
- What makes you feel pressured?

Take the time to have a discussion with your child to better understand their reason for being involved in sports and how you can be a supportive parent.

