

Parent Guidelines for Sportsmanship and Youth Sports

Parents and kids alike love sports, and it's easy to get caught up in a game and become focused on winning. Yet there is much more to be gained from the sports experience than a winning record. When children and teens are involved in sports, they can learn and put into practice values that will stay with them for the rest of their lives.

Good sportsmanship is one of the life lessons that children can learn from sports. You can help your children understand and value good sportsmanship while making sure they have a safe and fun sports experience.

Good sportsmanship may seem hard to define, but its hallmarks include being able to win without gloating, respecting one's opponents, and being able to lose gracefully. Here are some important principles to instill in your children:

- If you lose, don't make up excuses.
- If you win, don't rub it in.
- Learn from mistakes and get back in the game.
- Always do your best.
- If someone else makes a mistake, remain encouraging and avoid criticizing.
- Show respect for yourself, your team, and the officials of the game.

Parents are important role models, so let your children see you upholding these principles, whether you play a sport yourself or root for your child's team from the sidelines.

Sportsmanship from the stands for youth sports parents

It's easy to get caught up in the game. Fourth quarter, two minutes to go, and with the game on the line, a player misses an easy layup. Ugh!

And before you know it, you're yelling from the stands. It might start with an innocent "C'mon!" but sadly in many cases it deteriorates into yelling that can erode kids' confidence and self-esteem. You've likely witnessed a parent yelling things like, "C'mon Michael, Go to the ball! What are you doing? Get it together! What's the matter with you? Move your feet! Turn and go! Go! Gooooooo! Awwwww man. Come ON!" Or maybe you've found yourself guilty of this behavior, too. It happens.

But a commitment to good sportsmanship is not just the job of the athletes and coaches. Parents play a critical role in setting the tone – at home, in the stands, and after the game.

Before the game, remind your child – and yourself – that practicing good sportsmanship is something important, something you can commit to together, and something in which you and your child can take pride in, regardless of the outcome of the contest. Let your child know that you too will work on your commitment to good sportsmanship and will practice it in the stands.

During the game, work hard to not be "that dad" or "that mom" who loses their cool. While you think the spotlight is on the field, it's actually on you in the stands, in the eyes of your children. They see and hear it all. And during the game is your moment to demonstrate that you walk-the-walk and practice the very same good sportsmanship that you ask your kids to show.

Try things like 'no verbs cheering' where you only clap, wave your sign, whirl your rally towel, and yell, "Yay!" No verbs helps you steer clear of coaching from the stands or criticizing your child or any others who are competing. Cheer for good plays – by both teams! When a controversial call happens, be silent – or maybe even give a 'brush it off' sign to the team and fellow parents in the stands. If your child seems not to be paying attention during the game or is losing

focus (picking weeds in the field), resist the urge to say or do anything during the game. Save it for a conversation between you and the coach afterwards on what you can together do to help your kid stay engaged in the game.

Remember that they are kids who play sports to have fun and to learn. With learning comes mistakes. And traits like grit and determination happen when kids get the chance to struggle, figure out solutions on their own, and overcome obstacles. Give them the space to figure it out themselves.

After the game, resist the urge to ‘break down’ what you saw. Start with asking, not telling: “What was the most fun part of that game?” “What was your favorite play?” “What did you learn from that game?”

And above all – before the game, during the game and after the game, remind your children that you love them and are proud of them, win or lose. And that you are especially proud of them when they practice good sportsmanship. Who knows, your kid might quickly respond, “I’m proud of your good sportsmanship in the stands too!”

Tips for teaching good sportsmanship

Good sportsmanship includes following certain guidelines for good behavior. Share these concepts with your children:

Follow the rules of the game. It might seem easier to win by doing things a different way (cheating), but everyone has to follow the rules. Explain to your child that rules are created so that sports can be played in an organized way.

- **Avoid arguing.** Stay focused on the game instead of giving in to anger with teammates, coaches, or referees. Always avoid using bad language and negative words.
- **Everyone should have a chance to play.** In youth sports, it's important to encourage even those players who are the least skilled to have fun playing in the game. Parents, coaches, and even other players have an important role in allowing less talented teammates time to participate.
- **Play fair.** Good sportsmen want to win because they followed the rules and played the best game they could. Never support any effort to win that attempts to go around the rules. Cheating is not acceptable.
- **Follow directions.** Emphasize the importance of listening to coaches and referees and following their directions while on the field and involved in team activities.
- **Respect the other team.** Whether your team wins or loses, it's important to show respect for the effort of the other team. If the other team wins, accept defeat, acknowledge their abilities, and move on. If your team wins, resist bragging—that's what it means to be a gracious winner.
- **Encourage teammates.** Team sports work best when each individual supports the team. Praise teammates for what they do well and encourage them when they make mistakes. Avoid criticism and unkind actions. Parents should model this behavior for children by praising them for specific things they have done well, even if they made a mistake or may not have played as well as hoped.
- **Respect the decisions of referees and other officials.** These people are charged with making difficult decisions about plays in the game. Good sportsmanship requires that you accept a call, even if you disagree with it. Remember that it's only one call in a long game—get back into play and focus on the game.
- **End with a handshake.** Good sportsmen enjoy sports and know how to end a game on a positive note, whether or not they won. Threats, anger, criticism, and other negative expressions are not acceptable.

