



# SUCCESSFUL SPORTS PARENTING

## A Commonsense Approach to Some Challenging Issues

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### Real life issues:

*I am worried about my son. He seems to have gotten things out of perspective as far as sports are concerned. Although he's only thirteen years old, he's convinced that his future lies in college and professional sports. Nothing else seems to matter.*

*For two years all that my son has talked about is playing pee-wee football. He loves the game and watches the sport all the time on television. This year he finally was old enough to try out for a team. He just got cut and is really hurt. What can I do to cheer him up and show him there is a tomorrow?*

*I'm coaching a girls' softball team. My players are all average in ability, and some of them have relatively little talent. The problem I'm having is that every time we lose a game, their parents, in order to boost their morale, either blame it on poor coaching by me or on bad calls by the umpires. How can I get these kids to understand reality?*

*We screwed up and lost the state championship game. I'm so down and out that I'm ashamed to face anyone. My kids are getting too big for their britches. We're undefeated and the kids are so overconfident that they're getting obnoxious. How can I bring them down to earth?*

*My son hardly ever gets into games. He likes to play, but he's not very good. It seems like he's going to spend the whole season as a bench warmer. He's talking about quitting. Should I let him or not?*

*My eldest son has never had much athletic talent. His younger brother is terrific and is really in the limelight. I can see that it's causing problems between them and that the older boy is having trouble dealing with his brother's success. I feel like I need to do something about it.*

*I went out to watch my son's wrestling practice the other night. I was amazed to see what the coach was doing and saying to those kids. He's a real animal with a foul mouth. I don't want Steve exposed to a coach like that unless he changes. What should I do?*

*I'm the president of a youth basketball league. We're not having any problems with the kids or coaches, but the parents are another matter. They're yelling at officials and at their own kids, and the games are getting to be a real circus. If things don't get better, we may have to do something drastic.*

*My husband and I thought that sports would bring the family closer together. Instead, we're chasing all over, and we see less and less of each other. We never do anything as a family anymore, and this has gotten to be a year-round thing. I'm starting to feel that Bob and I are growing farther apart.*

### Helping Put Athletics in Perspective for Your Child

Sports are an important area in the lives of many youngsters, and for a small number, youth sports are the first phase of a journey that ends in a career in professional athletics. Perhaps you hope that your child is headed in this direction.



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To strive for high standards of athletic excellence is commendable. But parents and athletes alike must realize that the chances of actually becoming a professional are remote. Even if your child appears to be a gifted athlete, the odds are overwhelming. Given the reality of the situation, a career in professional sports or even participation at the elite college level is an unrealistic goal for the majority of young athletes. It is therefore important to impress upon youngsters that sports are but one part of their life. It is all too easy for youngsters and parents alike to harbor fantasies of turning pro and to sacrifice other areas of development in pursuit of that fabled status and its rewards of fame, money, and glory. It is not at all uncommon for athletes to become one-dimensional people. Putting young athletes on pedestals and granting them special favors may in the long run be a disservice to them. Be thankful if your youngster does have athletic ability, but at the same time help him or her to develop into a well-rounded person. As valuable as we believe athletics can be for developing youngsters, we do not believe spiritual enrichment, social and academic development, and quality of family life should suffer. Sports can offer both fun and fulfillment, but there is more to life than sports.

Perhaps the best advice we can give is to encourage your child to participate in sports if he or she wishes to, but at the same time do not allow the tail to wag the dog. Help your child to understand that sport participation is not an end in itself, but a means of achieving various goals. Teach your child to enjoy the process of participation for itself rather than to focus on such end-products as victories and trophies. Neither victory nor defeat should be blown out of proportion, and no parent should permit a child to define his or her self-worth purely on the basis of sport performance. By keeping sports in perspective, you can make it a source of personal and family growth.

## **Providing and Supporting Alternatives**

But there are two important instances in which sports are not an option in the child's life: One is when a child decides that he or she does not wish to participate; the other occurs when a child is prevented from participating.

We support the basic right of every child to participate in athletics. Sometimes, however, children make the decision not to play. When this happens many parents are confused and disappointed, particularly if they have looked forward to their child's involvement in sports. It is hard under these circumstances to respect a child's decision, but in many cases it is very important to do so.

Tell your child that you believe it's an important part of growing up to take responsibility for one's own decisions, but that you wish to understand the reasons why he or she doesn't want to play. You need to find out whether the child's decision is based on a lack of interest in the sport or whether it is based on other considerations. For example, some children would actually like to play but decide not to because they don't have confidence in their level of ability or in their acceptance by their teammates. Thus, the most important factor is to decide whether the child would actually like to play. If so, then you as a parent may be able to reassure and encourage your child to give it a try and see how things work out. You should point out to your young athlete that skill levels will increase through participation and that the job of the coach is to help team members become the very best athletes they can.

Sometimes a young athlete decides not to participate because of fear that he or she might let parents down or lose their approval by not performing well enough. If this is the case, you have a golden opportunity to deepen your relationship with your child by exploring his or her feelings and clarifying your own values and expectations. You must face head-on the concern that your child has and the extent to which it is based on reality. The fear may be based on the child's realistic perception of what you expect from him or her. If so,



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some adjustments in your own thinking may be important. Are you willing to accept your child for what he or she is? Can you love your little bench warmer? Can you be satisfied with your child merely striving to become the best he or she can be, not only in sports but in other activities? If so, and if you can communicate this honestly to your child, this lesson can contribute to lifelong growth.

## **What to Do If Your Youngster Wants to Quit**

At one time or another and for a variety of reasons, most athletes think about quitting. Sometimes a decision to quit comes as a shock to parents, but at other times the warning signs leading up to the decision are very clear.

What are the causes of dropping out of youth sports? In general, the reasons fall into two categories. The first category involves a shift in interests, especially in adolescents. Other involvements, such as a job, a boyfriend or girlfriend, or recreational pursuits, may leave little time for sport involvement. In such cases, a youngster may simply choose to set other priorities.

The second general set of reasons why youngsters drop out relate to negative sports experiences. Research conducted in the United States and Canada has shown that the following reasons often underlie a decision to drop out:

- Not getting to play
- Undesirable, abusive coaching practices
- An overemphasis on winning that creates stress and reduces fun
- Over-organization, excessive repetition, and regimentation leading to boredom
- Excessive fear of failure, including frustration or failure to achieve personal or team goals
- Mismatching relative to physical size and maturation

If the youngster has decided that other activities are more important, his or her priorities should be respected. However, it is wise to provide a reminder that a commitment has been made to the program and to teammates and that athletes owe it to themselves and to others to honor commitments and to finish out the season. This gives the youngster an opportunity to feel good about himself or herself by fulfilling the obligation through the rest of the season—even if the activity itself is no longer pleasurable.

If the decision to quit is based on one or more of the negative factors listed above, there is a legitimate problem. Again, it is very important that you listen to your child and offer understanding and support. Beyond that, you may discuss some ways to resolve the problems that are affecting the desire to participate. As a last resort you may wish to take some active steps to correct the difficulties. This way involves speaking to the coach or league administrators. In talking with your youngster, you should evaluate how intolerable the situation is to him or her and whether the problems can be worked out. In all but the most severe cases, you can point out that a commitment has been made, and you can encourage your youngster to finish out the season.

If the problems are sufficiently severe, the decision to drop out may be in the best interests of the child. In this case, you would want to communicate to your child that although it is important to live up to commitments, you understand that the principle is outweighed by the nature of the problems. If the child does drop out, there may be other opportunities to play in a sport program that doesn't have the negative factors that prompted the decision to quit.



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## What to Do If your Child Is Cut from the Team

Heartbreak can be experienced by both child and parent when youngsters are eliminated from sport participation. Surely not all children can be on the team of their choosing, but we believe that every youngster should have a chance to play. Prior to the age of fourteen, the practice of cutting children from sport programs is indefensible. At the high school level it is appropriate to have select leagues to allow gifted athletes to develop their skills. But even at this age, alternative programs should be available for less-talented youngsters who wish to play the sport.

The tragedy of cutting children from sport programs lies in the fact that those cut are almost always the least skilled or those who have discipline problems. It is precisely these children who are in need of an opportunity to grow through sports. Here again, we must choose between a professional model and one devoted to the development of children. Applying the professional model is certain to lead to a lot of disappointed children. As former basketball star Bill Russell described the world of professional sports, "Those who don't make the team get tossed out on the street. It is a very serious business." In choosing a program for your youngster, you should keep this in mind.

What should you do if your child is cut from a team? The first thing is to realize that whether or not your child shows it, he or she is likely to feel disappointed, rejected, and perhaps even humiliated. He or she needs your support at this very difficult time. You can give support by acknowledging the disappointment felt by the child. Do not tell the child not to be disappointed or make unrealistic excuses for why it happened. All people must learn to face disappointments in life. You can make this easier if you show that your love and esteem for him or her has not diminished.

In addition to communicating your understanding acceptance to the child and providing reassurance, you can help your child become involved in other programs or other activities. Help your child to investigate options in other programs in the same sport or in other sports. One child who was at first devastated by being cut from a peewee football team was helped by his parents to get involved in a soccer program and is now having a great time. Your child might also choose a non-athletic activity. If so, that decision should be supported.

Being cut from a team may be particularly painful at the high school level. Moreover, youngsters in this age range, particularly boys, may be unwilling to openly express the hurt they feel. Creating an atmosphere that will help your child explore feelings may help to ease the sense of rejection.

## When Injury Prevents Participation

A young athlete may be temporarily or permanently eliminated from a sport program because of an injury. This may be less painful to the athlete's self-esteem but can in many ways be just as frustrating. For example, a youngster with promising athletic ability can have future hopes dashed by a severe knee or back injury. Here again, parents must try to understand the feelings of frustration, to put up with occasional expressions of this frustration, and to support the youngster through a difficult period. Recognize also that depression, even if not openly expressed; may be reflected in loss of appetite, disturbed sleep patterns, or general apathy. If such symptoms continue or become severe, professional counseling should be pursued.

If a severe injury occurs to your young athlete, it is very important that he or she be seen by a sports medicine specialist. The possibilities of rehabilitation and complete recovery should not be ruled out without consulting an expert in the field. Sports medicine specialists are experienced in dealing with serious sports-related injuries. Most larger communities have specialized sports medicine clinics devoted to diagnosis, treatment, and



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rehabilitation.

## Helping Your Child Interpret Causes of Sport Outcomes

The judgments we make about the causes of events in our lives are of major importance. In understanding something that happens, we are often asked to decide how much the event was caused by us (factors within ourselves) and how much it was caused by factors outside our control, such as chance or the actions of others. Sport experience can be an important training ground in forming accurate causal perceptions.

As a parent you can objectively point out what you perceive to be the cause of your child's sport experiences. This can help a youngster form a more realistic way of looking at things. As adults we have our own biases in perception, but we can try to be as objective as possible. For example, if your child blames a loss on a bad call by an umpire or a referee, you might point out that your child did not play up to his or her capabilities. This helps the child evaluate his or her own role in the outcome. On the other hand, a low self-esteem youngster who blames himself or herself for a defeat may be helped if you point out that the opponent was highly talented and played well that day.

Some parents are quick to protect or comfort their youngsters by blaming others for losses and failures. It may be the coach, teammates, bad luck, or fate. Their children are never faulted for failure to achieve, for it is always due to some external cause. Parents who express such explanations may be doing their children a disservice by communicating that they are never responsible for what happens to them. Such children may begin to view the causes of what happens to them as beyond their control. As a result, they may lose sight of the responsibility they have for their own behavior and its consequences.

When parents do help their children to accurately interpret the causes of events, children can develop a balanced perception of reality. This is another way that sports can serve as a valuable arena for learning lessons and acquiring skills that can be applied throughout life. As a parent you can participate in and foster the process.

## What to do after a Tough Loss

Children differ a great deal in their reactions to a loss. Some may be barely affected or may forget the loss almost immediately. Others will be virtually devastated by the loss and may be low spirited for days.

If your young athlete feels down about a loss, you should give him or her a chance to feel and express the emotion. If, for example, the youngster cries after a loss, this is a realistic expression of depth of feeling and should be accepted as such. At a time like this, a child needs parental support rather than a command to "get over it."

Respect and acceptance of feelings demand that you not deny or distort what the child is feeling. If your son has struck out three times and made an error that lost the game, he does not want to hear, "You did great." He knows he didn't, and your attempts to comfort him may well come through as a lack of understanding about how he feels. Likewise, it is not very helpful to tell a child that, "It doesn't matter." The fact is that at that moment it does matter a great deal!

Is there anything you can do to make your child feel better without distorting reality? One thing you can do is to point out something positive that was achieved during the contest. A wrestling match may have been lost, but some good takedowns and escapes may have been executed. By emphasizing these accomplishments, you can keep your child from painting a totally negative picture.

Another thing that you can do is to look to the future rather than dwell on the loss. Nothing can be done about



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the loss, so the most productive view is to focus on what has been learned and can be used again.

Above all, don't blame or get angry with the child. He or she feels bad enough already. Support and understanding, sincerely given, will be very helpful at this time.

Perhaps your young athlete plays on a team that loses regularly. If winning is the only goal that is set, your child will be constantly frustrated. If, on the other hand, scaled-down goals are developed, a sense of accomplishment can result as improvement occurs. Knowledgeable coaches often use individual and team goal setting to create a kind of game within the game. For example, the team objective may be to reduce the number of errors, strikeouts, fumbles, or penalties in the next few games. Even if games are lost, children can experience a sense of accomplishment as they attain modified goals.

You can promote similar goal setting on an individual level with your child. In addition to performance goals, you can place emphasis on such important ingredients to success as effort and teamwork. Many a team and many an athlete have been helped to feel as if progress was made toward a larger objective when they succeeded at smaller sub-goals.

## **How to Deal with a Winning Streak**

Strangely enough, winning can create its own problems. One is overconfidence and the well-known swelled head. Unless carefully handled, winning teams can become abusive to teams they defeat. And a long winning streak can provide pressures of its own when the emphasis becomes the outcome rather than the process of competition.

Youngsters should be allowed to feel good about winning—they've earned it. But they should also be reminded to show consideration for their opponents. Emphasize that it never feels good to lose and there is no justification for rubbing it in. Instead, tell youngsters to be gracious winners and to give their opponents a pat on the back or a handshake in a sincere manner.

During a winning streak, most athletes experience not only the pleasure of winning but also the increased pressure not to lose. An additional danger is that if a team wins too regularly and too easily, they may get bored and take their success for granted. A focus on effort and continued improvement can provide an additional and meaningful goal for youngsters. It is important to communicate that you expect continual striving for improvement. Again, winning is to be sought, but it is not the only objective. Finally, don't allow your youngster to rest on past laurels. Point out that past success does not constitute a guarantee of no mistakes or losses in the future.

## **Parental Behavior at Practices and Games**

*In Miami, Florida, directors of a youth baseball program found it necessary to move games to mid-afternoon and to prohibit parents from attending them because of repeated unruly behavior on the part of spectators, including profanity and the physical assault of an umpire.*

*Near Hilo, Hawaii, a dispute among the parents of rival pee-wee football teams spilled over into a full-scale riot after the game. A group of parents from one town later invaded the other community with lead pipes and baseball bats, inflicting severe damage and injury.*

Much of the job of being a youth sport parent comes from watching your child practice and compete in games and meets. Most children also appreciate their parents' interest and attendance. What youngster isn't bolstered



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by looking up into the stands and seeing Mom and Dad in rapt attention?

It is most unfortunate when incidents such as those described above occur. Fortunately, the vast majority of parents behave appropriately at youth sport events. But the minority who misbehave can spoil it for, all the rest. It takes only a few inconsiderate parents to turn what should be a pleasant atmosphere into one that is stressful for all concerned.

Program directors, game officials, and the participants themselves have a right to demand that spectators observe certain standards of behavior. Here are some minimum standards of behavior:

- Parents should not yell instructions or criticisms to the children.
- Parents should make no derogatory comments to athletes, parents of the opposing team, officials, or league administrators.
- Parents should not interfere with their children's coach. They must be willing to relinquish the responsibility for their child to the coach for the duration of the contest.

Although they may appear totally engrossed in the game, many children are very sensitive to what is being said from the stands. Laughing or poking fun at an athlete who makes a mistake may inject some humor for the spectators but it may be heartbreaking for the child. Likewise, "bench jockeying," or attempts to rattle the opposition, is inappropriate at the youth sport level. Indeed, one can question whether such actions are in good taste at any level.

It is easy to get caught up in the action of the game and to suddenly find yourself verbally participating. Parents should never shout criticism or instruction at their children. This applies also to teammates and opponents. If you wish to shout encouragement or praise, make sure that your positive approach extends to the other players as well. But again, codes of sportsmanship dictate that recognition be given to opponents as well. There is no reason why a great play or a great effort made by the opposition should not also be appreciated.

Children are not the only ones who are the targets of barbed comments. Some onlookers seem to forget that youth sport programs could not exist without volunteer coaches and officials who give unselfishly of their time and energy. They deserve your respect and support, and they should be treated with dignity. As tempting as it may be, it is simply not appropriate to second-guess, yell instructions, or disagree with decisions made by the coach.

It is as American as apple pie to boo and criticize judgments made by officials. But such behavior has no place at the youth sport level. Officials are human, and they make mistakes. Like your child, they are amateurs. The officials are honestly trying to do their best. Booming their decisions will not change the outcome or improve the situation in any way. Moreover, parents who "get on" officials provide very poor models for their children, and such behavior can prove highly embarrassing to the young athlete.

Good sportsmanship among spectators is a goal worth working for. We believe that it is the job of parents not only to keep tabs on their own behavior, but also to remind others, if necessary. Coaches and officials have a big enough job without having to police spectators. The rule of thumb for all spectators is that nothing in their actions should interfere with any child's enjoyment of the sport.

## Getting Along with Your Child's Coach



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Some of the knottiest problems that arise in youth sports involve the relationship between parents and coaches. Any time another significant adult enters your child's world, it may require an adjustment on your part. You must also be willing to give up some control and influence in an important area of your youngster's life. Taking a backseat to another adult, even temporarily, isn't always easy. But things can get even more complicated and challenging if you find yourself at odds with coaching decisions that affect your young athlete.

Your responsibility for what happens to your child does not stop when he or she enters a sport program or joins a team. As a parent you have every right to be involved in and to look out for your child's welfare. The tricky part comes in deciding how and to what extent it is appropriate for you to be involved. When does appropriate concern become interference and meddling? At what point must your understandable concern with the happiness and well-being of your child be tempered by respect and understanding for the role of the coach? What should you do if issues like the following crop up?

- Your child isn't getting to play enough during games.
- Your child is not playing the position best suited to his or her talents.
- The coach is mistreating youngsters either verbally or physically.
- The coach is engaging in inappropriate behavior, such as bad language or hazing of officials or opponents.
- The coach is using technically incorrect, questionable, or possibly dangerous coaching methods.
- The coach is demanding too much time or commitment from the youngsters, such that the sport is interfering with other activities.
- The coach is losing perspective of the purpose of youth sports and seems preoccupied with winning, thus putting additional stress on athletes.

Because each situation is somewhat unique, there are no definitive answers that apply to every case. Nonetheless, there are some general principles that can be helpful in approaching and resolving such problems.

When incidents such as those listed above occur, it would be a mistake not to consider them problems. Perhaps the best starting point is to view them as problems that you and the coach must work on together to resolve. The key to doing so is establishing communication and then keeping the lines of exchange open.

Many parents first become aware of problems when their children complain about the coach. If this happens, the first step is to sit down with your youngster and discuss the problem to get his or her point of view. You should listen and express concern, but do not form a judgment or make condemning statements about the coach. After listening, you may decide that the issue does not warrant your involvement and that it might best be worked out by your youngster and the coach. You can help your child by giving suggestions on how to approach the coach and express concerns. If you can help resolve the issue without your direct involvement, your child may learn some very important interpersonal skills and gain confidence in his or her problem-solving ability.

If the situation seems to warrant it, you should contact the coach and indicate that you would like to have a conference. Such discussions should never occur during practices or games and should not include the child. Having your child there may put the coach on the defensive and create an adversary relationship between you and the coach. What is needed is a mutual problem solving approach.

When you meet with the coach, you can help create a positive atmosphere for exchange by telling the coach that you appreciate his or her interest in the children and contributions to the program. You might also communicate that you understand how demanding the role of a coach is. In other words, try to create an open and receptive atmosphere for discussion.



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Next, indicate that there is an issue that you would like to discuss with the coach and that if there is a problem, you would like to work with the coach in resolving it. Here are some examples of ways in which you can introduce the problem:

*Jason told me that he would like to get to play more during games. He feels that since he comes to every practice and tries hard, he'd like to get to play more. (Note that the coach is not being directly accused of not playing Jason enough, which might create defensiveness. Whenever possible, frame the problem in terms of a positive goal to be achieved.)*

*I have been to several of your basketball practices, and I have seen the drill where you have the children practice taking charging fouls and being run over by an offensive player. I am concerned about the possibility of injury. Is there a safer drill that could be substituted?*

*I've seen some of the kids get very upset after being yelled at and I am concerned. I wonder if there isn't some way of making it more fun for the kids. Sometimes we adults don't realize how easy it can be to hurt feelings.*

*Sara joined the program because she wanted to have fun and because she enjoys playing softball. There seems to be such an emphasis on winning and so much pressure put on the girls to perform that at least for Sara, it's becoming stressful rather than constructive.*

After expressing your concern, you might once again acknowledge what a difficult job coaching is, but that you thought the coach would want to hear about your concern because you believe he or she has the best interests of the children at heart. Then tell the coach that you would like to hear his or her view of the situation. Again, the emphasis should be on resolving the problem together.

Communication is a two-way street. You will need to be prepared to listen honestly and openly to the coach's point of view. For example, his or her opinion of your child's ability and deserved playing time may be somewhat different from your own. And the role of coach requires that he or she make a judgment about playing time.

Parents who voice their concerns are often surprised when they are asked to participate in a solution to the problem. For example, one father who disagreed with the coach's way of teaching a particular skill was asked by the coach to assume the position of assistant coach. The coach acknowledged that he had little experience in that particular area and that he would appreciate the father's assistance. In another instance a mother who expressed concern that her son was not playing enough was asked by the coach to practice with the son so that he would improve enough to play more. Thus, we must sometimes be prepared to contribute time and effort as well as opinion.

In some cases you may find that it isn't possible to correct the situation with the coach. If you feel strongly enough about the issue and are convinced that the coach's actions affect the physical or psychological well-being of the children, you may need to take further action. Several options are available.

- First, you may appeal to a higher authority. If a coach is being abusive to children, for example, this should be brought to the attention of league administrators.
- If the issue concerns only your child and not others, the solution maybe to request a transfer to another team and coach.



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- The last, most drastic, and least desirable alternative may be to remove your child from the program. This should always be a last resort, because it may have some negative consequences of its own. For example, the child may be called a quitter.

Fortunately, most coaches are firmly committed to providing the best possible experiences for youngsters. When approached properly, they will usually be open to parents' concerns and motivated to deal effectively with problems.

Up to now, we have been focusing on undesirable things that might come to your attention. But relating to your child's coach goes beyond this. When things are going well, it is important to offer your support, encouragement, and appreciation to the coach. This adult is playing an important role in your child's life. All too often, the only feedback coaches get from parents is negative. It is important to let them know when they are doing a good job. They deserve it.

## **Giving Attention to the Non-athlete in the Family**

Children who are heavily involved or gifted in athletics have no problem getting lots of attention. In some families, so much attention is paid to the star athlete that brothers and sisters may fade into the background. This is most likely to happen when parents are heavily invested in sports themselves and prize athletic accomplishments. It is important to keep in mind that all children need attention, love, and support from parents. When non-athletes feel pushed into the background, parents may find themselves having to deal with jealousy, feelings of rejection, and lowered self-esteem.

Although involvement in sports is to be encouraged and valued, other areas of achievement should be given equal billing. The non-athletic brother who is trying hard in school or is musically inclined or has a knack for making friends deserves recognition and support just as the young athlete does. Try to impress on your children that each of them has unique gifts and endearing qualities and that you are aware of them. Also emphasize that growing up involves finding out which things children are best at and enjoy most. Approval of each child as an individual lays the foundation for self acceptance in all of your children.

Your involvement with your young athlete may vary in degree, but it will almost certainly require a time commitment on your part. This should not detract from personal time with the non-athletic children in your family. We frequently suggest to parents that they keep a daily record of the amount of time spent with each of their children over a two-week period. They are often surprised to find that a huge amount of time is spent on the activities of the young athlete. If you find this to be the case in your family, you may wish to block special time around the activities and interests of your other children. When this is done, no child in the family will feel left out.

## **Helping Your Family Relationships Survive Youth Sports**

Youth sports can be an important element in family growth and solidarity. Anytime parents share significant experiences with their children, they can help build stronger family ties. Stronger bonds can be forged not only between the parents and children but also between the parents themselves. The sport environment is a place where you can witness and enjoy the growth and development of your child. You cannot sit in a classroom and watch academic skills blossom. But you can have a sideline seat to the development of your child's athletic and social skills. Take advantage of the opportunity.

Just as youth sports can be a double-edged sword to the athlete, so it can affect family relationships in a positive or negative fashion. Families need to be aware of this fact and to be prepared to counteract the



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potential pitfalls.

Your entry into a youth sport program can free up more time for parents or it can place even greater demands on them. As parents discover, there can be an increased time commitment to such things as driving children to and from practices and games, serving on parent committees, or acting as coaches. Some parents find to their dismay that practices are held during the dinner hour and that their kitchen becomes a cafeteria with several shifts. The fun and togetherness of family meals become a thing of the past. For most families this is only a seasonal happening. But for others whose youngsters have year-round involvements, this becomes the normal pattern of living.

Families whose children are in elite individual sports, such as gymnastics, swimming, or figure skating, often bear an extremely heavy responsibility. One mother whose daughter is an up-and-coming figure skater rises each morning at 3:00 A.M. to take her daughter to the rink for practice. This family spends up to \$20,000 per year on lessons, ice time, travel to competitions, and equipment. Because of these time and financial commitments, the family has not had a vacation in five years.

Perhaps the most important thing is to decide exactly what your priorities are and what you want out of the sport experience, not only for your child but also for the rest of the family. If your priority is to grow closer as a family, then you need to think of ways in which you can use sports to improve and not damage this process. For example, are you willing to put up with the chaotic family dinner schedule that often results? Some parents have answered this question with a firm no and have allowed their children to participate in only those programs that do not interfere with the routines of family life.

In most instances, you will have to balance the negative against the positive things that your child and the family might experience in a sport program. Be aware of what is likely to be required and how much time and effort you are willing to devote. Once into a program, you should also keep in mind that you can easily be seduced into more and more involvement. You will have to take your turn in car-pooling and you may be asked to perform other duties.