

For Parents



Your child's team lost – now what?

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By Linda Alberts

The game buzzer has sounded. The final score is not in favor of your child's team. So how do you help your young athlete deal with losing?

Losing games and learning from failure (<http://www.nays.org/sklive/for-parents/failure-why-it-s-actually-good-for-your-young-athlete/>) is a normal part of sports and life, and what you say and do after the game will affect how well your child learns these lessons.

"Up until around the age of 12, kids usually have a pretty high concept of their ability. They think that if they try hard at something, then they are good at it," said Dr. Stacey Gaines, associate professor in the Department of Health & Kinesiology at Texas A&M University-Kingsville. "They expect to win because they think they are good at their sport. When they lose it can feel unexpected and extremely frustrating."

This frustration can show itself in a variety of emotions and behaviors, like anger, sulking, refusing to play, messing up the game for others and even cheating.

LEARNING BY OBSERVING

A parent's post-game reaction to either a win or loss can greatly affect how their child deals with the situation, as well as their future performances.

"Children learn far more by observing adult behavior than they do from verbal instructions on how to behave," says Gaines.

So, when a parent is calm, rational and acts with self-control the child will have a role model for handling emotionally charged situations, like losing a game.

Following a loss, your child doesn't need you to act like their coach or to breakdown the game for them. They just need you to be their parent.

Gaines says that the best thing parents can do after their child loses a game is to give them lots of encouragement. Point out things that draw attention to what your child did well. For instance, did they play through the whistle? Did they help another player up after they fell? Did they thank the official after the game?

"Your praise in these areas will encourage good sporting behavior that can be transferred into other areas of your child's life, like school or even their career down the road," Gaines says.

Children don't have the ability to separate their identity from their performance. So if they lose, they tend to feel like they are a failure or a bad person.

"That sense of failure will undoubtedly increase the pressure the child feels to perform better next time," says Gaines. "When parents help alleviate that pressure, they can break the cycle."

Gaines says that many parents think that their child wants to be left alone after losing a game – but that couldn't be further from the truth. If a parent just remains quiet following a loss the child can grow up thinking that their parents aren't proud of them when they lose.

"The truth is being alone is the last thing a child needs after a loss," she says. "They have a myriad of competing emotions rolling through their brains and what they need most is connection and stability. This happens when a parent says, 'It's ok. I think you did a great job and I love you!'"

FOCUS ON SKILLS, FUN – NOT RESULTS

Ask questions that direct attention to the focus of youth sports: having fun and learning new skills. In fact, Gaines says the top questions parents should ask their child are "Did you have fun?" and "What did you learn?"

"While winning and losing are a natural outcome of the sports experience, fun level and skill development should be the focus of youth sports," says Gaines. "Parents enroll their kids in sports with the hope that their kids will learn something valuable, like how to work hard, manage time and respect authority – but the sports experience itself does not bring about these outcomes."

When we move the focus of sports from competition to learning, a host of positive outcomes can happen.

"Sport is such an amazing tool for learning! There are always opportunities to teach kids skills that they can use in their everyday lives through their experiences in sport, and losing a competition might be the best canvas to paint those experiences on," says Gaines. "When kids lose, they learn that they are