



BETTER ATHLETES
BETTER PEOPLE

Ten Tips for Sports Parents

Rather than concern with scoreboard wins and losses, playing time and position, PCA hopes that you, as a sports parent, keep your eye on the Big Picture – the life lessons in teamwork, resilience, overcoming adversity, communication skills, etc., that sports can uniquely teach, and that you can uniquely help your children process toward becoming fulfilled, productive contributors to our society.

Here are 10 tips that can help you help your children.

- 1.** It's easy to get wrapped up in the excitement of youth sports – we all want our children to succeed. But before your child's season starts and emotions run high, write down your goals for your child in sports. Keep this list close by and refer back to it throughout the season to help maintain your focus on the bigger picture.
- 2.** Before a game, help your child prepare with the right rest, good nutrition/hydration and encouragement.
- 3.** During a game: cheer positively for all the players on both teams; refrain from negative commentary on players, officials or fans of the opposing team; and do not instruct from the stands or sidelines. You can try "no-verbs cheering" or otherwise limit yourself to shouts of encouragement. Either way, let coaches coach. Many collegiate coaches watch the sideline behavior of a prospective recruit's parents to help determine whether or not to recruit that athlete.
- 4.** Sometimes, parents or other spectators behave in a way that feels out of place or just too intense for the situation – berating officials or screaming at their children or other players. You may be unsure how to respond. One key is to consistently model the appropriate behavior. Then, if you want to help an over-exuberant spectator, sometimes all it takes is a glance or a gesture, such as lowering your palms to indicate "calm down." You might choose to distract them with conversation about another aspect of the game, or if you feel comfortable, you can remind them about the role of parents in upholding a positive sports culture.
- 5.** After the game, resist the temptation to critique during the car ride home. Wait for your child to start conversation. If you are concerned with your child's emotional state after a tough loss, poor performance or other adversity, ask if he or she wants to talk. If the answer is "no," respect that.
- 6.** When your child is ready to talk...listen! Put the phones away. Maintain eye contact. Ask open-ended questions and nod and interject and smile so your child knows you're engaged. When it's your turn to talk, focus on the life lessons available from the experience. Reinforce your child's sense of self-worth with "You're the kind of person who..." statements: "I know you are disappointed with the loss, but one thing I like about you is you're the type of person who bounces back and tries hard the next time."
- 7.** If you feel the need to advocate for your child with his or her coach, consider helping your child self-advocate. If your child complains of routine issues, such as a coach yelling or a shortage of playing time, prepare the child to privately address the issue with the coach: "What can I do to get better and earn more playing time?" or "I know you want the best from me, but I get nervous when you yell." If your child does not complain, but

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you suspect a problem, ask an open-ended question, such as “How are you feeling about your season overall?” If convinced that your child is having fun and perceives no problem, then you might let the issue lie. Do not “poison the well” by speaking poorly of your child’s coach, which only puts the child in the middle of your conflict.

8. If self-advocacy does not work and you still feel the need to advocate for your child with his or her coach, do so by asking the coach to set up a private meeting. In the meeting, thank the coach for such a commitment. If you can honestly praise, do so. Then, calmly ask for the coach’s point of view on the topic that led you to seek the meeting. Once you understand the coach’s perspective, if you disagree, keep a civil conversation until the issue is resolved or until you politely excuse yourself to consider next steps toward resolution.
9. In either of the above scenarios, if you suspect physical or emotional abuse, address the matter with the coach, preferably in private, but however necessary to protect the well-being of children.
10. Families face increasingly early and persuasive pressure for children to specialize and play a single sport year-round. Except in rare cases, such as developing a prodigy in gymnastics or skating where many careers peak in a child’s teens, resist early specialization. Research from Michigan State University’s Institute for the Study of Youth Sports indicates that most athletes who attain an elite level specialize MUCH LATER than many coaches and parents think. In most cases, specialization before 12 is not a good idea. And many believe playing multiple sports until at least 15 is even better! If the temptation is to pursue a college scholarship in a certain sport, know that most collegiate coaches prefer multi-sport athletes.

At every possible turn, let your children know that you love them unconditionally (by saying it!), regardless of their athletic performance. Enjoy your child’s time in youth sports. It is fleeting, and you will want to look back, in conversation with your grown children, on the good old days.

For more insight on sports parenting, subscribe to PCA’s *Sports Parent Conversation Starters*, a weekly e-mail series with advice on talking to your children about their youth sports experiences.