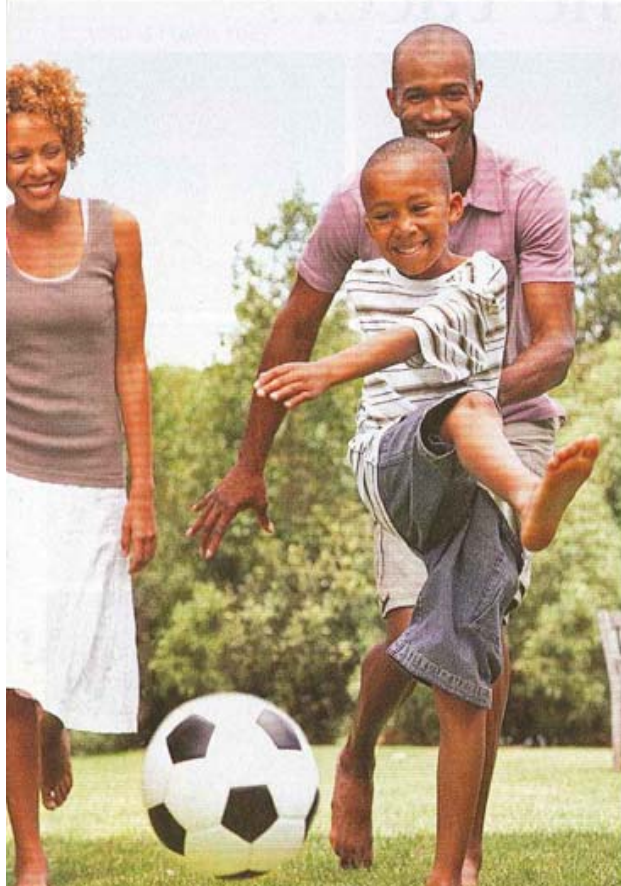


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Coach for Life

Use the lessons sports teach to guide your kids in the biggest challenge of all.

BY MYATT MURPHY

It's not whether you win or lose, it's how you play the game." This is the great lesson of sports, but it's also valuable to parenting. For children to become responsible adults, how you act after the game determines whether your kids truly win or lose.

"Letting kids participate in sports gives them the opportunity to learn many valuable lessons," says Rick Wolff, cofounder and chairman of the Center for Sports Parenting. "However, it's up to parents to help their children apply what they learn from sports to other areas of their lives."

Here are five important lessons sports offer, and how you can reinforce them by becoming the best coach your kids will ever have in the toughest sport of all—life.

1. THE STRENGTH OF TEAMWORK

"Sports provide an opportunity for kids to learn to take turns, set goals as a team, and cooperate with other children to achieve those goals," says Sharon Bergen, senior vice president of education and training at KinderCare Learning Centers. "It's this kind of emotional and social development that can easily carry over to how well your children work with their teachers, classmates, relatives, and anyone else they may encounter in life."

BRINGING IT HOME Look for ways to encourage teamwork within everyday family life. "Many family tasks, from cleaning the house, preparing the table for dinner, or even getting ready for a trip in the car, can be done as a team," says Bergen. Rather than focus on your children's individual tasks (cleaning their room), focus on the main goal (a clean house), then explain the part that each family member will play toward reaching that goal.

2. EVERYONE HAS SOMETHING TO OFFER

In team sports, no single shining star can perform every task. For example, one child may bat well, another catch, another run the bases fast. Some kids may be more developed cognitively and understand the sport's strategy, while others may be more adept socially and instinctively know how to motivate other kids to play their best.

BRINGING IT HOME "The next time your child makes a remark about someone's differences or weaknesses, immediately point out that person's strengths," says Bergen. "Over time, it will teach your child how to continuously look for and find positive qualities in every person she meets." If your child feels frustrated by her own shortcomings, remind her of the skills that come more naturally to her. Then find examples of the skills she had trouble with in the past that are no longer an issue.

3. PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

Through sports, kids can see the results that come from repeating certain skills in order to perfect them. "They develop a more positive self image through personal achievement and learn that if they spend enough time on a task, they will eventually become better at it," says Wolff. "With the right guidance, that valuable lesson can carry over into almost everything they may want to achieve in life, whether that's studying an hour a night to get a higher grade, practicing daily to learn how to play a musical instrument, or simply excelling at anything they set out to try."

BRINGING IT HOME Great coaches have cultivated the ability to link practice to a clear and specific goal. "The key is to explain to a kid why he is practicing, what he's



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getting better at, and how that skill will help him achieve a specific goal," says Bergen.

For example, instead of assuming your child understands why he should bother with his vocabulary homework, break it down for him: Explain how learning new words will make him a better reader, which will allow him to enjoy more books about the things he loves and to understand what he's reading more fully.

4. WIN—AND LOSE—THE RIGHT WAY

"Sports are the perfect forum for giving kids a taste of both victory and defeat on a regular basis," says Wolff. "They can also set the stage for teaching your child how to be happy for others' successes and rise above their own failures in the future."

BRINGING IT HOME "Every time you win or lose in front of your child—whether someone cut you off in traffic or graciously let you merge into their lane—remember that every personal gain or loss is a golden opportunity to

teach your child how to handle each with dignity," says Bergen. When he loses, be sympathetic. Judging him too harshly may cause him to start creating lies about why he didn't do as well—from "the sun was in my eyes" to "my teacher doesn't like me." You don't want your children learning to make up excuses or alibis when things go wrong. "Instead, you want them to recognize that it's entirely fine when they don't always perform at their best," says Wolff.

5. FEEDBACK DOESN'T MEAN FAILURE

Good coaches know how to offer constructive feedback in an uplifting way. This can make kids more respectful and receptive when taking advice from others, even their parents.

BRINGING IT HOME Many parents feel there's no better time to critique their child's performance than immediately after they've failed at something. "Skip the postgame analysis," says Wolff. "Immediately going over all their mistakes only tunes kids out and can lead to resentment, especially if your last words to them before the game were 'Just go out and have fun.'"

Regardless of how well she performed, always praise your child for her effort and for the things she did right. "Offering hollow compliments that are too general, such as 'you did great today,' isn't practical because it doesn't point to anything specific that kids can understand," says Wolff. "Reminding a child about what she did well makes her feel more comfortable to discuss the rest of her performance without feeling judged," says Wolff. Once kids start talking about the errors they made, always keep the conversation positive. Acknowledge their failure by saying "It's OK to be upset. You did your best and I'm proud of you."

"Knowing that you accept them—regardless of how well they perform—will give your kids all the confidence they need to succeed far beyond the playing field," says Wolff. ☺

SPORT TIPS

Every Parent Should Know

Children learn best from sports that fit their personalities and talents—and from having your support all through the process. Keep these tips in mind when your child picks an activity, says Rick Wolff, sports parenting expert.

● **Guide, but abide** You think you know exactly what activity your child would excel at—and you might be right—but don't let him feel railroaded. "Even if your child's size, shape, or skills make him ideal for a specific sport or activity, explore a variety with him so he can see his options," says Wolff. Ultimately, let him make the final decision and do your best to support his choice.

● **Learn the lingo** Once your child chooses a sport, educate yourself about the rules of the game. "If your child says she's playing 'second home' in lacrosse or 'fullback' in soccer, you should know what she's talking about," says Wolff. "It not only shows you care about what she's interested in, she'll also be likely to share with you more often because she'll know you understand."

● **Keep your emotions even** "If you find yourself more emotional than your child is about his sport and/or begin making demands of your child, you may be taking the game much too seriously," says Wolff. Instead of forcing your competitive spirit on your children, try finding your own sport or activity in which to compete.