



THE OFFICIAL NEWSMAGAZINE OF THE AMERICAN ACADEMY OF PEDIATRICS

AAP News

Volume 35 • Number 12
December 2014
www.aapnews.org

AAP News Parent Plus

INFORMATION FROM YOUR PEDIATRICIAN

Parents can model sportsmanship at kids' athletic events

Studies show that children who play youth sports reap considerable health benefits. They tend to sleep better, do better in school and are less likely to be overweight. But there is one thing that can have a bad influence on young athletes: their parents.



If your child is one of the nearly 60 million American kids playing organized sports, chances are you have witnessed parents behaving badly. In the heat of competition, parents may forget that it is just a game, and that the players are children. One survey of young athletes found that about a third felt their parent had overreacted from the sideline.

"It is expected for parents to be excited and vocally encouraging of their young athletes," said Paul Stricker, M.D., FAAP, a youth sports medicine specialist in San Diego. "But when (parents') behavior becomes irritating, uncomfortable, interfering and demeaning — that's crossing the line."

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) also advises parents and coaches to be careful not to raise their expectations above a child's developmental skills.

Parents may become overly involved in their children's sports because of a phenomenon called "over-identification," which puts a high value on the outcome of a game, said Dr. Stricker. Parents might hope their young athlete makes the pros and earns a huge salary. Some parents use their child's success to experience achievement they didn't accomplish when they were young, while others feel that having a successful child athlete makes them a "better" parent. These ideas can combine to cause heated emotions.

Dr. Stricker and the AAP offer the following advice to parent spectators:

- Attend sports events with the expectation of seeing what your child does well. After, ask him what he most enjoyed about the game.
- Cheer on your child, but be vocal only when the child will not be distracted by your comments. If there is a bad play or a bad call, do not blame it on the referee or another player — just encourage your child to do her best.
- Let the coach be the coach. If you are upset with how an aspect of the game was handled, speak with the coach privately.
- Remember that your child is your child first and an athlete second. Make sure he or she feels value and love that is not based on sports performance.

— Mary McGrath

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