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Creating Positive Experiences for Youths: What Parents Can Do to Help

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Go to any youth sport event and you will observe kids engaging in the sport, coaches and officials facilitating the event, and parents watching from the sidelines, cheering on their children, assisting the coaches, handing out programs or selling paraphernalia to raise money for the club. However, the role of parents in the sport experiences of youths is often overlooked. Without guidance, some parents negatively impact their child's experience by not becoming involved, putting too much pressure on their child to excel in athletics, becoming over-involved in coaching and planning decisions, or by engaging in deviant behavior. So what role should parents play in youth sports? This article will attempt to highlight several ways that parents can be appropriately involved in the youth sport experience.

with personal improvement and intrinsic joy from the activity, and not just from winning games.

Create a climate that emphasizes learning and improvement

One way to help your child have a positive experience in sport is to create the appropriate climate that will support or create positive experiences. Creating a climate that emphasizes learning and mastery of skills has been found to be associated with greater effort, more adaptive practice strategies, and more enjoyment (Roberts, 2001). Parents can do this by evaluating and rewarding their child's effort in games and practices. Following a game, a father could approach his daughter and congratulate her on how hard she hustled during the soccer game that day. Or a mother could tell her son how proud she is that he improved two seconds in the 100 freestyle. She might also emphasize that his improvement was related to his hard work in practice and his learning how to do flip turns. Therefore, the child learns to define success as a function of his/her own effort, an aspect she/he can control. This turns the focus away from an aspect that the child cannot control which is the win/loss record. A child has no control over how the rest of his/her team will perform

Emphasize fun

The first thing to remember is why children want to play sports. Research has continually found that the most prevalent reason why youths participate in sport is to have fun. Therefore, it is important to encourage your child to have fun and to enjoy his/her participation. But what is fun for children? In recent studies, athletes from 8 to 15 years of age identified learning skills and enhancing personal performance, socializing with others, and experiencing optimal challenge as key characteristics of fun in sport (Harris & Ewing, 1992; Shi & Ewing, 1993). The next time you go to a youth sport game look for what makes your child excited about playing sports. At a recent soccer game, I noticed the excitement on a 6-year-old girl's face as she was kicking the ball down the field. She did not make a goal but she was able to kick the ball and move the ball down the field and she was ecstatic. Fun is not only experienced by children just learning to do skills but also by adolescents who excel in their sport. For example, I have seen 16-year-old swimmers who have experienced joy in their sport from overcoming a challenging opponent or achieving a personal best time. Therefore, as parents we should make sure fun is associated

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or the ability level of the opponent. The only aspect of the game which children can control is their own effort and their approach to the sport. Talking to children after games may also help them develop a better sense of how to define their success through effort. Instead of focusing on the win/loss, children should be encouraged to think about how they performed on the field: What they did well, where they need to improve, what was enjoyable about the game regardless of the outcome. Children also need to be taught that mistakes and failure are opportunities for learning. So rather than dwelling on the mistake, it is important to glean the necessary lesson (hopefully with the help of the coach) that will prevent the mistake from happening again. With this perspective, children will be able to maintain a higher level of motivation and enjoyment while engaging in sport rather than experiencing added stress and fear related to losing and making mistakes.

Maintain realistic expectations

We all want our children to excel in every activity in which they engage. However, we are not always sure about what to expect. If a child is not improving at the same rate as other children, it is easy to blame poor coaching or lack of effort on the child's part for the lower level of ability. However, it is much harder to be objective about the child's ability. It could be that the other children have been involved in sports longer, that the child is late maturing and will need more time to develop motor coordination and size, or maybe this is not the activity for the child. The reverse is true as well. Parents who see their children excel begin to develop expectations. Could my child's team win the conference championship? Could my child get a college scholarship? Could my child be the next Mia Hamm? In an effort to support their child, parents may further encourage participation in isolation of other activities. They may continually push their child to practice more or stay focused and may become easily frustrated at set backs or blame others when their child does not excel. Therefore, it is important to have realistic expectations about what the child can truly accomplish. It is important to ask whether the child is capable of achieving at this level. Talk with the coach about her/his expectations for your child. Also begin to question your motives. Are you living vicariously through your child? Is excelling in athletics your goal or your child's goal? Researchers who have talked with young elite athletes have found that parents' negative evaluative and affective reactions to poor performance, exaggerated importance of good performance, or lack of support has been linked to sources of competitive stress for the athletes (Scanlan & Lewthwaite, 1984; Scanlan, Stein, & Ravizza, 1991). Additionally, excessive parental pressure has been linked to athlete's perceived negative affect (Hellstedt, 1990). To avoid placing excessive pressure on a child, it is important to be realistic about what they can and want to accomplish in the sport. It is also important to realize that children need a balanced life. They need a myriad of

experiences in which to discover who they are and what they want to become. Isolating them as an athlete will not be beneficial.

Support your child

Your child needs you to be there for him/her when good things and bad things happen in sport. Therefore, it is important that parents provide emotional support for their athletic child during and following the game. The child has a coach to go to for skill improvement and strategy development but parents are often key in providing emotional support for their child. In fact, young children (10 and under) determine their self-worth and physical competence from feedback (praise and criticism) they receive from their parents and coaches (Harter, 1999; Horn & Hasbrook, 1986).

Support your coach

Coaches have many responsibilities-from coaching your children to maintaining the facility to organizing competitions. Parents can be a coach's greatest ally in making the youth sport experience a good one for all children. Youth sport coaches are always looking for volunteers to hand out programs, usher kids to their events, time events, keep score, etc. Coaches may also appreciate help organizing social activities for the children. For example, parents can organize spaghetti dinners the night before competitions or bring food for teams to eat following the game. The important piece is to ask how you can help. Coaches also need to be supported during practices and games. It is important that you, as parents, respect the decisions made by the coach, avoid coaching from the sidelines, and resist the urge to critique a coach until after the game. If you do have questions or concerns about coaching methods, it is always important to first understand, from the coach's perspective, why a decision was made. Rather than starting a conversation with a coach by saying, "You know I did not agree with the decision you made, I think you should have done this. . .", it is more appropriate to begin by saying, "I am not sure I understood your reasoning behind that last decision. Could you explain it to me?" After understanding the coach's rationale you may still have a disagreement and it is important to acknowledge this in a calm and logical way. For example, "I understand your reason for making that decision but I think that this decision would be more appropriate for the following reasons . . .". Most coaches appreciate the feedback as long as it is presented in a respectful manner.

Support the competitive spirit

For many people, the first thing that comes into their mind when they think of competition is winning. "Who won the game?" is usually the first thing we ask our children. A clear example is the following quote from a soccer parent (his child is in the 7-8 year old division), "I don't care how it gets in



there [the goal], I will take the win." However, sport is about more than winning, it is about learning, improving, and, most importantly, challenging ourselves to reach a higher level through our own hard work and effort. Competition helps us achieve this goal. By competing against another individual or team, athletes are pushed toward greater levels of excellence, excellence that could not otherwise be achieved without the opponent. This competitive spirit is what makes sport so exciting for both the participants and the viewers. Therefore, it is important to support this competitive spirit by encouraging good sport conduct among all those involved in sport. As parents, this means encouraging all children to excel (your child cannot reach excellence unless pushed to excel by the opponent) and congratulating both teams for great plays and a good game. It also means understanding the rules of the game and encouraging your child to abide by them, supporting the decisions made by officials (they are right 98% of the time) and encouraging your child to respect the officials and their decisions. Finally, it means monitoring others to make sure they also maintain the spirit of the game (i.e., it may be necessary to talk to other parents on your own team about good sport conduct).

Manage your emotions

During any game, emotions can escalate to a point where a parent yells at an official, coach, or even worse, a child. This yelling not only portrays poor sportsmanship on the part of the parent, it can hurt the child as well. Many youth sports teams have instituted rules where parents who act inappropriately are banned from games or their child is pulled from the game. Additionally, recent media coverage has brought to the forefront the violence in youth sports involving parents. For example, in Massachusetts, a father, who fatally beat another son's father at a hockey rink, was recently convicted of involuntary manslaughter. In California, a father attacked a high school football coach following a game. Additionally, the National Association of Sports Officials documents receiving about three calls a week from officials who were assaulted by parents or spectators. Therefore, it is important that individuals learn to manage their emotions during athletic competitions. To help manage frustration, it is important to adhere to the following three steps. The first step is to reduce the possibility of an outburst or retaliation through distraction by taking a few deep breaths, by counting to ten, or by taking a walk to the parking lot. The next step is to alleviate the frustration by understanding where it originates. For example, if you are upset at an official's call, try to understand the situation from the official's perspective. Was the official purposely making a bad call? Could it be that based on the information from his/her perspective he/she made the best call possible? Could it be that you did not have the best vantage point to make an accurate call? Or that you may have misinterpreted a rule of the game? If you decide that you cannot alleviate your frustration without talking to the official, it is important to remember the third step:

to treat others as you would like to be treated. So regardless of your frustration, it is important to treat everyone with respect while discussing a dispute calmly and rationally after the game.

Conclusion

Regardless of the sport or the competitive level of the athlete, parents can play a positive role. By considering the welfare of their child (not just their athletic identity), considering the opponent as someone else's child, and placing themselves in the shoes of coaches and officials, parents will find it easier to have a positive influence on the youth sport experience of their child. Hopefully, many of the strategies outlined in this article will lead parents in that direction.

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