

From the Desk to the Field

April 2007

An excerpt from Sports and Your Child (Frank L. Smoll & Ronald E. Smith, Warde Publishers, Inc., 2005)

Much of the joy of being a sport parent comes from watching your child during practices and games. Fortunately, the majority of parents behave appropriately at athletic events. But it takes only a few inconsiderate individuals to turn a pleasant atmosphere into a stressful one for all.

Coaches, program administrators, sport officials, and the athletes themselves have a right to demand that spectators conform to acceptable standards of behavior.

Pre-Practice/Game Preparation

- Tell your child to have **fun**. Emphasize that sports and other activities in life are enjoyable in themselves—whether you win or lose. In other words, having **fun** does not depend on winning!
- Tell your child that success is related to commitment and **effort!** The goal is to **do your best**, rather than be the best. Emphasize that athletes are never “losers” if they commit themselves to **doing their best** and giving maximum **effort**.
- Let your son or daughter know that the pride you feel is not affected by their level of performance, or by winning. Again, **effort** is what counts!

During Practices/Games

Youth sports should be enjoyable for everyone, so remember to have **fun**. Moreover, in addition to some obvious **don'ts** (using profanity, drinking alcohol, etc.), you are encouraged to follow these rules of conduct:

- **Do** remain in the spectator area during the event.
- **Don't** interfere with the coach. You must be willing to give up the responsibility for your child to the coach for the duration of the practice or game.
- **Do** express interest, encouragement, and support to your child. Be sure to cheer good **effort** as well as good performance. Communicate repeatedly that giving total **effort** is all you expect.
- **Don't** shout instructions or criticisms to the children.
- **Do** lend a hand when a coach or official asks for help.
- **Don't** make abusive comments to athletes, parents, officials, or coaches of either team.

What if an official makes a “bad” call or a parent violates a rule of conduct?

- You have the obligation to control your own behavior, and to remind others of their responsibilities, if necessary.
- When parents behave badly (loud, rowdy, obnoxious actions), it is primarily the duty of program administrators and sport officials to step in. But you can also help to correct the situation with a reminder that these are just kids playing a game.

- Caution! When parents misbehave, it could be emotionally charged and potentially dangerous. So, be very careful and diplomatic in how you approach unruly parents.

Post-Practice/Game Follow-up

- Compliment the coaches and sport officials for doing a good job, and be sure to thank them for their contributions.
- **STOP** focusing on whether your child won or lost.
- **LOOK** for signs that indicate how your child is feeling (facial expressions, tears, body language).
- **LISTEN** to what your child has to say before you provide input. Begin with a supportive greeting, and then ask open-ended questions:

“What part of the practice/game did you enjoy the most/least?”

“What was the best/worst thing about your performance?”

“Were you satisfied with your **effort**?”

If not, “What do you intend to do about **effort** in the future??”

“What was the most important thing you learned from the practice/game?”

After a Win

- Let your child know that athletes should feel good about winning and enjoy it.
- Tell your child to show consideration for opponents. Good sportsmanship includes being a respectful winner and giving opponents a pat on the back or a “high five” in a sincere manner.
- Remind your child about the importance of continued **effort** and striving for improvement. If your child played well, here are some things to say:

“Way to go! You showed a lot of **effort** and improvement. Keep it up.”

“You must feel satisfied with your **effort** and performance. I’m proud of you.”

“You met the challenge really well. Is there anything in your game that needs more work and improvement?”

If your child played badly, here are some things to say:

“That was a good one to win. Is there any part of your game that needs work?”

“Let’s enjoy that win. Keep focusing on your **effort** and learning, and you’ll do better next time.”

- Ask your child, “Did you learn anything from this that you can apply in school and in other parts of your life?”

After a Loss

- Don’t blame or get angry with your child. He or she feels bad enough already.
- Avoid the temptation to deny or distort the disappointment your child is feeling. For example, it is not helpful to say, “It doesn’t matter.”

- Point out something positive that was achieved during the game. Here are some things to say:

“Great **effort** and improvement. Keep working hard, and winning will take care of itself.”

“That was a tough one to lose, but your defense showed improvement. Stick with it, and it’ll pay off.”

“Really good **effort**. That’s all anyone can ask. I’m proud of you.” “It never feels good to lose, but you showed terrific sportsmanship. Way to go!”

- If your child hasn’t given maximum **effort**, communicate your unhappiness without putting down the youngster as a person. Focus on the future and emphasize athletes owe it to themselves and their team to give maximum **effort**.
- Ask your child, “Did you learn anything from this that you can apply in school and in other parts of your life?”

NOTE: This material was excerpted from Sports and Your Child (Frank L. Smoll & Ronald E. Smith, Warde Publishers, Inc., 2005).

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