



THE FAMILY TREE

On Your Mark...Get Set....Go!

Parents, take a deep breath and get ready! Summer is nearly over and our kids will be back to school before you know it. For many of us that means an endless round of transporting children from one after-school event to another. I bet you've already signed your child up for a sports activity, haven't you? And you plan to go to as many events as you can to cheer for your child and his team. Good all American family fun? It should be. It once was. Children play sports for fun. And it *used to be* that intertwined with just plain fun they would learn good sportsmanship, team effort, and healthy competition.

Many parents are pushing their children to participate in team sports at younger and younger ages. Three, four and five years olds are engaged in sports "clinics" that were once designed mainly for fun and are now moving towards aggressive competition. Coaches want to win to such a degree that teams are sometimes "stacked" so that the average little player doesn't get to play. And parents can become so personally involved that they lose sight of the fact that tiny people are doing the best they can and are not equipped for such intense competitiveness, but only want to *play*.

Nearly six million high school boys and girls take part in team sports, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics. Their participation gives them the positive benefits of improved health, fitness and social skills. But the vast majority of the millions of children involved in sports activities drop out by the age of 13.

Did you know that research tells us that parents play an important role on a child's decision to stay in sports? And recently, the trend has been an increasing number of incidents of violence and verbal abuse by parents at sporting events, which means there is an increasing number of embarrassed children who no longer want to play. Across the country, parents have even been arrested for assaulting referees, coaches and players. These are behaviors that we would not only never allow our children to get away with, but nowhere else would we as parents be willing to model such behaviors in front of our kids. At sporting events, "Parents are teaching their children it is OK to cheat, to taunt other players on the other team, to play when they are injured, and to criticize the officials. We have seen too much of parents fighting in the stands, fighting with their child's coach, fighting with their own child because the child isn't living up to their expectations." (from ***Why Johnny Hates Sports*** by Fred Engh).

Have you ever found yourself getting upset when your child made a mistake on the playing field? Do you praise him or her for just being a part of the team and doing their best? Are your expectations of your child's ability reasonable and realistic? Is it all right with you if your child just has fun playing games or are you looking for a super star and a college scholarship from a 9 year old on the school soccer team? Is it his dream or yours? And if he's under such pressure today, will he even want to play tomorrow? Will he lose an important part of his childhood experience because you lose control on the sidelines of the playing field? Probably none of these things apply to you. But even if one does, then you are in danger of becoming a part of the growing statistics documenting disorderly conduct at children's games. Youth sporting events are supposed to be fun, but many parents don't realize that their actions on the sidelines, whether verbal or nonverbal, have a lasting emotional effect on their children.

There is a real need to reduce and eliminate violence, negative talking and taunting on the sidelines; to improve communication between coaches, officials, parents and children; and to put fun and learning back into sports for youth and children. All the yelling in the world will never change a team's play, a child's play, a referee's decision or the outcome of a game. Let's give our children a consistent picture of how to live and behave and how to play, a picture that does not hurt or embarrass them or us.

Here are some tips for good parent conduct at sporting events. We think you will find them helpful.

1. Never force a child to participate in sports.
2. Remember that children want to have fun and the game is for them, not adults.
3. Let the coach know if there is any physical problem or ailment that may affect the safety of either your child or someone else's child.
4. Learn the rules of the game and the policies of the league to better understand the referee's decisions.
5. Be a positive role model for your child by showing respect and courtesy for all players, coaches, officials and spectators at every sporting event.
6. Do not engage in any unsportsmanlike conduct such as booing, taunting, refusing to shake hands, or using profane language.
7. Do not encourage any behavior that endangers the health or well being of any player.
8. Teach your child to play by the rules and to resolve conflict without violence.
9. Require your child to treat other players, coaches and officials with respect regardless of race, creed, color, sex or ability.
10. Teach your child that doing his best is more important than winning, so that he will never feel defeated by the outcome of a game or his own performance.
11. Praise your child for competing fairly and trying hard, and make your child feel like a winner every time.
12. Do not ridicule or yell at your child or other players for making a mistake or losing a competition.
13. Emphasize skill development and practices and how they will benefit your child

- rather than winning. De-emphasize competition in the lower age groups.
14. Promote the emotional and physical well being of the young athletes ahead of any personal desire you may have for your child to win.
 15. Respect the officials and their authority during games and never question, discuss or confront coaches on the game field.
 16. Demand a sports environment for your child that is free of drugs, tobacco and alcohol, and refrain from using them at sporting events.
 17. Do not coach your child or other players during games and practices unless you are an official coach.