

Children and Sports are a Natural Combination by Nancy Hafkin

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Sports can offer a child fun, personal growth and skill development. The parent of the young athlete serves as the child's cheerleader, trainer, nurse, ethics advisor and role model. Here are some thoughts about making sports enjoyable and educational.

A Parent's Job

Encouragement is probably the most important function of the parent who wants to help a child succeed in sports. Regardless of ability level, the child needs to hear that his or her parents think sports are important and fun. It is always possible to say something encouraging. Parents can reinforce a child's effort and make participation positive. For example, a missed goal is not only a missed opportunity to score --- it's a chance to yell, "Good effort!"

Parents need to model appropriate attitudes and behaviors on the field and sidelines---remaining calm when there is a mistake on the field; remembering to keep a sense of humor; keeping expectations reasonable (these are children); and not taking losses or wins too seriously . These approaches will keep the children involved and help maintain the fun.

Parents can help children practice. Those who do not know about the sport their children are playing can make it an opportunity to learn. Going to a practice, checking out a video, or reading one of the many books available will help. Teach, encourage, and notice any and all progress.

Confidence and self-esteem come from being able to master skills. The more children learn skills, the more they feel "in control" when they participate in sports. Children need to know what they are to do and they need feedback when they are doing it correctly.

Parents can help children let go of errors made during a game or performance. Learning from mistakes and refraining from beating oneself up about them can be good practice for life. One study reveals that world-class athletes recover from their errors in less than a second. This is a worthy practice to emulate and good advice for children. Have you ever been to a soccer game where a team scored a second goal while the other team was feeling bad about the first? Shaking off those mistakes allows players to continue putting forth their best efforts.

Setting Goals

Parents can use a marvelous and simple approach to teaching performance in sports. Something that even the youngest child can learn is the idea of setting two reasonable goals for each performance or game. The first should be a personal performance goal and might be as something as simple as “Pass the ball twice with my left foot” or “Take half a second off my backstroke time.” The second goal should be a leadership goal and involves influencing or reinforcing another player. Examples are saying, “It’s OK” to someone having a bad moment, complimenting another player’s good play or noticing aloud another player’s hustle.

The Value of Sports

Youth sports promote active lifestyles, a good idea for everyone. Starting early helps a child develop healthy habits that can continue throughout life. Sports also offers opportunities to teach children about caring for their bodies (for example, learning about dehydration and hypothermia---big words with important implications).

In helping children prepare mentally and physically to compete, self-care skills are being taught. Even injuries present opportunities to learn about self-care (such as caring for sprains or doing the exercises necessary for recovery). Participating in sports can help children become competent, care for their bodies and look out for themselves when they reach adulthood.

Sports can teach the values of commitment, responsibility, self-discipline, cooperation, teamwork and sportsmanship. They can help with concentration and focus. They can teach children to challenge themselves. Whether the family is “two by two in a canoe” or yelling from the sidelines as one member plays soccer, the opportunities are boundless.