



keep encouragement positive  
remember to laugh  
step into their shoes  
notice and praise progress  
show excitement

# Parents Can Help Youth Develop **Sportsmanship**

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Every year, more than 50 million children in the U.S. participate in some type of organized sport, and more than 7 million participate in interscholastic sports.

Many accept the idea that participation in organized sports provides benefits and attributes such as moral development, good citizenship, leadership skills, fewer behavior problems and improved self-image. For this reason, athletic participation is highly esteemed in the U.S., and many believe, or want to believe, that sports teaches values and fosters good character and the many good lessons learned in sports will last a lifetime. However, as athletes compete to make the team and eventually earn college scholarships, “winning at all costs” becomes commonplace and athletes display poor sportsmanship and gamesmanship during athletic contests, changing the concept of “sports builds character” to “sports builds characters.”

Coaches, the news media, college and professional athletes, peers and parents all influence children and their beliefs regarding sportsmanship. Below are five actions parents should take to help their young athletes develop and display good sportsmanship.

## ■ **Keep Encouragement Positive**

All parents and guardians of children should strive to deliver a greater percentage of positive than negative remarks and comments. Some experts suggest that for every critical or corrective remark, parents should provide three or four encouraging remarks and “pats on the back.”

Many sports parents focus too much on criticism, constantly correcting their children and showing them

what they believe is the “right” way to do something instead of just letting their children enjoy the thrill of playing. Teaching skills certainly is OK, but parents must remember that children learn better from positive than negative criticism. Parents also need to remember that put-downs, insults, comparisons and sarcastic remarks have no place in their interactions with their children. Words such as “loser” or “clumsy” can be devastating to young children who are learning the various aspects of playing sports.

When parents focus on positive interactions with their sports-playing children, they help their youngsters see themselves as winners, regardless of athletic skills or team standings. Parents must minimize criticism and seize every opportunity to smother their children with encouragement and positives so that when inevitable disappointments or mistakes occur in a game or practice, the children will have the self-confidence to handle them.

## ■ **Remember to Laugh**

All parents and guardians of youth league players need to make sure their sports-playing children see the lighter side of sports and not get weighted down with self-imposed pressure. Parents must try to prevent their children from placing too much pressure on themselves and help them keep their sports experience as light and humorous as they can. Parents need to remind themselves and their children that life goes on after youth sports. Parents who take the whole youth sports experience too seriously convey this seriousness to their children, which then is transferred into undue pressure on their children.

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## ■ Step Into Their Shoes

All parents and guardians must remember that their children are just children, not small adults. Some parents have trouble remembering what being a child was like and get so wrapped up in the youth sports experience that they lose sight of what it is all about, which should be the children. If parents really want to make youth sports a positive experience, they must make the effort to let their children be children and remember to view youth sports through the eyes of children.

Parents also must remember that youth sports is not about winning, losing and standings, but rather it is about young children who are learning to play with other children, have fun and to take turns, and develop new skills. It is also about children learning to handle defeat, mistakes, pain, fear and disappointment, supported by understanding parents.

## ■ Notice and Praise Progress

All parents and guardians should help their children notice progress in themselves at every practice and game. When parents call attention to their children's progress, the children themselves will begin to notice and monitor their own progress. Too many children focus on their failures, rather than their successes, and are too preoccupied with comparing themselves to other athletes who they think are "better" than they are. Parents need to concentrate on every small step of progress with their children, getting their children to do the same.

## ■ Show Excitement

All parents and guardians should be enthusiastic in their encouragement and calm in their corrections. Parents need to make a "big deal" when giving en-

couragement and praise for positives and progress, and they must try to be calm when correcting mistakes.

When parents remain calm and try to help their children learn from their mistakes, their children are not as likely to be afraid of making mistakes. Youngsters need to feel assured that making mistakes is OK and to view mistakes as steppingstones for growth, rather than as examples of failure.

While parents praise their children's deeds, performances and efforts, they most importantly need to stress to their children that they are "good" kids who are "loved," regardless of wins or losses and the presence or absence of athletic skills.

Many parents and guardians live vicariously through their children, get too wrapped up in their children's sporting experiences and have unrealistic expectations of their children. Unfortunately, children struggle to meet those expectations, often falling short and feeling bad. Too many parents believe that if their child makes an error, it reflects on them as parents, and if their child loses, they somehow feel that they lost.

In addition, too many parents tend to get too preoccupied with standings, playoffs, tournaments, all-star teams, etc., forgetting that their children care more about playing the game than the end product. Because parents sometimes are too concerned with the end product, they take losses harder than their children.

Parents must not lose sight of what youth sports is all about and work hard to keep sports fun for their children because those are the times we all want them to remember. Sports should offer parents an opportunity to give unqualified, uncensored and absolute approval to their child just for participating in an activity.