

Making Youth Sport Better for Kids
By Dr. Al Petitpas, Director
NFF Center for Youth Development through Sport
Springfield College
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Participation in school and community sport programs has traditionally been viewed as a safe haven where youth acquire skills and experiences that build self-esteem and prepare them for later life. Unfortunately, even though most parents are still eager to get their children involved in sports, a large number are beginning to question the efficacy of sport participation in light of all the stories of violence, drugs, hazing, cheating, and sexual improprieties that seem to dominate the media. The critical question may be, what things are children learning from sport?

In reality, there is probably nothing about kicking a ball or catching a pass that teaches life skills directly. Sport simply provides opportunities for young people to test their personal competence and to learn about themselves. The character and skill building potential of sport is in direct proportion to the quality of the interpersonal relationships that are part of the activity. If this belief is true, then attempts to eliminate negative elements like violence, trash talking, or cheating should focus on the coaches, parents, fans, and the media that surround the sport experience. Unfortunately, this is where the current sport system has failed, particularly in the area of youth sport, where our children are most malleable and most easily influenced by the behaviors that they observe.

Recent studies have shown that approximately 54% of young people 6 to 18 years of age participate in organized sport. Yet, most of these kids play in leagues where few of their coaches have any formal training in coaching or youth development; where parents and fans are not required to adhere to any standards of behavior; and where the media tends to focus on violence, criminal behavior, drug use, and inappropriate sexual activities. The numbers are alarming. Only about 10% of youth sport coaches receive any formal coach education training. This means that even though there are a growing number of coach education programs like the American Coaching Effectiveness Program and the NFL/National Football Foundation Coaching Academy, the vast majority of youth sport coaches know little about human development or how to foster self-esteem, create a fun and positive environment, or how to take advantage of teachable moments. With this in mind, it is not surprising that half of the participants drop out of sport by age twelve.

To make matters worse, most local sport organizations lack the administrative infrastructure or clout necessary to mandate and enforce codes of fan conduct. Attend a few youth sport games and it won't be long before you observe a fan or parent yelling vulgarities at an official or belittling a young child who has made an error or not lived up to somebody else's standards. Couple this problem with the media's penchant to highlight the fights, taunting, and other examples of inappropriate behavior and it is easy to see where kids are getting their role models.

So what can be done? Well, instead of criticizing the sport system, maybe it is time to structure youth sport in a manner that promotes fun and teaches important life skills. Research has shown that as long as kids are having fun and believe that they have an important role in a valued group, they will push themselves without fear of failure or criticism, which is an ideal environment to learn and grow. Unfortunately, it is doubtful that our children will experience this type of positive climate unless their coaches receive appropriate training and their parents are assisted in understanding how to reinforce these transferable skills at home and in school.

Clearly, there are costs associated with coach and parent education programs, but these are minimal when compared to what most communities now spend on general education. The bottom line is simple. Our children get bombarded with enough negative images on a daily basis, so let's provide them with a positive sport experience and surround them with caring adults who teach and send the right messages.