

Sport Parenting 101

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Want to be the best sport parent you can be? It sounds easy, but it can be a little tricky. It is, after all, a competitive atmosphere which can and does blur the lines of appropriate behaviour. Here is where the pressure and responsibility rests with you – how are you going to formulate your philosophy of what constitutes good and poor sport parenting behaviour? Here are some guidelines to get you thinking.



The “Don’t” List:

- Pushing: it appears to work in the short run, but is usually disastrous long term. Children will quickly learn that acceptance is conditional upon winning and either emotionally withdraw or become resentful.
- Act as a coach. Your child already has one of these and should be directed to them if they have a sport question. As a parent, you are part of their team, their support system.
- Gossip negatively about other athletes, coaches or parents. This is behaviour that while tempting, can create conflict for you and your child.
- Think of your child’s participation as an investment for which you deserve a return. Any emotional or financial expense on your part should be given without expectation.
- Compare your child’s performance to others. Every athlete has a different speed of development. Direct them instead to improve skills and to develop personal bests.
- Base your self esteem on your child’s participation. Kids know all too well when this happens and will begin to feel compelled to compete for your approval rather than their own pleasure.
- Never publicly criticize your child. Even if discipline issues arise that must be dealt with that are not sport related, use discretion and handle these matters privately.

The “Do” List:

- ✓ Emphasize process over outcome: Make sure you celebrate participation, effort, sportsmanship and planning with your athlete, not just the wins.
- ✓ Keep competition in perspective for both yourself and your child: remember only a small percentage of youth athletes go on to professional levels, for most it is a learning and enjoyable experience. It’s also an opportunity to learn important transferable life skills.
- ✓ Separate sport failure from personal failure for your child. The loss of a game should not reflect on their value as a person, or suggest they are a ‘failure’.
- ✓ Know your own values about sport and how they are being communicated. Values are both explicitly and implicitly translated to the child. For example, if every time they win, you shower them with attention and gifts, and when they don’t you just ride home in silence-what are you communicating?
- ✓ Comment on the activity not on the child’s ‘status’-i.e., “I really enjoy watching you play” instead of “you’re the best athlete out there”.
- ✓ Support all members of your community, including other teams- by doing this you are contributing to an atmosphere of respect and value for all performers.
- ✓ Keep your sense of humour. If you’re having fun and being relaxed, your athlete will feel free to do so as well.

Parents share an important role with coaches in the development of young athletes. They have tremendous influence in the construction and maintenance of their children’s confidence. What is confidence? It’s knowing you have tools, or the ability to do a particular task. It is a hard won knowledge that you have a certain capability. Confidence is certainly not an absence of stress. You may see a child confident in their abilities, but under stress because they are trying to solve a problem or extend beyond their current ability level.

Participating in competitive sport can be the best, or worst experience of your child’s life. There is certainly the potential for the development of important life skills, such as the ability to focus, work hard, and handle responsibility and commitment. These types of outcomes are far from automatic, however, and that is why your child needs your guidance, attention and wisdom.