

# How to be a Winning Parent:

## A Parent's Guide for Winning in the Youth Sports Game

(adapted from Dr. Alan Goldberg)

If you want your child to come out of their youth sports experience a winner, (feeling good about themselves, and having a healthy attitude towards sports) then they need your help! You are a vital part of the coach-athlete-parent team. If you do your job correctly and play YOUR position well, then your child will learn the sport faster, perform better, really have fun and have their self-esteem enhanced as a result. The sport experience will serve as a positive model for them to follow as they approach other challenges and obstacles throughout life. Failure on your part could result in your child stopping learning, experiencing performance difficulties and blocks, and hating the sport. Further, your relationship with them may suffer significantly. Negative experiences in sport may create feelings that permeate other areas of their lives. Your child and their coach need you ON the team. They can't win without YOU! The following is a list of useful facts, guidelines and strategies for you to use to make you more skilled in the youth sport game. Remember, no one wins unless everyone wins. We need you on the team!

**#1 Competition** in youth sports is both good and healthy, and teaches children a variety of important life skills. The word "compete" comes from the Latin words "com" and "petere" which mean "together" and "seeking" respectively. The true definition of competition is a seeking TOGETHER where your opponent is your partner, NOT the enemy! The better they perform, the better chance you have of achieving a peak performance. Sport is about learning to deal with challenges and obstacles. Without a worthy opponent, without any challenges, sports are not so much fun. The greater the challenge, the better the opportunity you have to go beyond your limits. Records are consistently broken at the Olympics and other championships, because the best athletes in the world are "seeking together", challenging each other to greater performances. Your child should NEVER be taught to view their opponent as the "bad guy", the enemy, or someone to be hated or destroyed. Do NOT model this attitude! Instead talk to/ make friends with parents of your child's opponent. Root for great performances, NOT just for the winner.

**#2 Encourage your children to compete against themselves.** The ultimate goal of the sport experience is to challenge oneself and continually improve. Unfortunately, judging improvement by winning and losing is both unfair and inaccurate. Winning in sports is about doing the best YOU can do. Separate from the outcome or the play of your opponent. Children should be encouraged to compete against their own potential. When children have this focus, and try to better themselves instead of beating someone else, they will be more relaxed, have more fun, and therefore perform better.

### **#3 Do not define success and failure in terms of winning and losing.**

A corollary to #2, one of the main purposes of the youth sports experience is skill acquisition and mastery. When a child performs to their potential but loses, it is criminal to focus on the outcome and become critical. When children perform their best, they are winners. Similarly, when a child or team performs far below their potential but wins, this is NOT cause to feel like a winner.

**#4 Be supportive, do not coach!** Your role on the parent-coach-athlete team is as a Support player with a capital S! You need to be you child's biggest fan UNCONDITIONALLY! Leave the coaching and instruction to the coach. Provide encouragement, support, empathy, transportation, money, help with fund-raisers, etc., BUT...DO NOT COACH! Most parents that get into trouble with their children do so because they forget the important position that they play. Coaching interferes with your role as supporter and fan. The last thing your child needs and wants to hear from you after a disappointing performance or loss is what they did technically or strategically wrong. For those who actually have to coach their children, try to separate roles by saying, "Now I'm talking to you as a coach" and at home or in the car say; "Now I'm talking to you as a parent". Don't parent when you coach or coach when are parenting.

**#5 Help make the sport fun for your child.** It's a time proven principle of peak performance, that the more fun an athlete is having, the more they will learn and the better they will perform. Fun must be present for peak performance to happen at EVERY level of sports from youth to world-class competitor. When a child stops having fun and begins to dread practice and competition, they have a tendency to burn out and become susceptible to repetitive performance problems. Investigate why they aren't having fun. Keep in mind that being in a highly competitive program does NOT mean there is no room for fun.

**#6 Whose goal is it?** #5 leads us to a very important question? Why is your child participating in the sport? Are they doing it because they want to, for them or because of you? When they have problems in their sport, do you talk about them as "our" problems, "Our jump isn't high enough", "We're having trouble with our flip turn"? Are they playing because they don't want to disappoint you? Are they playing for rewards that you give out? Are their goals and aspirations YOURS or theirs? If they are competing to please you, or for your vicarious glory, then they are in it for the wrong reasons. It is quite normal and healthy to want your child to excel and be as successful as possible, but you cannot make this happen by pressuring them with your expectations or by using guilt or bribery to keep them involved. If they have their own reasons and own goals for participating, they will be FAR more motivated to excel, and therefore far more successful!

## **#7 Your child is not their performance-Love them**

**unconditionally.** Do not equate your child's self-worth and lovability with their performance. The most tragic and damaging mistake parents make is punishing a child for a bad performance by withdrawing emotionally from them. This can damage your child emotionally, and ruin your relationship with them. In the '88 Olympics, when Greg Louganis needed and got a perfect 10 on his last dive to win the gold medal, his last thought before he went was, "If I don't make it, my mother will still love me".

## **#8 Remember the importance of self-esteem in all of your interactions with your child-athlete.**

Athletes of all ages and levels perform in DIRECT relationship to how they feel about themselves. When your child is in an athletic environment that boosts self-esteem, they will learn faster, enjoy themselves more, and perform better under competitive pressure. One thing we all want as children and NEVER stop wanting is to be loved and accepted, and to have our parents feel good about what we do. This is how self-esteem gets established. When your interactions with your child make them feel good about themselves, they will, in turn, learn to treat themselves this very same way. This does NOT mean that you have to incongruently compliment your child for a great effort after they have just performed miserably. In this situation, being empathetic and sensitive to their feelings is what is called for. Make your child feel good about themselves, and you've given them a gift that lasts a lifetime. Do NOT interact with your child in a way that assaults self-esteem by degrading, embarrassing or humiliating them. They will continue to do this to themselves later in life, and to repeat YOUR mistake with THEIR children.

**#9 Give your child the gift of failure.** If you really want your child to be as happy and as successful as possible in everything that they do, teach them how to fail! The most successful people in and out of sports do two things differently than everyone else. FIRST, they are more willing to take risks and therefore fail more frequently. SECOND, they use their failures in a positive way as a source of motivation and feedback to improve. Our society teaches us that failure is bad, a cause for humiliation and embarrassment, and something to be avoided at all costs. Fear of failure causes one to be tentative and non-active, and is the cause of most performance blocks. You can't learn to walk without falling enough times. Each time that you fall your body gets valuable information on how to do it better. You can't be successful or have peak performances if you are concerned with losing or failing. Teach your child how to view setbacks, mistakes and risk-taking positively and you'll have given them the key to a lifetime of success.

**#10 Challenge-Don't threaten.** Many parents directly or indirectly use guilt and threats as a way to “motivate” their child to perform better. Studies indicate that while threats may provide short-term results, the long-term costs to mental health and performance are devastating. Fear as a motivator is possibly the worst dynamic to employ with your child. IMPLICIT in a threat, (do this or else) is your OWN anxiety that you do not believe the child is capable. This is detrimental to your child's performance. A challenge does not entail loss or negative consequences should the athlete fail. Further, implicit in a challenge is the empowering belief, “I think you can do it”.

**#11 Stress process, not outcome.** Common cause of choking under pressure is a focus on the outcome of a performance (win/lose), instead of the process. In any peak performance, the athlete is totally oblivious to the outcome and instead is completely absorbed in the here and now of the actual performance. The outcome is beyond the athlete's control, and focusing on it raises anxiety to inhibiting levels. So if you TRULY want your child to win, help get their focus AWAY from how important the contest is, and have them focus on the task at hand. Stress learning the skills and playing the game.

**#12 Avoid comparisons and respect developmental differences.** Supportive parents do not use other athletes that their child competes against to compare and thus evaluate their child's progress. Comparisons are useless, inaccurate and destructive. Each child matures differently and the process of comparison ignores significant distorting effects of developmental differences. Performance comparisons can prematurely turn off talented athletes on their sport. The ONLY value of comparisons is in teaching. If one child demonstrates proper technique, that child can be used as a model. For your child to do their very best they need to learn to stay within themselves. Worrying about how another athlete is doing interferes with this.

**#13 Teach your child to have a perspective on the sports experience.** The sports media in this country would like you to believe that sports and winning/losing is larger than life. The fact that it is just a game frequently gets lost in translation. This lack of perspective frequently trickles down to the youth sport level, and young athletes often come away from competition with a distorted view of themselves and their performance. Parents need to help their children develop realistic expectations about themselves, their abilities and how they played, without robbing the child of their dreams. Swimming a lifetime best time and coming in last is a cause for celebration, not depression. Similarly, losing the conference championships does not mean that the sun will not rise tomorrow.