



The Clay Center for Young Healthy Minds

Shining light on mental health through education.

8 Important Steps for Parenting Young Athletes

We've all seen or heard of a parent getting out of hand at their kid's game, but this can have damaging effects on a child and their interest in sports. Below are steps to manage the balance between your child's experience and your enthusiasm.

- 1. Control yourself on the sidelines.** The first step in owning your behavior as a parent-spectator is to take note of your mindset before the game starts. *Remember that what you are about to watch is only a game.* That's what makes it fun.
- 2. Know that providing feedback can be tricky.** It is possible and important to let your child know when you believe that they have learned from past games and have the ability to improve. This is a major aspect of mastering any athletic challenge. However, parental feedback can be delicate. Be aware that constructive encouragement can be misinterpreted by the teen brain as disappointment or disapproval, especially if you reference poor performances in past games.
- 3. Accept that the officials are in charge.** Tolerating the imperfections of the people in charge is part of growing up and the lesson you want to share. This is the only way to keep the game safe. If kids sense during a game that you distrust or disagree with the officials – coaches or others in charge of the rules – then kids may stop following the rules. If they aren't following the rules, by definition they are no longer playing the game. It goes without saying that coaches can make bad calls, but let it go until after the game. Then, you can sympathize with your child.
- 4. Talk about the game, after the game.** Some kids will want to discuss a game in detail after the event, while others will act like the game never happened. Each child is wonderfully unique – find out what works best for your kid.
- 5. If things feel unsafe, get your kid out of the game.** Some sporting events genuinely get out of hand, and large crowds can make people reluctant to take corrective actions. If things feel unsafe, and you have accurately assessed the situation, don't hesitate to remove your child from the competition. Whatever emotional damage you cause can be repaired much more easily than the risk of permanent damage in truly unsafe conditions.
- 6. Be wary of hyper-competitiveness.** It makes little sense to spend every waking hour pursuing athletic greatness at the expense of other developmental concerns. Everyone needs a break to develop social skills, focus on academics, and simply enjoy being young. Professional athletes often note that the willingness of their families to allow other activities helped them to make friends, fall in love, and continue to enjoy and excel in their sport.
- 7. Remember the child who might not be into sports.** If your child has never shown interest in sports, don't worry. Encourage other interests, and remember to pay attention to the less athletic child if their sibling plays sports. This might seem obvious, but American cultural practices suggest that many of us choose athletic events over other activities in which our kids engage.
- 8. Don't forget: the goal isn't just to excel at the game.** The goal also is to *excel at being an individual athlete.* That means taking pleasure in pushing your body to do things that you weren't sure you could do and understanding at the same time the limits of your body. These lessons will last a lifetime, long after the cleats are put away for good.

Thanks for all you do to support a young person in your life. It really makes a difference.

For more resources visit us online: mghclaycenter.org

