

# How Youth Sports Parents Can Help Kids Thrive

## Help your child benefit from youth sports with positive parent involvement.

By Catherine Holecko

There's little question that kids can gain a lot from youth sports. Parents want their kids to play sports to help them learn skills, practice teamwork and sportsmanship, and enjoy physical activity. But to make sure your kids get the most out of their sports participation, you need to participate too. Just as in school, parental involvement goes a long way, as long as you keep it positive.

### 1. Be a source of support.

Your child can't play without your active support--financial, logistical, and emotional. Having kids involved in youth sports can tax your family schedule along with your wallet. There's no need to hide the truth from your child, especially if she is old enough to understand the tradeoffs involved. But it's also important to reassure your child that you support her efforts and are proud of them, even if you don't enjoy waking up at 5 a.m. to drive her to practice.

### 2. Provide positive feedback.

Boost your child's self-esteem and help him master new skills with plenty of praise. The most productive feedback is detailed and positive: "You really hustled after the ball today." "That was a great pass to Will in the third quarter." "I noticed how you really tried to keep your legs straight just like your coach suggested."

### 3. Be present.

While there's no need to attend every practice or even every game or meet, it's meaningful to make the time to watch your child play in competition whenever you can. And remember, being fully present also means keeping your phone in your pocket or purse!

### 4. Debrief after games and events.

Not every player will enjoy rehashing a game right after it ends, especially if he was on the losing side. Still, it's often helpful for your athlete to have a sounding board so he can discuss events after they happen. This could mean later that evening or in the next few days; follow your child's lead. Listening between the lines may help you identify problems that you could help with, such as anxiety, bullying, or an undiagnosed injury.

## **5. Be realistic.**

Being proud of your child and encouraging her to do her best is great. Adding unnecessary pressure to her play? Not so great. Not every child can go pro, win a college scholarship, or be the best on the team. So be clear-eyed about what your child can do; she'll still gain a great deal from her participation, even if she doesn't take home a trophy every time.

## **6. Learn about the sport.**

When you know more about the game your child loves, you can follow the action and provide helpful feedback. You might even enjoy your time in the bleachers more!

## **7. Be a role model at home.**

Your young athlete needs to keep his body in good shape to perform well and reduce the risk of injury. Through words and deeds, you can help him do this: Eat healthy foods and serve them to your family (and the team--try these healthy half-time snacks). Exercise regularly and talk about how it makes you feel stronger and more energetic. You might even work out together, help him practice drills, or have him teach you some of what he's learned about his chosen sport.

## **8. Be a role model for other youth sports parents.**

As a parent, you can help promote sportsmanship from the sidelines and in the stands. Be respectful of your child; her teammates, coach, and opponents; the officials; and the game itself, its rules and traditions.

## **9. Help kids handle disappointment.**

Sometimes it's bad luck, a bad call, or just plain old bad play. When things go wrong, your role is to help your child get over it--but also learn from it. Your empathy, along with helping your child find and make a positive change, builds resilience. And that's a skill your child can use on and off the playing field, for many years to come.