

Recommendations For Parents of Athletes

by TC North, Ph.D.

Parents want the absolute best for their children. This is especially true of organized youth and high school sports, *where* parents love to see their children do well and win. I have discovered that loving, well-meaning parents can sometimes behave in a manner that can be a detriment to the parent/child relationship. Extreme situations that I have witnessed can cause irreparable damage.

For more than a decade, I have consulted with athletes in elementary through college, Olympians and professionals. In sports, and other areas where children and teenagers participate competitively, it is important for these youths to learn personal and team success strategies. The following are guidelines for parents and young athletes to consider for maximizing the enjoyment and benefit of organized sports. However, since all family situations are different, please consider these as “guidelines” and not rules.

SUPPORT YOUR CHILDREN

Give children unconditional love whether they win or lose! This will help your child understand that he/she is lovable and has value independent of the outcome of competition. Emphasize and reward fun.

Support skill development, cooperation, competition, self-discipline and commitment; rather than winning. Show interest in your child’s participation by attending competitions, transporting your child to practices and asking questions about their enjoyment and what they are learning. Avoid being highly emotional about the outcome of the competition.

Let your child’s sport be your child’s challenge and success, not yours. Assist your child in setting realistic and challenging goals in participation rather than focusing on whether they win or lose. These goals must be your child’s goals, not yours. Help your child understand success and disappointment and to learn from both. Help your children to develop the mastery and love of sports for a lifetime. Help your child develop positive, constructive personal success strategies through sports participation a transferable life skill.

Sports are a great opportunity for greater independence. Participation in sports is an independent step for kids. Your attitude influences how your child feels during and after a competition. Share your child’s joys, be empathetic with your child’s frustrations and losses, and encourage your child to keep learning. Allow your child to experience and process the feelings of winning and losing without imposing your feelings; try to not become overly emotionally involved. When you child loses a competition and experiences an upset parent, this may cause the child to feel guilty. While watching your child compete, always look upbeat. As part of your child’s maturation process, allow your child to struggle a little to solve his/her own problems.

Use positive communications with your child. Use of threats, sarcasm, fear, or other negative approaches erodes your child's self-esteem and provokes a desire to rebel against you. Be honest with your praise.

When your child feels successful, share the joy, when your child is disappointed, be supportive. Always compare your child's development to himself or herself, not to other children. Please do not do or say anything that will cause your child to think less of him/herself, or of you.

SUPPORT COACHES

Your child needs you to be the parent. Let the coach do the coaching. Give the coach and the team your time and support. Parents please do not criticize coaches, officials or other athletes! This will often embarrass your child and may compromise their respect for you. Communicate with the coach about your child and listen to what the coach learns about your child that can help you. Ask for a periodic update on your child's progress to be done at a mutually convenient time. If your child's behavior is unacceptable during practice or competitions, ask the coach how you can help to resolve this.

PARENTS HAVE FUN

Enjoy competitions whether your child wins or loses. Enjoy socializing with other parents at sporting events. This can be more fun for you and your child will not have to be as concerned about your enjoyment. Do not make your child feel guilty for the time, energy and money you are spending. However, it is fair to have participation guidelines that your child needs to meet in order for you to continue to pay for the child's sports (e.g., going to practices.)

It is natural for all parents to want their child to succeed in what ever they do. However, with a parents' overemphasis on wanting their children to be "winners", children get the message that "losing" is bad. Despite a parent's best intentions, one can end up hurting your relationship with your child. Following the above guidelines can help both you and your child get the most enjoyment out of sports competition while maintaining, and even strengthening your relationship.

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