



be a better sports parent

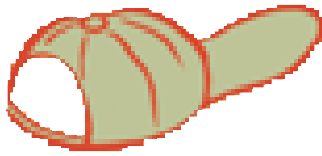
While you may be your child's number-one fan, make sure your behavior on the sidelines doesn't border on fanatic.

Here, the rules every mom and dad should follow.

BY HANNAH STORM

It's that time of year again—homework, car pools and, of course, sports. If your family is like mine, you're probably headed back to the field to cheer on your kid's games and practices. As a mom of three active girls, I've seen how great organized sports can be, helping kids learn cooperation, discipline and respect while also encouraging lifelong exercise habits. But I've also seen how even the most well-meaning parents can undermine the many benefits that sports have to offer.

Illustration: Leah Corman



WINNING REALLY ISN'T EVERYTHING. MOST KIDS WOULD RATHER PLAY ON A LOSING TEAM THAN HAVE TO SIT ON THE BENCH OF ONE THAT WINS ALL THE TIME.

Yelling advice from the stands, challenging coaches or referees, or putting too much emphasis on winning isn't the support your child needs. The simple golden rule in youth athletics: Make it fun. As I learned while researching my book *Go Girl! Raising Healthy, Confident and Successful Girls through Sports* (Sourcebooks), as many as 70 percent of kids quit organized sports by the age of 15. And one of the top reasons why is they weren't having fun, according to a nationwide survey by the Youth Sports Institute at Michigan State University.

And after two decades as a sportscaster covering the best athletes in the world, and more recently as an anchor on CBS's *The Early Show*, I can attest to the fact that even the most elite sports stars play for the love of the game—and so should your child. Follow these tips to nurture that passion without putting on pressure.

Redefine winning and losing.

A few years back I enthusiastically took my four-year-old to her first team soccer game. We were both so excited—after all, I loved soccer as a kid. When we got to the field, the coach asked the preschoolers to “take a knee” and huddle right up. Then he told them they were there to beat the other team and win! These little kids didn't even know what a goal was, much less which one was theirs! While it's natural for kids to become more competitive as they get older, when they're little, it's more important that they simply be participating than winning. Indeed, several studies have shown that kids would rather play on a losing team than sit on the bench of one that wins all the time.

What's more, your child learns lessons when his team loses a game—like how to give a strong effort, show grace in defeat and overcome setbacks—that are just as valuable to his growth as winning. Kids seem to have an inherent understanding that there are other priorities in playing sports: One national study found that among girls ages 10 to 18, winning wasn't even mentioned as one of the top 10 reasons they played sports, and for boys it ranked only number seven. Also, when these same kids were asked what they would change about youth sports, they overwhelmingly stated they wanted to see less emphasis on winning.

Help your child set realistic goals.

Your child has a lot less control over the final outcome of a game than she does over maximizing her individual potential. To help her keep a healthy perspective, encourage her to set goals that have some wiggle room. For instance, instead of, “I'm going to make every free throw I take,” have her aim at shooting 70 percent in practices and 65 percent in games. Make sure goals match your child's age and skill level. They might include reaching base at least twice in a baseball game or getting in three out of four first serves in a tennis match. With my daughters, rather than asking, “Did you win?” or “How many points did you score?,” I'll ask “Did you try



Cheer, don't coach

Last summer I was at the tennis courts with a few other parents watching our kids take lessons and do drills. I had to chuckle as my friend's husband kept yelling out instructions to his kids and then, after observing my silence, proceeded to yell out tips to my daughter. “Ellery, hold your racket back!” She turned around and shot him a look that said, “Who are you?”

Indeed, while you may think you know something about your child's sport, save the instructions for some one-on-one time in the backyard, if you must impart your wisdom at all. Leave the coaching to the coaches, even if you think you know more than they do. Drilling last-minute pointers on your way to the game or yelling out advice from the sidelines not only confuses kids, but it's also futile. Once on the field, players are too busy to process and integrate the many tips flying at them. Often they don't even hear you, so limit your shouts to a few heartfelt hoorays.

your hardest?" or "Did you do something better today than yesterday?" That way, even when the scoreboard isn't in their favor, they can still walk off the field feeling accomplished.

Show up for practice.

Every parent is time-crunched, but try to make room in your schedule to attend at least a few of your child's team practices as well as the big games. This sends the message that you value his hard work and appreciate the process of playing sports, not just the outcomes. This also gives you a chance to see if the sports program is run properly, such as whether the coach lets everyone play, how he interacts with the team, and whether everyone is having a good time.

KIDS MODEL SPORTSMANSHIP FROM YOU. HOW CAN YOU EXPECT THEM TO SHOW RESPECT FOR PLAYERS AND OFFICIALS IF YOU DON'T?

Get your head in the game.

Learn the rules, since youth guidelines often vary from the way pros play. And when you show up, pay attention, avoiding the temptation to chat it up with other parents on the sidelines. That way, when your kid says, "Mom, did you see the pass I made?" you'll be able to offer specific praise and feedback. You might say, for instance, "Weaving the ball between those two defenders really helped set up your team to score."

Keep it positive.

As part of a special feature for The Early Show, I recently attended a soccer camp with my 8-year-old. She routinely beats me badly when we play in our backyard, so I hoped to pick up a few pointers from the woman running the camp, Olympic gold medalist Kristine Lilly. It happened that the best female soccer player in the world, Mia Hamm, was also there that day as a guest coach. I've interviewed her several times, but took the chance to ask her what was the most important thing her parents did to help her succeed in sports. Hamm said it was giving her hugs! Kristine Lilly also chimed in with this advice: What really matters to kids is a pat on the back and the words "Nice job, I'm proud of you."

Mind your manners.

Sports create so much emotion, and we've all heard of incidents in which parents go to the extreme—like the New Jersey soccer mom who allegedly attacked a 17-year-old player on the team opposing her daughter's, or the Massachusetts father convicted of beating

another dad to death in a fistfight over rough play during their sons' hockey practice. Thankfully, such violence is rare, but parents on the sidelines still indulge in plenty of appalling behavior.

No matter how heated a game gets, never yell at your child, other players, the coach or referees. Remember, your kids model their sportsmanship from you. How can you expect them to show respect for opposing players and officials if you don't? If you disagree with the coach's decision, speak to him after the game once you've calmed down and can talk without your child present. Also, never approach a game official: Leave it up to the coach to sort out any problems with the officiating with the referees. And it goes without saying, but never use profanity in a youth sports setting.

Applaud good play— no matter who makes it.

Focusing solely on your child sends the message that you're more interested in grooming the next sports phenom than encouraging team effort. Compliment other players as they get substituted in and out of the game. A great move by the opposing team deserves a cheer, not boos or taunts. And show respect for the other team's players, parents and coaches by welcoming them onto your field and congratulating them after a good game.

Mix things up.

During my 20 years of covering both college and professional sports and hosting four Olympic Games, I learned one irrefutable fact: My children and yours have a minuscule chance at a college sports scholarship, much less a pro career. Elite athletes are few and far between, and while your child may be talented, he'll most likely go on to do something else wonderful with his life. Nurture a well-rounded child by supporting his interests in several extracurricular activities. I've interviewed the greatest athletes in the world, and even they played multiple sports in high school. For example, my friend and former New York Giants quarterback Phil Simms was a much better baseball player than football player in high school, even though he went on to become a Super Bowl MVP.

Unfortunately, these days parents tend to be overzealous and a bit unrealistic, pushing their kids to win medals or trophies at one sport in particular, hoping they'll become the next Michael Jordan or Michelle Kwan. Specializing in one or two sports all year can cause burnout and injury, putting too much stress on certain body parts. What's more, by not participating in a mix of activities, these kids miss out on learning a variety of physical skills and meeting different groups of people. Your child's chance of going pro may be tiny, but he does have a 100 per cent chance of growing up to love sports and physical activity with your winning support along the way. **FC**



For more helpful tips on kids and sports, catch "In the Family Circle" on CBS TV's *The Early Show* the week of September 26.