

Some Thoughts about Youth Sports

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Recently a trial was held that involved a father who killed another father at a hockey rink in Reading, Massachusetts as their children looked on in horror. The trial received national media attention. Ironically, the argument began when the father convicted of involuntary manslaughter complained to the victim who was refereeing this supposedly “noncontact” pick-up game, that there was too much checking and body contact occurring. An argument and physical fight ensued between the two men that led to the death of one of the fathers. The incident and the subsequent publicity once more placed the spotlight on parental behavior and youth sports.

As most of us are aware there have been numerous documented cases of so-called “sports rage” by parents at their children’s games, including parents attacking referees, umpires, and coaches. On many occasions the anger is not expressed physically but instead through hostile, demeaning words and obscenities. In some cases parents have been banned by sports officials from attending future games as a consequence of their outbursts. A number of towns have required parents to attend a meeting to review appropriate behavior at youth sporting events and still others require that parents and their children sign a code of conduct as a prerequisite to a child participating in a sport sponsored by the town.

In a television interview, a man involved with youth sports recommended that parents not be permitted to attend their children’s games. Although I did not agree with his suggestion, as he said it I thought back wistfully to my childhood in Brooklyn. Sports activities that took place outside of school such as basketball, football, and stickball (a well-known New York City game) were organized by the kids themselves with nary an adult around. Somehow we even settled disputes peacefully without the input of a referee. I recall that the only sport in which I participated outside of school that involved an adult was baseball. The league was similar to Little League except it was called PAL (Police Athletic League). As the name implied, the police organized the sport, provided a bat and balls, and served as umpires at the game (you didn’t argue with a police officer about any call that was made). No parents were present. I also remember some pick-up

basketball games in schoolyards that went on hour after hour on the weekends. They were fun. Again, no parents attended.

These comments should not be interpreted to imply that I am opposed to organized sports or the involvement of parents in their children's games. I coached my sons Rich and Doug in a youth basketball league for eight years and have very fond memories of those times. Saturdays from December through March became the day we spent at the gym. They played and I coached in one game and I served as a referee in another. In addition to these basketball activities, I attended countless soccer and Little League games in which Rich and Doug participated. Given these experiences I have no hesitation in saying that youth sports can serve as a powerful vehicle to teach kids how to get along and play as a team, to learn about both winning and losing with grace, to develop one's physical and athletic skills, and to appreciate the importance of commitment, respect, and responsibility towards others. It can also provide the physical exercise required by far too many youngsters who prefer to sit for hours watching television or using their computer.

These as well as other benefits of youth sports can only be realized with the proper attitudes and behaviors displayed by both parents and coaches. But what are proper attitudes and behavior? Following are some of my thoughts, not necessarily in any order of importance:

1. Youth sports should ensure that any youngster who registers to play should receive ample playing time. This is especially true during the elementary school years. I have been at games where some coaches play their most athletic kids for most of the game, leaving little playing time for those less athletically gifted. I think it is sad to observe seven, eight, or nine-year-olds languishing on the bench or the sidelines because they are not as coordinated as their teammates. Several years ago after one of my presentations for parents about nurturing competence and resilience in children, a father approached me. Although I had not specifically addressed the question of youth sports during my talk, he asked me, "Do you think it's okay if a coach plays a child who is not a very good athlete just a few minutes each game?"

I discovered that this man coached in a soccer league and the team he coached was comprised of seven and eight-year-olds and it was not an uncommon practice for

some children to play only five minutes a game. I asked why a coach would do this and not surprisingly he said, "Because a coach would like to win the game." Then he added, "I'm not certain I go along with that being the primary goal." I agreed with his reservations. I said that from my perspective the main goal given the age of the children he was coaching was not winning and losing but rather finding opportunities to help all children participate and develop their skills.

I recommended that the coaches in his league engage in a discussion of the goals and purpose of youth sports. I told him that when I coached, all of the coaches involved with elementary school youngsters (through sixth grade) implemented a rule that no child could play more than three-quarters of a game and no child could play less than one-half of the game. I mentioned how impressed I was by the enthusiasm with which parents and children embraced this rule. If certain children are given only a limited time to play, we are robbing them of an opportunity to develop their skills. I believe that a basic goal of youth sports is to teach.

2. Comments uttered by parents at the sideline should be positive and encouraging. If a child makes a nice shot in a basketball game or scores a goal in a soccer game, it's natural for parents to shout, "Nice shot" or "Nice goal." The comments should not be excessive nor should they be reserved only for your child. I was at one soccer game during which a mother and father screamed with delight at every move their daughter made, as if she were the next Mia Hamm. You could see the embarrassment grow on their daughter's face with each new, overdone compliment. Obviously, negative, critical comments should be avoided. Not only are they typically unhelpful in improving a child's skills but when done in the presence of teammates and other parents they are humiliating and may backfire. If anything, a child subjected to criticism during a game may become more upset and less able to concentrate. I have actually witnessed parents yell at kids to run faster, to hold their hands differently on the bat, to play better defense, or to be more alert while a game was in progress. While I am not suggesting adults avoid offering children feedback, I think such feedback is best left to coaches to do in a way that is not disruptive or embarrassing. When as parents we give our children feedback it should be free of intimidating, demeaning remarks.

Last July, The Boston Globe Magazine published an excellent article about youth sports. Al Skinner, the well-respected basketball coach at Boston College, commented on coaches who use demeaning remarks. He noted that such coaches have the “wrong attitude. Even if the kids have some success they won’t enjoy it. The purpose of youth sports is fun. If it’s fun, they’ll practice more and improve, and success will follow. Of course, kids need criticism to correct mistakes, but there’s a way to deliver the message so kids can hear it.”

3. This point should be very obvious. Youth sports are for youth. They are not vehicles through which parents live or re-live their own lives. Years ago I saw a boy in therapy who played Pop Warner football. In one game he caught two touchdown passes. In the same game he also dropped a pass. As he came off the field at the end of the game, his father’s first comment to him was, “How come you dropped that pass?” Interestingly, one of the reasons the child was referred to me was that in school whenever he had difficulty with a task, he quit. In my next session with this boy tears came to his eyes as he recounted what his father had said. The boy noted, “Nothing I do is good enough for my father. I wish just once he would say something positive.”

I scheduled a meeting with this boy’s mother and father. I raised the question why the father had focused on the dropped pass rather than the two touchdown catches. At first father defended his actions by saying, “I want my son to learn from his mistakes.” I agreed that learning from one’s mistakes was very important but that children and adults benefited most from feedback when they felt the person also focused on their strengths. As we continued the discussion, this father said, “I was never a very good athlete growing up. I always wanted to be. The good athletes seemed to be the most popular kids. My son has natural talent and can go far with sports. I don’t want him to waste that opportunity.”

Fortunately, this father was open enough to recognize eventually that his behavior was greatly influenced by his own “excess baggage” from the past and that he was attempting to re-write his frustrating childhood through his son. This insight served as the basis for changing his “negative script” and seeing his son as a person in his own right.

Relatedly, if parents and youth coaches believe that the number of games their children/players win or lose is a reflection of their parenting or coaching skills, they should reassess their position. Otherwise, it is almost certain that their own self-esteem is in for a roller coaster type ride. During one of the seasons that I coached, our team compiled a record of 0-10 (you read it right, no wins, 10 losses). Yet, the preceding season my team had a record of 10-1. Obviously, the kids on the 0-10 team and I would have preferred to have won at least a few games (actually, we would have preferred to have won every game); however, I did not feel that during our 0-10 season I was any less a person or coach nor my players any less deserving of my positive comments and encouragement than during the 10-1 season.

I cannot leave this point without mentioning that I have heard of instances in which parents delayed entering their children (especially boys) in kindergarten for a year, not because they judged that their children required a year to mature cognitively but rather so that they would be at a physical advantage in school sports. I know that colleges engage in “redshirting” their athletes to provide players an opportunity to sit for a year without jeopardizing their eligibility—but to begin this practice when a child is five years old seems foolish and possibly harmful to the child. I can only imagine the pressure such children will experience while engaged in sports.

4. I know that some youth coaches tell their players, “If we win today’s game I will take you all out for ice cream.” I am not against winning or against celebrations but I question the basis of such celebrations. When I coached we selected one or two times to go out as a team after a game. This was decided before the game and not based on whether we won or lost; the main rationale for doing this was that we were teammates and it would be fun. I think when you are dealing with young children it is unfair to tie a treat to winning and losing. You invite negative consequences. What happens, for example, if a child in a Little League game makes an error that allows the other team to win or in a basketball game a child misses two foul shots at the end that would have given his team the win? Kids in these situations already feel they have let their team down. Imagine how much worse they feel when they realize that they also cost their teammates ice cream or some other reward.

In ending these thoughts about youth sports, I would like to report the findings of a survey that examined what children most wanted from their experiences in youth sports. The study was reported in The Boston Globe article mentioned earlier. Research conducted by the Institute for the Study of Youth Sports at Michigan State University found that “winning games is barely on the radar screen. Sure, kids would rather win than lose, but among younger players winning isn’t their reason for playing.” Mike Clark of MSU noted, “Preadolescents play sports to have fun, be with their friends, and learn.” In contrast, the MSU study found that for their parents and coaches “winning is a high priority.”

Parents and coaches should keep in mind the first word in “youth sports” and listen carefully to what kids view as important. By doing so we will be better equipped to provide the experiences that will help our youngsters obtain the many benefits of participating in sports.

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