

Do's and Don'ts for the Parents of Young Athletes

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I love sports. Like many of you, I've loved sports my entire life. I played a wide variety of sports as a child, became a bit more selective as an adolescent, and settled on one sport for a brief college career. As a fan, I've also seen an evolution over my life span. When I was a kid, I'd watch just about anything, literally *anything*, that was on TV. And, off course, I lived and died for whichever Chicago team was in season. As I grew older, I started following my local heroes – those larger than life (at the time) athletes competing at the high school. In college and as a young adult, most of my energy was directed towards collegiate and professional teams.

Then something really wonderful happened. I became a dad. This started a whole new evolution of sport fandom. I started cheering for teams with names like Skittles and R & L Excavation. We watched mosh pits with (we had to assume) a soccer ball in there somewhere. We cheered for kids as they turned a two foot hit off the batting T into an inside the park homerun ... every time! You've been there. It's pretty awesome.

Then our kids start getting older. Their skills improve. The competition improves. Games start looking more like real games. This is a time when sports frequently become more important to children. Often, the coaching and the commitments become more intense.

Developmentally, this is a time (as they head towards adolescence) when they start thinking differently and their emotions become more intense. This is a very important time for us as sports parents, because it is our job to make sure our kids continue having fun (first and foremost), but it is also a point when we can help them develop a good mental foundation for success. It is a time to build a confidence that comes from things they can control and duplicate, like playing hard every time (a "process" goal) versus things that they cannot, like scoring a goal (an "outcome" goal).

If you've been to enough youth sporting events, then you've seen some pretty outrageous behaviors from parents. To be fair (and honest) I'm sure there have been times when I've let my emotions lead to actions that I wish I could shake away like an Etch-a-Sketch. I believe we all want what's best for our kids and even in our darker moments it is never the intention to hurt or embarrass (or both) our child. However, hurt we do sometimes – feelings, confidence, focus and, worst of all, pleasure. It is for this reason, that I, as a less than perfect parent of two young athletes and sports psychologist, humbly offer the following “Do's and Don'ts” for parents of young athletes.

Don't focus too much on scoring goals, getting hits or winning. These are great accomplishments to be celebrated for sure, but they are *outcome goals* kids can't control. They may play a great game, but lose and not score. Excessive anxiety comes from worrying too much about things that are beyond athletes control and this can be conveyed to kids by the way we talk to them before and after games.

Do focus on things that are within your young athlete's control – things that are generally repeatable with effort. These are *process goals*. It's a great idea to first ask, “Did you have fun?” Then, comment of their process – things you noticed that they did that they can control. For example, “I saw that you played hard every time you were in the game.” Or, “I really liked how aggressive you were today.” Or, “You seemed very focused when you were batting.” This provides confidence boosting input on things that can be consistently duplicated (e.g., playing hard). When kids focus on their process goals, outcome goals (e.g., wins, hits, goals, etc.) will come often enough.

Don't let your young athlete get stuck ruminating about mistakes or poor performance. This can rob them of the enjoyment that should come naturally from simply competing and participating. It can also begin the slow erosion of their confidence and lead to excessive anxiety that becomes an obstacle to performing well, and can cause children to not take risks.

Do remind your young athletes that mistakes are part of competing and are, in fact, built into sports – errors, fouls, penalties, etc. Encourage them to accept that they will make mistakes and set a *process goal* with them to work on handling these set backs, not to avoid them (an *outcome goal*). Point out examples of players they admire when they make their inevitable mistakes (e.g., a turnover by a star basketball player). Talk with them about how they didn't get down on

themselves and remained focused on the *next play*. When they themselves handle a mistake or poor performance well, make sure they see that you are as proud of that as you are of a goal or hit. This will help them play through mistakes as opposed to fearing them.

Don't let your young athlete engage in negative, self-defeating dialog. Negative statements such as, "I stink," or "I never score goals," or "I'm the worst player on the team," not only undermine enjoyment and performance, but also erode confidence and create anxiety. These statements can also create a mind set that becomes self-fulfilling (e.g., if a child believes they "stink" at baseball, they may let their first at bat "confirm" this belief and shut down). Even statements (verbalized or thought) meant to inspire or focus such as "Don't strike out," or "Don't make an error" can create anxiety by setting a negative message (e.g., striking out) on an *outcome goal*.

Do teach your young athlete how to be positive about their abilities and role on the team. Help them see the many roles they can play on the team that are more *process* oriented than *outcome* oriented. Help them learn to balanced assessments about their abilities (they may not be as fast as some, but are strong), their performance (they may not have gotten a hit in the game, but made some good plays in the field), and their role on the team (they may not score a lot of goals, but can be counted on for their excellent defense). Also, help teach them to make short *positive process statements* rather than *negative outcome statements*. For example, it is better to say "See the ball and make a good swing" (a positive statement or something good to do – see the ball, about a process goal – make a good swing), than to say "Don't strike out" (a negative statement or something to avoid – striking out, about an outcome goal – getting a hit).

Don't allow your young athlete become afraid of failure. It is important to understand that this is a learned trait. When our children first started playing sports (remember the soccer mosh pits I mentioned earlier?) they weren't afraid to fail or make mistakes. They just played for the pure joy of it. In my opinion, the fear of failing is the single most limiting variable in young athlete's performance, and it is something that they acquire along the way. Fear of failing leads to anxious performance, avoidance and/or hesitation on the field or court, or, worst of all, total avoidance or quitting.

Do help your young athlete to accept that the only failure to avoid is the failure to try. Help them see that making mistakes, missing shots or losing games is a part of sports that ALL athletes at EVERY level experience. Frame disappointments as an opportunity to learn and get better, or as a chance to build important skills like determination and perseverance. Remind them that Babe Ruth struck out 1330 times and Michael Jordan got cut from his high school basketball team. When they do take a chance and fall short, compliment them on their courage and don't let them exaggerate it into anything more than it was (e.g., a missed shot). We would all love to see our son or daughter make the big play when the pressure is on. The best way to help them do this is to make it clear from an early age that the most important thing is that they be willing to take the shot (*process*), not that they make it (*outcome*). If they'll take them without fear, they'll make their share.

Enjoy these years of watching your young children play sports. Cheer them on, tell them to have fun and play hard (*process goals*) and help them build a healthy mental base for the years to come.