

Coaching Kids' Sports
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Most coaches could use a few pointers themselves. Believe me- I'm one of them. As a coach of various youth sports I've learned many valuable lessons- most of them from the children. Children try to teach us every day- sometimes we just aren't listening. One of my eight-year-old basketball players came to a game and said he didn't want to play. Rather than force the issue I tried to see this from his perspective. He's one of the youngest boys on the team and he plays against opponents 12 inches taller and two years older than himself. No wonder he was suffering from "hypo-confidence" (my term for "I'll never be any good at this game"). With a little encouragement and support he later decided he would give it a try. When he made the first shot he attempted, the ball lit up the scoreboard and his smile lit up the gym! His enthusiasm spread like wildfire through the team (not to mention his parents). This child went on to play like he never played before and he played better from that moment forward. What made the difference? Confidence! The feeling of "I *can* do it!"

That young boy taught me that my job as a coach is to teach children to try, try and try again no matter what the odds. I'm reminded of my former basketball coach who showered us with positive messages. We entered the gym one day our average height about 4 foot 11 inches. We looked at our opponents who towered above us like redwood trees. As we complained to the coach he quipped, "boys, trees can't play basketball", and we won the game!

Self-confidence is only one lesson we have to teach these children. What follows are other tips for coaches of today's youth which my experience as a coach, a player, a father and a child psychotherapist have taught me.

As coaches we must consider ourselves role models whose purpose is to set a positive tone. Your team is watching *you* so watch what you say. Your actions should reflect how you want your team to behave. Do you yell at the officials and complain of "bad calls"? Or do you talk calmly to the officials and teach the kids that the officials are part of the game- whether they are right or wrong.

When mistakes are made do you chastise the player and tell them what *not* to do? Or do you tell them we all make mistakes; they should try to do better next time, and show them what *to do*? Positive attention and praise are powerful tools.

Catch your players being good, trying hard and demonstrating good sportsmanship. Reward them with praise and recognition and they will continue to improve and feel a sense of accomplishment. Make practices enjoyable for the players. Remember this is only for fun! It never hurts to win, but this should be last on the priority list.

Perhaps it would be easier to redefine "win". If your team is learning about life, having fun and getting exercise isn't that winning? When someone asks you about your team, do you talk about the score of the last game and your won-loss record? Hopefully you tell them about how the team is learning to work together and have fun while "learning the game".

Good sportsmanship is essential. Many friends are made through participation in athletics. The other team does not have to be the enemy. Teach your players to

congratulate the opposition on their successes and to be friendly competitors. Those who act smug in victory will soon be humbled in defeat. Children need to be good winners as well as gracious losers. Life is full of loses and disappointments. If these children can learn to handle loses on the field or the court, they will be better equipped to handle loses on the "field of life". The most gratifying compliments I have ever received as a coach are from parents of the opposing team saying that our players were "good sports" after we won a game.

The sense of *teamwork* and helping others reach a common goal is central to sports. Nothing feels better than making a crucial play and having your teammates appreciate your effort as the team's success. There will always be some players who are better than others. Children learn well from each other and coaches need to use their more gifted players to encourage and support those less naturally talented in athletics. There is a tremendous sense of accomplishment and satisfaction achieved by having a group work together toward a common goal- the more difficult the challenge, the sweeter the success.

Putting forth your very best effort is another lesson for coaches to teach their kids. Some people go through life not ever trying their best. Some children do not try their hardest for fear they may fail anyway. We need to show them the value of trying to give 110% even if you fail. When you give your all you reach new heights. You go where you have never been before. You also get disappointed sometimes. But you never know what can be accomplished without that extra effort. This is an invaluable lesson for our children.

Coaches have a responsibility to *equate the challenges on the field with those off the field*. Stress the importance of studying hard in school. Show them that you value effort and achievement both on and off the field. Teach them that getting along with your brother or sister is as important as getting along with your teammates. Listening to your parents is as important as listening to your coach. As coaches our job is to help these kids through life, not to score more points than the other team. Our job is to teach them the value of athletics and the skills of the game, not to run off the field yelling to the opponents "we won and you lost". By helping them develop self-confidence, good sportsmanship and putting forth their best effort in athletics we enable them to use these positive qualities to succeed in life.

I watch children I have previously coached play ball now. I see them doing what they were taught. I remember the progress they made throughout the long tedious practices. One child congratulates someone on the other team for a good play, one goes after a ball with all his might and another is a humble winner or a proud loser. These are the rewards that make coaching worthwhile.