

KEEPING THE FUN IN CHILDREN'S SPORTS

David Lowenstein, Ph.D.
Psychologist

The number of youths that are participating in sport is on the rise (Singer, & Gerson, 2002). Children as young as five are participating in one or more sports offered in a variety of organized programs available at the club, community, and school levels for youths. Adults who are involved in youth sports as coaches, officials, league administrators, and educators should understand that the main reason children are drawn to sport is to have fun. Therefore, adults should try to structure the sport environment so that the children enjoy their sport experience. For example, allow children to choose which position they would like to play during a practice or to play without keeping score. Also teaching the basic fundamental skills through non-competitive game - like drills - is recommended.

Although winning and losing is part of organized sport, a focusing on outcomes rather than performance can be detrimental. When children lose, some may feel like a failure and perceive themselves to have less ability than others. Children should be told that their effort during practice and/or competition is under their control and that they do not have to win in order to have a successful performance. Coaches and parents need to help children learn that the outcome is not the most important thing.

Adults should help children realize that personal achievements and the child's individual effort are more important than the outcome. High effort and the accomplishment of personal goals can provide a sense of success for the child. In order to help children cope with losing, parents and coaches need to focus their attention on other aspects of the competition instead of just the outcome. Helping children develop a positive self-concept and self-confidence is very important. After youngsters sometimes do lose, they need to be reassured that they are not less important and that it is their effort and personal achievements that are most important. After a competition, instead of talking to young athletes about what went wrong in the game, communicate what was done right. If a softball team loses but had no base running mistakes, the youngsters should be complimented on their base running. Telling children what they did right will enhance their self-confidence and motivate them to work for improvements.

Coaches should always treat all athletes equally. If a child is ignored by the coach or does not play a lot, their self-confidence will most likely go down. Every child needs to be given equal attention and playing time to decrease their feelings of inadequacy. The feeling of inadequacy can result in a low level of effort for a game and can eventually lead to the child dropping out of the sport.

With youth sport becoming increasingly popular, coaches and parents need to help children learn how to deal with a loss in a way that self-confidence does not suffer. By focusing on the effort displayed and personal achievements instead of outcomes, children will learn that hard work and determination will help them to eventually create the outcomes that they want. Finally, remember

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to treat each child equally and make sure that children are having fun. Efforts by adults designed to help children to enjoy their sport participation will help to keep kids in sport longer.

BULLET POINTS FOR YOUTH & SPORTS

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- coaches should always treat all athletes equally
- efforts by adults designed to help children to enjoy their sport participation will help to keep kids in sport longer