

Kids and Sport

By Ira Klein, ASCA Level 5; Sarasota Y, Florida

Recently I read an article from Sports Psychology magazine, written by Dr. David A. Feigley. He works with the Rutgers University Youth Sport Research Council. The article was entitled "Why Kids Quit" and contained interesting and useful information, which I wish to share with all of you.

First, why do kids play sports?

There are three basic types of participants. Ability oriented children enjoy competition and "want to be the best". Task oriented children enjoy the activity itself and often focus on self-improvement. Social approval oriented children work to please others such as coaches, parents, and teammates. To my surprise, the author says that the evidence suggests that those who work for social approval persist the longest.

Children aged six years and younger cannot distinguish between ability and effort. They believe that when they try hard they are automatically good at what they are doing. Praise tends to be accepted positively by very young children regardless of whether the task was successfully completed or not.

Children aged seven through eleven develop the ability to differentiate between having talent and trying hard. They compare themselves with others, and if they feel they cannot succeed, they would rather not try. They find it easier to attribute failure to a deliberate lack of effort, than to admit that they lack ability.

Children from age twelve become skilled at making social comparisons and realize that expending effort is no longer a guarantee that they will succeed.

What can we do to help reduce the pressures that children feel?

1. Encourage enjoyment of the activity and self-improvement.
2. Encourage children to interpret comparisons with others solely as a tool for improving. Comparisons should be constructive and never as simple as "they are better" or "you are not as good".
3. Praise must be an earned reward. As children mature, they begin to value praise for successful outcomes much more than praise for trying hard. Look for specific successes.
4. Continually remind your children that ability often changes dramatically as they mature.