



# SUCCESSFUL SPORTS PARENTING

## Mind and Motives

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The development of a human being is a truly remarkable process. In only nine months two microscopic cells change into a fully formed human infant. Six years later the newborn has become a walking, talking first-grader ready to master such complex skills as reading, arithmetic, relating to others, and sports. From here, a process of rapid mental, physical, and social development advances the child into the storms and challenges of adolescence and then into such adult roles as worker, husband or wife, and parent.

As parents, we have a window to the wonders of growth and development in our children. We are excited by rapid events of evolving maturity. And, at the same time, we are saddened by the realization that we and our children can never recapture the delights of earlier ages, now preserved only in our photo albums, home movies, and hearts.

Because so much of a child's time is spent in play, the functions of play have attracted the attention of educators, medical doctors, and scientists. To understand the role of sports in the life of the child, we must first consider the meaning and functions of play itself.

### Play and the Developing Child

Animals as well as humans engage in play activities. In animals play is a way of learning and rehearsing behaviors that are necessary for future survival. For example, baby lions stalk and pounce on objects in their play. In children, too, play has important functions during development.

From its earliest beginnings in infancy, play is a way in which children learn about the world and their place in it. Much of the first two years of life is spent learning about objects and events. By handling and manipulating objects in the environment, infants gain information about how to respond to the world and how it responds to them.

Between the ages of two and seven, children spend most of their waking hours involved in play. In their play, they take on a variety of imaginary roles. With time, they become responsive to playmates and begin to understand the effects of their actions on them. Play now becomes an important avenue for social development. Children can tryout various kinds of social interactions by creating rules for games or by developing ways to cooperate, share, or compete. They can experiment with different roles and actions without actually experiencing the dangers that the real action might hold. Through make-believe play, children can test skills - such as driving a car or cooking a meal-that they might not be allowed to try in reality at that time. They can also learn new skills, such as building with blocks or mastering an electronic video game, by watching more skillful playmates.

In later childhood, play changes from the dramatic fantasy of the young child to games regulated by rules that everyone accepts. Beyond age six, children spend a great deal of time making up exact rules, and they place strong pressure on one another to follow them. Through this process children learn that social systems are cemented together by rules and that the good of the group demands the individual's willingness to abide by the rules. This is the beginning of consideration for the rights of others. Children learn to compete, too, but within a safe world where the consequences of losing are minimized. Younger children often attach little significance to who wins or loses. In contrast to many adults, they often get their enjoyment from experiencing, not just from winning

### Self-Concept Development

During the early elementary school years, the world of the child broadens dramatically to include not only the family and playmates but a widening circle of schoolmates and adults. In this expanded environment children



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discover and judge their own abilities and begin to form a stable self-concept and feelings of self-worth. Academic and social experiences provide important information, as do the reactions of peers and adults in the child's life. It is during this critical period of development—the years between six and twelve—that most children enter organized sport programs. This is why sport experiences can play such an important role in children's personal and social development.

Self-concept consists of what we believe about ourselves. It includes our perceptions of personal traits and abilities, particularly those that are important in shaping our identities as distinct people. Self-esteem refers to the way we feel about our own characteristics as good or bad, valuable or worthless, and so on. Self-concept and self-esteem strongly influence how we function in the world. They underlie our view of who we are, what we are capable of, and how we can expect others to react to us.

None of us was born with a self-concept. It is a product of our experiences in living. Two types of information are particularly important with regard to self-concept and self-esteem development:

- How other people respond to us.
- How we compare with others in important skills and characteristics.

From the reactions of significant people in their lives, children draw conclusions concerning how other people feel about or evaluate them. Children often have little more than the reactions of others to go on. It is no wonder that such information has such a strong influence on their sense of who they are and how worthwhile they are. Thus, a child who consistently receives attention, approval, and loving concern from parents is likely to conclude that he or she is a valued person and thereby develops a positive self-concept and high self-esteem. Such messages to the child may be very direct, as when a parent says, "You're a great kid and I love you very much," or they may be transmitted in more subtle ways, such as approving smiles and expressions of attention and interest in the child. On the other hand, children who receive a lot of disapproval, rejection, and hostility from those who matter are likely to infer that others see them as unlovable, unworthy, and inferior. It is not surprising that such children tend to develop negative self-concepts and low self-esteem.

A second important type of information enters into the developing conception of self. At a relatively early age, children begin to compare themselves with other children. This is quite natural, for in any new or novel situation we have little basis for judging ourselves or our performance except in comparison with others. Comparison and competition begin around the age of five or six and increase throughout the elementary school years, with the peak occurring around grades four, five, and six. Through self-comparison and competition with other children, youngsters learn where they stand relative to others like them. It is easy to see how such information would feed into the developing self-concept of the child.

Psychologists who study personality place much emphasis on self-concept because we tend to filter new information and to behave in accordance with our self-concept. We tend to accept evidence that supports our notion of ourselves, be it positive or negative, and reject or explain away evidence that is inconsistent with our self-concept. Thus, a failure may have little impact on a child with a positive view of himself or herself, while the same failure may serve to demonstrate once again to the low-self-esteem youngster how inadequate he or she really is.

Children with poor self-concepts and low self-esteem have little confidence in their abilities. They are insecure in their relationships with others, are highly sensitive to criticism, and are easily hurt. Some try to cover up their feelings of inadequacy with an aggressive or attention-demanding front that alienates others, whereas others withdraw into a protective shell. Either response tends to result in low popularity and this only serves to confirm a poor self-image. The low-self-esteem youngster is thus primed for entry into a failure cycle.

## **Sports and Self-Concept Development**

We can now see why sport experiences can have an important effect on a child's self-concept development. Children typically enter the world of sports at a time in their development when they are seeking information about their abilities. The kinds of motor abilities required in sports are particularly valued by them at this



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stage. When children enter sports, the stage is thus set for an ability test whose outcome is potentially very important.

There are good reasons to try to succeed and to be a good athlete. Success brings feelings of mastery, competence, self-pride, admiration and status from peers, and approval from important adults, such as parents and coaches. Inferior athletes often experience feelings of shame and inferiority, lowered respect and status among their peers, and the reactions of disappointed parents. At the very first practice or tryout, children begin to see how they compare with their peers in this prized activity. In a very short time children can tell how proficient they are relative to their teammates and opponents.

In addition to comparing themselves with others, children also have many opportunities to observe how others are judging them. The reactions of coaches, parents, teammates, opponents, and spectators to their play are visible on many occasions. Some of these evaluations are very direct, as when others offer praise or criticism. Other reactions, although unintentionally shown, are easily picked up by a child. For example, when Bobby comes to the plate with the bases loaded, his teammates, the coach, and spectators cheer and shout, "Hit a home run!" When Chad comes up under the same circumstances, there is silence or maybe even a few groans. Or "encouragement" may take such forms as "C' mon, Chad, try to hit the ball!" or "Don't strike out!"

As youth sport programs become more highly organized, formal procedures, such as grading players during tryouts, "drafting" players, and even buying them with play money, provide direct indications of ability. One child we know was devastated when his coach paid only \$25,000 in play money for him while his neighborhood buddy went for \$40,000." Even more painful is being cut, a most humiliating message that one doesn't measure up. Research done in Canada by sport scientist Terry Orlick showed that nearly three out of every four non-participants who didn't go out for hockey teams said that they were afraid of being cut-an indication of how much children dread the message that they're not good enough.

Even children who make the team continue to receive many messages about their performance. This feedback comes from people whose opinions carry a great deal of weight because they are so important to the child. Many parents are very concerned about their children's athletic development and often have a good deal to say about performance. It is the job of another significant adult, the coach, to evaluate performance. Youngsters receive much feedback from this "expert" about their strengths, weaknesses, areas needing improvement and progress. The coach also makes very obvious ability judgments in selecting players for particular positions, in choosing who starts and who substitutes, and in deciding the game conditions in which substitutions occur. Being allowed to play only when one's team is way ahead or hopelessly behind communicates a pretty clear message.

Athletics thus provide many opportunities for children to form judgments about their abilities. They get information by comparing themselves with others as well as by observing the reactions of others to them. All this occurs during the age period when children are beginning to form a stable conception of who they are and how they feel about themselves. If you add to this the fact that motor abilities are of central importance and highly valued at this age and that the people evaluating the child-coaches, peers, and parents are of great importance in the child's life, is it any wonder why the experiences children have in sports can have a rather profound effect on them? This is particularly the case with children who have not established feelings of self-worth in other areas of their lives or with those whose parents value athletic abilities above all others. Finally, it is important to realize that children at this age are not yet capable of distinguishing between judgments of their abilities and judgments of their personal worth. Thus, ability judgments are not necessarily seen as evaluations of only a single physical trait but may well be taken as an indication of total worth.

## What Parents Can Do

It is important that adults be sensitive to the impact that sport experiences can have on the child's developing conception of self. The processes we have described-self-comparison and feedback from others-are going to



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occur in any situation in which children interact, but their effects can be softened and viewed more realistically if understanding adults help children place sport experiences in proper perspective. There are several things adults can do.

First and foremost is to emphasize fun, participation, and skill improvement rather than winning and losing. Most children want to play a sport because they enjoy the activity for its own sake. Adults can turn that enjoyable activity into a pressurized, competitive nightmare. Fun is no longer just playing; it's now defined as winning. Introducing material rewards, such as trophies, into the picture can cause children to lose sight of the fun of merely playing.

Second, adults should emphasize striving to improve skills rather than comparing oneself with others. Physical development and skill development occur at different rates in youngsters, and it is important to make this clear to children. It is particularly important that children whose skill development is lagging not view this as a permanent condition. Helping a youngster derive pleasure from his or her improvement over time and praising the self-improvement efforts of the child can create many rewarding experiences in sports, even for the athlete who never will be a star. *Just* as it is important that the unskilled child athlete not develop low self-worth because of his or her own sport abilities, it is important that the highly skilled athlete not acquire an inflated self-image. Again, parents should help children to understand that despite the importance of sports to them, it is only one area of their lives. This will foster a more balanced perspective and a wider range of interests.

Finally, it is important that parents examine the conditions of worth that they hold for their children. If your young athlete must excel to get love and approval from you, if you are sending out subtle (or not so subtle) signals of disapproval when your child fails or embarrasses you, then you need to take a hard look at your own priorities. If, on the other hand, you are able to communicate love and acceptance to your child whether he or she is a star or a bench warmer, then a basis for positive self-concept development exists regardless of your child's eventual success in sports.

Competitive experiences are an important part of life. In themselves, sports are neither good nor bad. The value of competition for the child depends on how the competition is conducted, how the situation is interpreted, and how the outcome of competition is understood. Properly managed, youth sports can be an important training ground for competing successfully in other areas of life and for the development of a positive self-concept.

## **Sport Motivation and Competitiveness**

The concept of motivation is the central one in our attempt to understand the whys of behavior. It helps us to understand differences among people in the goals they pursue and in the vigor with which they pursue them. In sports as in other areas of life, the importance of motivation is well recognized. Motivation is crucial to understanding both sport involvement and performance. As a parent, understanding your child's needs and motives can help you provide a more positive athletic experience for him or her.

There are many reasons why children are drawn to sports. Some of the reasons have to do with the activities themselves. Children, like adults, find it enjoyable to hit a baseball, dribble and shoot a basketball, run and catch a football, kick a soccer ball, or stroke a tennis ball. Using one's body just for the sake of doing so is in itself a joyful activity and provides what psychologists term intrinsic motives for participating in sports.

Sport involvement can also be a means of satisfying other important needs. We have already talked about the need to compare ourselves with others in the process of defining our abilities and establishing our self-concept. There are two other psychological needs that sports fulfill: the need for competence and achievement, and the need for recognition and approval.



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## Achievement-Related Motives

Sports provide many opportunities to demonstrate competence and mastery. It is an area in which competence is highly valued by adults and children alike. We should therefore expect that motives having to do with success and failure would be among the most important determinants of sport participation and performance.

The most universal principle of motivation is that people, like animals, strive for positive or pleasurable things and avoid experiences that are painful or threatening. It thus makes sense to distinguish between approach motives and avoidance motives. Where achievement is concerned, there are two separate but related motives: the need to achieve, and fear of failure. Research has shown quite clearly that these are separate sources of motivation and that people differ widely in the strength of these two motivational states. Some people are low in both motives, others are high in one and low in the other, and still others are high in both.

The need to achieve is an approach motive. It is a positive desire to attain success and to compete successfully with standards of excellence. Differences in achievement motivation begin to emerge in children in the early school years. Children who are high in achievement motivation seek out challenging situations and are concerned with how well they perform, in terms of both their own standards and the performance of others. They also tend to show a lot of persistence in their attempts to achieve. Failure tends to spur them on to greater effort rather than discourage them. They tend to prefer situations that put their abilities to the test. Many studies have shown that when their achievement motivation is aroused, these children perform at a higher level than those low in achievement motivation.

The other side of the achievement coin is, of course, failure. Just as some children show a positive desire for success, others exhibit a negative fear of failure. People who have great fear of failure work hard not so much because they yearn for "the thrill of victory" as because they dread "the agony of defeat." For them, achievement situations are not challenges, but threats. The child highly motivated to achieve gets "pumped" and "psyched up" when faced with a challenge, but the child highly motivated by fear of failure is more likely to get "psyched out." Tension, fear, and anxiety result. And although the motivation to achieve tends to improve performance, the fear of failure tends to disrupt it.

## How Achievement Motivation and Fear of Failure Develop

Because the motivation to achieve and the fear of failure so strongly affect enjoyment of and performance in achievement situations, researchers have been very interested in understanding how these motives develop. They have found that children who have high levels of achievement motivation but little fear of failure tend to have a history of encouragement and reward for success and independence. Parents of such children tend to emphasize the positive aspects of achievement and to praise their children for their efforts to achieve. Importantly, when their children try hard but nevertheless fail, these parents do not punish or criticize them. Instead, they encourage them to continue their attempts and praise them for their persistence. Because of the emphasis that the parents place on striving to meet standards of excellence, this value is adopted by the children and serves to guide their behavior.

The background of the fear-of-failure child is quite different. These children tend to want to avoid new experiences or activities because of the punishment or rejection associated with previous failures. Their parents tend to focus only on the success or failure experienced by the child, not on the effort the child puts out. They express displeasure with the child when failure occurs but take success for granted and expect it. In some cases, unrealistically high goals are set for the child, and the parents express displeasure when the child does not succeed. It is quite easy to see how such a background would result in a child who has learned to dread failure. Ironically, once the fear develops, its disruptive effects are likely to further decrease the chances of success. What often occurs is a vicious cycle in which failure results in increased anxiety, which in turn helps to ensure future failure.



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## What Parents Can Do

Sports can be a training ground for the development of positive motivation toward achievement. Parents and coaches can have an important influence on developing attitudes concerning success and failure. Research on the development of the need for achievement and fear of failure offers some pretty clear guidelines for how you can help your child develop a healthy achievement orientation. The key principles seem to be encouraging the child to give maximum effort and rewarding him or her for that effort. Make sure the achievement standards you set are reasonable and within your child's capabilities. When success occurs, enjoy the success with your child and express appreciation for the effort that went into it. Never be punitive or rejecting if the child tries but does not succeed. Show your child that you understand how disappointed he or she is, and encourage the child to continue trying. Communicate love and acceptance regardless of success or failure. If you want to avoid developing fear of failure, don't give your child a reason to dread failure.

## Understanding Competitiveness

One of the most highly prized athletic traits is competitiveness. Applying what we now know about achievement-related motives helps us to understand what goes into being a good competitor. From youth leagues to professional leagues, outstanding competitors are almost always people who are high in achievement motivation and low in fear of failure. Challenging athletic situations arouse their strong desire to achieve, and unhindered by performance-disrupting fears of failure, they tend to peak under pressure. They enjoy and seek out the challenge of athletic competition.

Quite the opposite occurs in the child who is primarily motivated by fear of failure. Competitive situations provide little to gain but much to lose for such children. If they can avoid competition, they will do so. If other factors force them to compete, they derive little enjoyment from it and their performance tends to deteriorate under pressure. Some children who apparently enjoy sports but who have a great fear of failure tend to like practices and "goofing off" more than they do games.

Besides children with such high-low levels of achievement motivation and fear of failure, there are also children who have high levels of both and those who have low levels of both. The child who has high levels of both motives is in a state of conflict between approach and avoidance motives. This child wants to achieve but also fears failure. If the child enjoys the sport itself, he or she tends to remain in it but experiences stress and anxiety under pressure. The key to helping such a child to become a good competitor is to reduce fear of failure so that the positive effects of the motivation to achieve are not interfered with.

For the child who has low levels of both achievement motivation and fear of failure, achievement concerns have little importance. When such children do elect to participate in sports, it is often because they simply enjoy the activity or because of the social benefits of participation. As a result, they exhibit a rather nonchalant attitude about the sport. This can prove perplexing and irritating to parents and coaches who are more concerned about winning and achievement.



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<b>Relationship Between Achievement Motivation, Fear of Failure and Competitiveness</b>			
<b>Achievement Motivation</b>			
		<b>Low</b>	<b>High</b>
<b>Fear of Failure</b>	<b>Low</b>	Achievement concerns are largely irrelevant. Appears "laid back" and is probably in sport for reasons unrelated to achievement.	Is a good competitor; peaks under pressure because fear of failure does not disrupt performance. Enjoys and seeks out the challenges of competition and is motivated to win.
	<b>High</b>	Competition is threatening. Experiences anxiety under pressure which lowers performance. Does not enjoy competition and may avoid such situations by dropping out of sport.	Has conflict in competitive situations. Wants to win but also fears failure, so performance may suffer. Does not enjoy the threatening part of competition.

## Needs for Approval and Recognition

As social beings, humans have a need to be recognized, valued, and cared about by others. From a very early age, children seem to crave attention and to do whatever is necessary to gain it. Many children with behavior problems develop those problems because obnoxious behavior is the only way the children have of guaranteeing the attention of parents and others. Such children prefer the attention that goes along with being punished to simply being ignored.

As children develop they learn to satisfy their needs for recognition and approval in a variety of ways. For one thing, they find out what is praiseworthy to people who matter to them, such as parents, teachers, and peers. It doesn't take most children very long to realize that sports provide many opportunities for recognition and approval. They see how sport heroes are idolized in our culture and they often develop their own sport heroes at a relatively early age. Further many parents communicate very positive attitudes about sports and exhibit a great deal of interest in such activities. Finally, as we noted earlier, physical activities are among the most highly prized attributes of school-aged children.

Approval and recognition provide powerful motivation for athletes at all levels. Almost all of the positive attributes that can be developed through sport participation-achievement motivation, sportsmanship, teamwork, unselfishness-are ultimately strengthened through approval of significant people, such as coaches, parents and teammates. Thus, it is almost impossible to overestimate the importance of approval and recognition to the developing athlete.

As was the case with achievement, there are both approach and avoidance motives connected with approval. On the approach side, there is the positive desire to obtain approval and recognition from other people. This is similar to the positive achievement motive that we discussed earlier. The child wants approval and may be frustrated if approval is not received, but the child is not necessarily afraid of disapproval.

On the other hand, the social behavior of many people is motivated by a strong desire to avoid disapproval at all costs, a motivational state similar to fear of failure. Such people are very concerned about the evaluation of others, and they are fearful of being evaluated unfavorably. Often they automatically assume that all assessments will be negative. As a result, they may experience considerable tension and distress in social situations, and they may be highly motivated to avoid them. Where fear of disapproval is not excessive, these people enter social situations but strive to please others at all costs. They are highly conforming and hesitate to take a position that others might disapprove of. They define their own self-worth in terms of the feedback



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they get from other people.

Of equally great importance, however, is the child's own self-approval or self-disapproval. Once children begin to set standards for their own behavior, they approve or disapprove of themselves depending on whether or not they meet these standards. Thus, a young boy may feel badly about himself if he does something that he knows is wrong even if his friends approve. The development of internal standards of behavior and of conditions for self-approval and self-disapproval is a sign of developing maturity in a child.

Motivational patterns differ from child to child, of course, but in a recent research project we tried to determine the relative strength of approval motives in child athletes. We devised a psychological test to measure the approval-related reasons that children strive to do well in sports, and we administered the test to a large number of boys and girls of various ages.

<b>Reasons for Trying to Perform Well in Sports</b>			
<b>Reason for Trying to Play Well</b>		<b>Order of Importance</b>	
		<b>9-11 yrs.</b>	<b>12-14 yrs.</b>
1.	Feeling good about how you played	1	1
2.	Making sure you won't blame yourself for losing.	2	2
3.	Being praised by your parents for playing well.	6	4
4.	Making sure your parents won't be displeased with your	3	8
5.	Making your coach proud of you.	4	3
6.	Making sure your coach won't be displeased with you.	5	6
7.	Making the other kids like you more.	8	7
8.	Making sure the other kids don't get upset with you.	7	5

It is noteworthy that for children in both age groups, their own self-approval and self-disapproval were more important to them than the reactions of peers, coaches, or parents. Where parents were concerned, the younger children were more strongly oriented toward avoiding parental disapproval than toward gaining their approval, whereas the older youngsters were relatively more concerned with getting approval than with avoiding disapproval. It is important to note, however, that this pattern did not hold for all children but only for the sample as a whole. For some children, the reactions of others were of utmost importance. Sometimes the primary motive was to gain approval, while other children were clearly motivated to avoid the disapproval of others.

## **Extrinsic Rewards: Can We Destroy the Love of the Game?**

In youth sports there is the risk that children's intrinsic interest in the sport can be decreased if they begin to see their participation as a means to some extrinsic goals, such as trophies, trips, or state championships. If carried to an extreme, external rewards can replace intrinsic motivation as the reason for participating in sports. When the young athletes begin to see these extrinsic rewards as the reason for their participation, the removal of these rewards may result in a loss of interest in participation.

We are not suggesting that trophies and other extrinsic rewards be eliminated from sports. They certainly have their rightful place as a means of recognizing outstanding effort and achievement. It is important, however, that adults and children maintain a proper perspective so that trophies do not become the be-all and end-all of participation. It is sad indeed when children lose the capacity to enjoy athletic competition for its own sake.

## **Sports and Character-Building**

Raising our children is in large part a moral enterprise. We do our best to teach our children the difference between right and wrong. We communicate our own values to them and hope they will adopt similar values.



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We want them to develop positive character traits that will make them happy and contributing members of society. Our goals in this regard are shared by religious institutions, schools, youth organizations and athletic programs. Adult responsibility in such programs goes beyond teaching sport skills to included stressing the value of hard work, sportsmanship and good citizenship.

Not everyone agrees that youth sport programs succeed in these goals. Critics point out that in some instances impressionable youngsters learn to swear, cheat, fight, intimidate, and hurt others. Sports provide opportunities to learn immoral values and behaviors as well as moral ones. Depending *on* the types *of* leadership provided by coaches and parents, the experiences can result in sinners as well as saints. In the final analysis, it is not the sport itself that automatically determines the worth *of* the activity for the child, but rather the nature *of* the experiences within the program.

Sports are an especially promising setting for learning the positive traits we lump under the term *character*, because they confront children with many challenges that await them in later life. Cooperation, competition, perseverance in the face of difficulties, concern for others, self-sacrifice, and moral behavior (sportsmanship) can all be called for on any given day. Through the influence they have as important adults in children's lives, coaches and parents can teach children to respond to these challenges in desirable ways. Important lessons of life can be learned *on* the athletic field and in the gymnasium.

Many sports, particularly those that involve physical contact, require some degree of aggressiveness on the part of athletes. A rather fine dividing line can exist between assertiveness, on the one hand, and aggression on the other. Assertiveness involves using physical force to its maximum legal limit, as when a football player makes a hard tackle. Aggression, on the other hand, is the use of physical force in a manner that is intended to hurt an opponent. Ideally, we would like our children to be appropriately assertive, but not to intentionally try to harm others. Clearly, adults must be sensitive to the potential that certain "contact" sports have for teaching and rewarding aggression so that they can emphasize the importance of hard but fair play.

In our attempts to teach children desirable attitudes and behaviors, it is important that we explain to children the principles or reasons behind desired actions. For example, rather than simply threatening to punish players for heckling opponents, a coach might help his players understand the golden rule "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" by asking them to consider what it would be like to be the victims of heckling- and thus encourage his players to develop empathy for their opponents. This ability to place oneself in the role of another person is essential to the development of morality. Understanding and applying this golden rule can lead children to internalize the concept of sportsmanship and consideration for others.

Youngsters learn moral behavior not only through verbal explanations, rewards, and punishments but also by observing how other people behave. They imitate their parents and peers, and they model themselves after their heroes. Because coaches are often highly admired and very important in the child's life, they are especially likely to serve as models. Without realizing it, coaches can behave in ways that teach either morality or immorality. For example, by trying to get the edge by stretching the rules, coaches can easily give children the impression that cheating is not really wrong unless it is detected, and then only to the extent that it hurts the chances of winning. When coaches bend the rules in order to obtain a victory, children may conclude that the end justifies the means. Likewise, coaches who display hostility toward officials and contempt for the other team communicate the notion that such behaviors are appropriate and desirable. Even when coaches and parents preach correct values, it is essential that they themselves behave in accordance with them. Psychological experiments with children have repeatedly shown that when adults' actions are inconsistent with their words, it is the actions, not the words, that influence children's behavior. Actions do indeed speak louder than words.

Critics of youth sports sometimes attack the competitive aspect of sports as inconsistent with the development of morality and concern for others. Some, however, dispute this position, arguing that moral development is actually furthered when moral decisions come into conflict with winning. In other words, noteworthy acts of sportsmanship often involve situations in which conduct governed by a moral principle (for



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example, one should not cheat) is chosen instead of victory. When a youngster makes a decision to do the right thing rather than unfairly pursue an opportunity to succeed, we have a true demonstration of moral growth. Coaches and parents are in a position to further such growth.

What, then, is the verdict on sports as a means of building character? At this point we are unable to give a definite answer, for sports are simply one aspect of the complexity of children's lives. Scientific evidence is inconclusive, although positive differences in academic achievement and personality traits are sometimes found when groups of child athletes are compared with non-athletes. A lower incidence of juvenile delinquency has consistently been found in child athletes. The difficulty has been in proving that these differences are caused by sport participation. Perhaps brighter and better-adjusted children are more likely to be attracted to sports, and that's why participation is related to these attributes. There is no denying, however, that sports are capable of furthering the character development of children if adults are able to structure sport experiences for their benefit. The sport experience is full of valuable lessons for children and can be an important training ground for moral and social development.