

Competitive sports offer children ages four through adulthood many benefits. It is more common to find organized sports than sandlot. Leagues exist for just about every age group and sport. Team sports promote:

- * Healthy self-esteem
- * Teamwork
- * Physical activity
- * Leadership development
- * Development of problem-solving skills
- * Healthy competition
- * Self-discipline
- * Constructive pursuits for idle time
- * Friendships

Although structured sports begin at very early age, many factors influence a child's continuation of sports. A child's experience of the coach, his or her teammates, and parents in relation to the sports experience may leave an indelible impression. Positive experiences often lead to developing a passion for the sport. Negative sports experiences tend to be generalized by the child to the entire sport impacting his or her desire to continue in sports. For example, if during a season a child has a coach who yells at him or her they would associate playing sports and getting yelled at by an adult. This will influence his or her decision to participate going forward.

In addition to all the benefits listed above, sports should be fun. Participants above all should enjoy the experience and competition. Unfortunately, even well-meaning adults can ruin the experience for a child. Both coaches and parents fail to

understand the influence their attitude has on the child. It is important for parents and coaches need to separate adult expectations from the child's. **Winning** is definitely more enjoyable than losing, however if a child feels too much pressure to win, his or her experience of the sport will be diminished. Here are some general guidelines to facilitate a positive sports experience.

1. Remember that you are a role model. How you conduct yourself while watching your child's sport, will be what your child emulates.
2. Distinguish between your goals for your child and your child's expectations. Winning may not be as important to your child as just competing.
3. Let the coach do his/her job. If you are openly critical of his coach, it will certainly diminish the experience for your child. The coaching you do should supplement not contradict the coach.
4. Emphasize the experience of participating rather than the results. If your child had fun, made friends, and learned along the way, that should be viewed as a successful endeavor.
5. Carry on a dialogue with your child during the season. Make sure your child does not get lost in the competition.
6. Most organized sports have a code of ethics. Familiarize yourself with all the information.
7. Get to know the coach as well as the organization. The philosophy of the league flows from the top down. If the

Director of the league does not have a consistent approach to the game, it is likely coaches will not either. Most Directors will take the time to discuss their league policies.

8. Advocate for your child in a calm, rational manner.

An Age by Age Guide to Youth Sports Expectations

The expectations for a child should be different for each age in organized sports.

Ages 4-7:

Athlete expectation: Kids at this age are introduced to the sport. They learn to follow rules, play with others, have fun, and understand somewhat about the nature of the sport. Physical coordination and skills begin to develop.

Parent Guidelines: Kids have fun. Winning or losing is not a priority. Support kids and keep the focus on learning.

Coach Guidelines: Allow kids to enjoy game. Focus on safety and fun. Provide structure in practice. Work toward teaching rules understanding that learning these will be a repetitive process.

Ages 8-10:

Athlete expectation: Kids should have a better understanding of rules. Team play is better understood. Sharing and passing are better understood. Children are also better able to understand the concept of winning and losing. More self-awareness is developing at this age.

Youth and Sports

Athletes are more aware of their abilities, but still limited on how they compare among their peers.

Parent Guideline: Do not place great demands on winning or losing. Focus on positive accomplishments. Most likely referees or umpires are going to be introduced at this level. In most leagues, these will be teenagers. It is important to present good role modeling by not yelling or being critical of them. Remember, even in major leagues umpires and referees make mistakes.

Coach Guidelines: Provide a safe learning environment. Allow kids to have fun and want to continue in the sport. Make sure practices are safe and structured. Involve parents in practices and solicit feedback from them about how children are enjoying the experience.

Ages 11-14:

Athlete expectation: Competition usually becomes more intense. The demands of the sport and practice time increases. Greater concern about winning and losing develops. Kids with more advanced athletic skills come to the forefront. They are more aware of differences in abilities. Youth are also more sensitive to these differences and may get discouraged easily if left out of a game. As children move into travel leagues, middle school and high school children may experience being cut from a team.

Parent guidelines: Deemphasize winning and losing. Encourage focus on team and individual goals. Parents should be aware of how they present themselves at practices and after games. They are still role models to kids and parents that are critical of officiating, coaches, or other players, will certainly influence their children.

Sportsmanship should be highly stressed at this age. Parent should also consider travel teams for their children. These teams provide more competition and will prepare them for high school sports should they decide to continue.

Coach guidelines: Even though there may be differences in ability, coaches should try to create an atmosphere where all kids feel a part of the team. The inclination may be to highlight the children with more athletic skills but focus should be on including all players and providing all team members the opportunity to develop their skills.

Make sure all kids are still enjoying the game.

By the time a child reaches age 14, they are nearing high school and most sports opportunities will be limited to high school sports.

It is important to remember that adults play a large part in a child's impressions about involvement in sports. It is also important to keep in mind some kids are not born with natural abilities in sports but have a desire to be a part of the team. They also may not enjoy this type of competition as much as other kids. Be mindful that sports benefit body and mind. The child's social and emotional needs are important. Continue to be involved throughout their athletic career and most importantly, role model good behavior.



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