

Fun, Fitness and Fostering Character: 8 Tips to Make Youth Sports Great for Kids

By Anne Josephson

Parent brawls, coaches who belittle athletes and the kids who are suffering from injuries, eating disorders or stress and exhaustion. It can leave a parent wondering: why is it valuable for my child to play youth sports?

As a former athlete, parent to four and owner of a gymnastics club for the past ten years, I can assure you that there are many, many reasons why participating in sports is good for kids. Those reasons can be separated into three categories: fun, fitness and the fostering good character.

Playing sports can be fun. Fun is often thought of as a superfluous, silly non-essential of life. Like frosting, it's fluffy and delicious but lacks any nutritional punch and actually has the lesser-desired effect of rotting your teeth. In fact, the word just so often predicates the word 'fun' that we dismiss the significance of fun in our lives.

But we shouldn't. Fun brings joy and happiness to life. It reduces stress. It enhances creativity. It is when we are having fun while being appropriately challenged that we enter into flow, what psychologist [Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi](#) names the feeling of complete and energized focus in an activity, with a high level of enjoyment and fulfillment. People are happiest when they are in flow. Sports are a natural area in which kids can find and develop flow because they are challenged while having fun. Furthermore, youth sports participation can create life-long friendships and happy childhood memories.

Participating in a sport can develop fitness for life. Scarcely a week goes by without a news story outlining how fitness, or rather lack thereof, is a crisis in the United States today. The Center for Disease Control reports that childhood obesity has [doubled in children and quadrupled in adolescents in the past 30 years](#), with more than a third of all kids overweight or obese. The immediate health effects of youth obesity include the risk of high blood pressure, high cholesterol, pre-diabetes as well as the social and psychological ramifications of being overweight. Long term, obese youth are more likely to become obese adults and therefore face the increased risk of heart disease, type two diabetes, stroke, several types of cancer and osteoarthritis.

While reducing screen time, portion sizes and the frequency with which unhealthy foods and drinks are consumed are useful, playing sports can lower the risk of obesity and its associated problems. It can also develop basic coordination and the habit of exercising which in turn increases the chances that a youth athlete will continue athletic pursuits into his or her adult life.

Finally, sports can help foster a child's character. According to [a recent Pew Research Center study](#), there were two traits that over 90 percent of parents who were surveyed listed as important to teach their children: responsibility and hard work. Sports can teach both of these traits as well

as others including fairness, respect, empathy, tenacity, discipline, grit, resilience, persistence as well as winning and losing with dignity. Additionally, sports participation can build self-confidence and self-esteem.

Fun, fitness and fostering good character does not happen merely because a child dons a leotard, dribbles a ball or wears soccer cleats, however. The caveat to the ability for youth sports to do these wonderful things is this: they must be pursued with intention. Coaches, youth officials and parents must keep their eye on the big picture of creating an atmosphere where fun, fitness and the fostering of character take precedence to winning, scholarships, the development of professional athletes and adult egos.

Here are eight tips to making youth sports great for kids:

- 1. Make the experience child centered.** Youth sports should be centered on the child's needs first, not those of the adults coaching or parents viewing. It should be an environment free of bullying and intimidation.
- 2. Create an environment of teamwork and community.** The environment should encourage kids to be friends with one another and camaraderie should be cultivated through group activities in and outside of practice.
- 3. Focus on process not product.** We tend to talk about sports in terms of outcomes, asking questions like: Did you win? What was the score? What place did you get? Did you make the All-Star team? Are you trying for a scholarship? The Olympics? Considering asking questions like: Did you have fun? What part did you enjoy the most? Are you going to try anything differently next time? How you will practice this week? Did you say thank you to your coach?
- 3. Make fun a central goal of your sports program, not a fluffy add-on.** Ask your child if he or she is having fun. Often. While some days will be better than others, the frequency of "yeses" should overwhelm the few days when the answer is 'no.' By repeating the question frequently, your child will understand that fun is a worth goal.
- 4. Fitness and skill development should take precedence over winning.** While winning is fun, kids sitting on a bench for an entire game does nothing to contribute to their progress of fitness or development of skills. Emphasizing how good it feels to exercise and keeping your body healthy should be central messages in any youth sports program.
- 5. Incremental improvement, effort and teamwork should be praised.** Encourage the small wins and the good attitude the child demonstrates. Comments like tie improvement ("I see how much stronger you are getting.") to effort ("Your hard work is paying off.") helps your child link effort and achievement, a hallmark of the growth mindset. Avoid focusing on talent as it promotes a fixed mindset, the idea that you cannot meaningfully influence your abilities.
- 6. Use failure as a normal part of learning.** Failure scares most people. But, in actuality, it is a good thing because it is a normal part of learning. The more comfortable a person becomes with failure, the easier it is for them to be bold in the face of an obstacle. The good news is that sports

provide multiple opportunities to fail. Talking about failure as feedback and using it to come up with a plan for how to do better next time teaches kids how to be resilient.

7. Talk about the character building lessons and opportunities in sports. Sport builds discipline and responsibility when kids have to go to practice and meet their commitments even when they no longer feel like doing so. So when a child wants to miss practice for no good reason, it is a great chance to discuss why we don't behave that way. On the other hand, at one point or another, most kids are going to stop playing a sport. This gives the child the opportunity to learn the difference between quitting and ending. Quitting is giving up on something in the middle, often in frustration, anger or fear. Ending, however, is deciding something no longer fits our needs and unwinding from that responsibility in a manner that honors our commitments and relationships. These are valuable conversations.

8. Allow those valuable life lessons to occur. Helicopter parents: come in for a landing. Letting your child experience the ups and downs that come with participating in sports, with your love and guidance, is marvelous preparation for their lives as adults. Don't intervene each time you think they are treated unfairly. Don't be too quick to jump in to shield them from frustration or disappointment. Allow the lessons that sports provide to teach them and you can be there to help them process.