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How Can I Help My Child Get The Most Out Of Organized Sports?

Tom Lee

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A weekly question/answer column

How Can I Help My Child Get The Most Out Of Organized Sports?

Tom Lee answers:*

April 11, 2002

Most children will not pursue athletics as a career. However, participating in organized sports can be enjoyable, and the things they learn from sports can help them become contributing, positive adults.

As a parent, support the philosophy that the basis for success in sports is having fun and trying hard. Help your children be properly equipped, and get them to practices and games on time. Practice with them to help improve skills. Give praise and encouragement for effort and improvement - not just for being the best, the first or the fastest. Consider emphasizing these points to help children get the most out of organized sports.

- **Having fun.** The first goal of youth sports should be to have fun. If children have fun, they will be motivated to continue participating. Fun for a child usually comes just from kicking, throwing or running if adults don't add undue pressure to win. Parents' attitudes toward the coach, officials and other players are important. These attitudes will ultimately communicate how important learning, participating, having fun and personal improvement are, versus playing just to win.
- **Making friends.** Feelings of belonging and being part of a group are basic human needs. Friends are critical to healthy emotional development for children and teens. Team spirit and unity teach important traits of loyalty and cooperation for the good of the whole that can carry over into other areas of life.
- **Improving skills.** Parents and coaches should help children focus on improving their past performance. Comparisons with others can be risky and discouraging, since someone will always be better. The goal should be to help children compare themselves against themselves, then they can always improve and have goals to work toward. It is important to remember that only a few will be the very best at the sport. Praise a child for being the best he or she can be.
- **Becoming physically fit.** Physical conditioning is not usually the main reason most children participate in sports. Usually their goal is to have fun. However, the physical activity involved in organized sports can also be important to their health.
- **Wanting to be involved.** Playing a sport is more likely to be a positive experience if it is something children want to do rather than something parents push them to do. Let your children explore different sports to see what they enjoy the most. Don't push them into a sport because it was something an older sibling or parent enjoyed. Let them choose.

* Tom Lee is Utah State University Extension Family and Human Development Specialist