

An Important Message

Vigilant parents of sports specialists should send the following message: “We want you to pursue your dream, but whenever we see neglect in your studies or character, the ball (or club or flute) will be taken away.” The objective is not to suppress a child’s desire to excel but rather to support the desire by making sure that the two anchors are safely moored. Failure to demand consistent effort toward achieving proficiency in the anchor qualities is detrimental to a youngster’s long-term development. Aspirational sports goals should never be mistaken as substitutes for the anchor values.

A Starting Specialization Point

The driving force behind a child’s interest in a sport must be the child’s passion for the sport—not that of the child’s parents.

SUCCESS AND ACADEMIC RIGOR

Our surveys of successful career people who played sports in their youth make an obvious but important point: many told us that their love of sports did not detract from the anchor qualities of training the mind and character development. While the athletic accomplishments of these highly successful adults covered a wide span, most fell into the “average athlete” category. The majority, however, seemed to recognize the limits of sports, and the boundless opportunities associated with academic rigor and good character.

Eleven Important Values to Be Learned from Sports

Because sports are so engaging, they offer a good vehicle for teaching strong lessons to children. Many of the following values come under the umbrella of good sportsmanship which, broadly defined, emphasizes honesty, fair play, winning and losing gracefully, and respectful treatment of all players, officials, coaches, and spectators. Parents should help their child develop and practice a sound, values-based sports philosophy, the tenets of which are useful in all facets of life. I discuss these values with varying emphasis at different levels: elementary and youth league followed by middle school and high school.

Throughout your child’s sports career, teach and reinforce the following values—and begin early!

1. Balance and perspective
2. Honesty/good sportsmanship
3. Self-reliance/responsibility
4. Self-control/nonviolence
5. Hard work/perseverance
6. Respect
7. Empathy
8. Teamwork/unselfishness
9. Tolerance
10. Moral courage
11. Physical fitness

Level I—Elementary/Youth League Players

Which values you teach, and when, will depend upon the age of your athlete. Athletes of elementary school age, who play on a school or youth league team, should be taught the following values and their fine points.

Value I—Balance and Perspective

“She has been blessed with a gift of maturity and perspective, something that many athletes learn only much later in life, if ever. Somebody raised her right.” —New York Times on Olympic skater Michelle Kwan

Parents must help their child establish a balanced, reasonably structured lifestyle that demands good character and academic proficiency, and thus encourages a child to choose extracurricular/recreational activities such as sports, music, or the arts. Parents should not allow sports to become so time and labor intensive that schoolwork suffers. Parents should not allow sports to gain such importance that an athlete only feels valued for her sports performance or for winning.

Six Points Regarding Perspective

Be sure your young athlete understands that:

1. Schoolwork, good character, and good behavior come first, and sports are a complementary and beneficial extracurricular activity.
2. The joy and satisfaction of participating in healthy, fair, and challenging competition—and the benefits of physical fitness—are among the most important reasons to play a sport.
3. You are proud of your player's hard work and effort, whatever the final score!
4. Winning is a worthy goal, but it is not the only objective of sports.
5. Losing is as much a part of sports as winning, and it is important for an athlete to learn from both—and learn how to handle both with grace.
6. A sports career will probably take up a very, very small percentage of your whole life.

Parents need to continually reinforce a balanced point of view about where sports fall within the overall context of childhood learning and development, as well as a balanced attitude toward the sport itself.

Value II—Honesty and Good Sportsmanship

Emphasize the following:

- Always play by the rules *and* the spirit of the rules, even when no one is looking.
- Never cheat to gain unfair advantage.
- Never go along with others who cheat or play dirty.
- Honesty and fair play extend to unsupervised games and activities. In unsupervised play, it is the athlete who must deal fairly with line calls, fouls, and playing-time issues.

Why is good sportsmanship so important? For two simple reasons: First, it is the right thing to do, and second, no fair-minded person likes a cheater. Institute for International Sport surveys of young athletes found that among the most common reasons that athletes did not like or respect opponents or teammates was because they used unethical means to win.¹

Encourage your child to talk to you about any questions regarding what is right and wrong. Also, encourage your maturing player to discuss such issues with the coach!

Value III—Self-Reliance/Responsibility

Parents who want their child to develop self-reliant, responsible behavior must allow their athlete the freedom to learn how to deal with problems without constant parental intervention. Firm rules and guidance on issues such as good sportsmanship and self-control are okay. Parental micromanagement regarding issues such as playing time, playing position, and coaching strategy is not okay.

Intrusive parenting stifles a child's growing self-reliance.

Seven Self-Reliance Points

Encourage your player to do the following:

1. Plan ahead and practice time management skills for completing homework both before and after sports activities.
2. Gather equipment, uniform, water, etc. before a game without constant parental reminders.
3. Employ self-discipline to practice and improve skills during free time.
4. Engage in “free play” and “pick up” games in which players learn how to stand up for their rights, negotiate, and compromise.
5. Learn to deal with directions, discipline, and criticism from coaches, as well as frustrating issues with teammates. Your job is to advise, not act on behalf of your child. Parental intervention in coach/team activities is rarely appropriate or necessary unless there are health, ethical, abuse, or sportsmanship problems.
6. Learn to deal with disappointing play by increasing resolve rather than by making excuses.
7. Discuss problems and problem-solving strategies with you, and then try to follow through independently. This is a key goal in the self-reliance journey!

Value IV—Self-Control/Nonviolence

Young athletes need to understand that sports involve physical activities that result in accidental, incidental, i.e., “part of the game,” or sometimes intentional physical contact. Explain that the rules for each sport clarify which types of physical contact are permitted and which types are not. *The player's job at all times is to maintain self-control in response*

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to any physical or verbal harassment, contact, or fouls.

Emphasize these points:

- If you are accidentally or intentionally hit, tripped, or hurt, *do not hit back, retaliate, or argue with other players.* Step away, and let the officials and coaches handle the problem.
- Avoid confrontational posturing, eye contact, or verbal barbs while stepping away; in an emotional situation any of these behaviors can provoke a fight.
- Contact by you that is intended to hurt someone, illegally stop or impede a player, or retaliate and get revenge, is never acceptable. Practice the “Don’t punch back, play harder” credo. When bumped or fouled, your job is to return to the game and focus on playing harder.
- In discussions with your young athlete, make known your objection to profanity, trash talking, and baiting officials. Make it clear that these behaviors are unacceptable during or after a game. Explain that fighting, during and after sports competitions, has resulted in severe, sometimes permanent injuries, and even death.
- Explain that self-control often leads to better and more consistent performance—and *surely leads to a better quality of life.*

When using sport as a vehicle to teach self-control and nonviolence, *parents must not tolerate* low-grade aggressive tactics such as elbowing, shoving, or tripping, which can escalate dirty play or promote fighting.

Your *unambiguous* parental message should be: “No fighting, dirty play, or retaliation of any sort, regardless of whether you think the coaches and officials are watching.” To reinforce your message, you must establish clear consequences for any violations.

And, by the way, it is *always* important for parent spectators to model self-control! Bad parental game behavior is a source of great stress and embarrassment for children. It can also provoke copycat behavior in a child. Parents do not have the right to take the joy of sport away from a child by their lack of self-control.

A QUESTION TO POSE TO YOUR CHILD!

Billy Lee Long, who coordinated Institute for International Sport activities in the Pacific Rim, is as fine an example of the “honorable competitor” as I have ever observed. As a boy in Australia in the late ’50s, Billy was among a small, select group of fledgling tennis players trained by the great Australian coach Harry Hopman. Others in this select group included the likes of Rod Laver, Roy Emerson, and Billy’s best friend, Kenny Fletcher, who went on to win fourteen Grand Slam doubles titles.

Billy himself had a sparkling career in professional tennis, followed by an equally successful business career. As he approaches age seventy, he is an inspiring combination of fitness, intellect, goodwill, and serenity.

Based on my admiration for his perspectives on sport and life, I asked Billy about how his parents raised him. I was particularly interested in any specific lessons he recalled as being vital to his success in life, and his present state of equanimity.

Billy responded, “When I was a little boy, my dad, who was our town’s best athlete, was firm but gentle. During those times in my youth when I was confronted with some type of challenge or disappointment, my dad would ask me, ‘how are you going to persevere?’ He would then help by providing me pointers on how to persevere in the face of the particular challenge, but would always leave it up to me to take it from there.”

“I am not sure there is a more important question and ensuing discussion that a parent can raise and talk about with a child.”

By the way, that remarkable sports parent from Australia, Billy Lee Long, Sr., is ninety-seven as of this writing, and still playing three rounds of golf a week!

Value V—Hard Work/Perseverance

Sports can be very useful in encouraging a youngster’s striving spirit. Explain to your player that hard work and extra practice will bring improvement and make a player more valuable to the team. Youngsters will no doubt enjoy their activity more if they work to do their best and improve their skills. At an early age, begin to teach your player about setting goals and developing the resolve and work habits to pursue such goals, even when disappointed. *A wonderful aspect of sports’ success is that it often involves hard work and delayed gratification.* Impress upon your child that when success comes after a long period of hard work, it can be even more rewarding than immediate gratification.

Alas, the value of delayed gratification has been lost on many contemporary parents.

Value VI—Respect

“Premature ideas of independence, too little repressed by parents, beget a spirit of insubordination.” —Thomas Jefferson

Some players go into a competition loudly stating they are going to “get some respect” from another team or player. This is a serious misuse of the word. There is a difference between trying to force respect and earning respect. “Getting some respect” may be a good motivational slogan for a team that wants to gear up for a game, but genuine and enduring respect is a by-product of effort, skill, and honorable play.

Children should be taught to treat everyone with respect. In sports, this encompasses teammates, opponents, coaches, officials, and spectators. Tell your child that, “you should never say or do anything that is rude or could hurt another person’s feelings or body.” No doubt, your child has heard, seen, or been victimized by teasing. Ask her how she would feel if she were being teased for striking out or making a bad kick.

In addition to treating everyone with respect, players should be taught how to earn respect for themselves and their teams through good sportsmanship, hard work, and skill development.

Value VII—Empathy

Helping your player understand the feelings of others will be a major step toward your child’s maturity. Tell your young athlete:

- Winners should never be loud, boastful, or taunt the losers.
- A player should never tease or make fun of a less skilled player.
- A teammate who makes a mistake does not need criticism, and usually appreciates encouragement. Make a habit of saying something nice to someone who is less skilled, has lost, or has made a mistake.
- Before you do or say something that could hurt someone, think about how you would feel if you were the other person.
- If you see someone being teased or humiliated, ask yourself:
 - How would I feel if I were that player?
 - Is there anything I can do to help this person?

Value VIII—Teamwork/Unselfishness

Athletes who engage in team sports should be taught that the team comes first—period! Teams work best when everyone plays unselfishly and puts team goals ahead of individual statistics. *If you expect your child to place team goals above personal goals, you must consistently demonstrate your unselfish commitment to the team.* Remember, what is best for the team may not always feel like it’s fair, or best, for individual players.

Value IX—Tolerance

Many youngsters go into sports having had no contact with people from other backgrounds. Sports can teach athletes how to feel at ease with people of different races, religions, and socioeconomic groups.

Take advantage of team sports to make the following points to your athlete:

- It is wrong to be intolerant of people who are different, whether because of dress, skin color, hairstyle, accent, point of view, religion, or ethnicity.
- Sports can help you feel more comfortable working with people from all kinds of backgrounds.
- Treat all people the way you would like to be treated, with respect and good sportsmanship.
- When athletes strive toward common goals, there is a good chance that mutual respect and friendship will develop.
- The intense level of emotions generated, and the desire to achieve victory, help players forget personal differences.
- If you are mistreated because you are different, do not respond in a nasty way. Rather, stand up for your rights by maintaining your self-control, displaying dignity, and doing your best.
- People who set a good example by treating everyone courteously and with respect encourage good behavior in others.

Value X—Moral Courage

- Moral courage is standing up for what is right, especially when it is not easy or popular. Studies on bullying show that it is often a popular “star” player or student who belittles or bullies others. Tell your youngster:
- Never “go along” with those who single out teammates for harassment or teasing.
- Try to have the courage to speak up when you see another teammate being teased or picked on. Such courage is a quality that can be improved upon over time, and beginning the practice is the vital first step.
- Bullies lose much of their power if they are ignored or verbally confronted, especially by a group.
- Competing in unsupervised games may demand that a player exhibit moral courage by making honest calls of fouls

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or other infractions.

Value XI—Physical Fitness

Early in your youngster's life, explain and regularly emphasize the many benefits that result from being physically fit. Tell your player, "Staying physically fit will help you feel better, look better, think better, play better and probably be healthier for the rest of your life."

It is the parents' job to make sure their child receives adequate sleep and eats properly. *Remind your young athlete that sleep and diet strongly influence one's ability to properly perform.*

VALUING THE WHOLE CHILD

Sports should not gain such importance that the young player only feels valued for athletic excellence or winning.

Throughout this book, you will read about the perils of those parents who make young athletes feel worthwhile only if they win. I caution against this for many reasons, including:

- If your child is a skilled athlete, it is likely that most of the feedback received from friends, teammates, and even adults relates to the child's sports performance.
- If your child is a *highly* skilled athlete, virtually all of the feedback received will be about sports performance.

This is precisely why you must balance the gale force of sports with consistent attention to the two anchors of character development and training the mind!

Levels II & III—Middle School and High School Athletes

In middle school and high school sports, parents should reinforce the values taught to their youth league player. However, older athletes must also learn about making more complex choices, such as those involved in gamesmanship and even substance abuse. Consequently, I have modified the set of values at this level to reflect those and other issues specific to these levels.

Gamesmanship

"The method or art of winning a game or contest by means of unsportsmanlike behavior or other conduct which does not actually break the rules." —The New Book of Knowledge

Rules of sports make a clear distinction between which acts are and are not permitted. Since rules cannot anticipate every behavior or misbehavior, there are some activities that may not specifically violate the rules, but which clearly violate the spirit of the rules. *Gamesmanship tactics include dubious conduct, methods or techniques used to gain advantage or win, but that may not be clearly addressed in the rules of the sport.*

As a parent, your three steps are:

- Explain the meaning of gamesmanship to your child.
- Explain that you believe that gamesmanship tactics should not be used because they violate the spirit of the rules and establish a pattern of taking shortcuts to win.
- Tell your player, "When in doubt about whether to use what might be a questionable tactic, it is probably best to wait and discuss it with me or the coach."

Examples of gamesmanship include:

- A defensive basketball player "flopping" to convince a referee that he picked up a charge.
- A golfer intentionally casting a shadow over the line of a putt.
- A tennis player intentionally stalling between points to throw off an opponent's rhythm.
- A batter who, on a full pitch count, pretends there is dirt in an eye and steps out of the batter's box hoping to disrupt the pitcher's concentration.
- A football player who fakes an injury to stop the clock.

Gamesmanship practices are at the core of many sportsmanship/ethical problems in sports and, indeed, in life. Help your child understand the many gray areas in which maneuvering is possible, and firmly teach your player that such tactics are unacceptable. If the coach allows or encourages gamesmanship techniques, tell the coach that you object.

Respect

Whenever you feel the time is right, teach your young athlete that the word competition comes from the Latin word "competere," which means to strive together, not against each other. Respect is an important part of this concept. Impress