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Organized sports provide teens with an excellent opportunity for learning important skills and values. However, many parents worry about how their children handle winning and losing. A healthy balance of competition, cooperation, and having fun is important whether the child is competing with himself or against others. Parents and caring adults need to work at creating an environment in which their teens can compete in a healthy manner.

Selecting appropriate sports activities

As a parent, the first step is finding the right sport and the right team or coach for your son or daughter. This means understanding what teens look for in organized sports. Keep in mind that the top three reasons kids give for wanting to be involved in organized sports are to have fun, be with friends, and improve their skills. Ask yourself these questions when trying to identify a positive activity for your teen:

- Does the sport offer all players (regardless of ability) a chance to succeed, to participate, and to develop their skills?
- Does it offer my son or daughter a chance to have fun and be with friends?
- What are the attitudes of the other parents and of the coach about winning?

Benefits of participating in sports

For teens, a critical part of learning the important skills and values that organized sports can teach is found in observing the ways adult role models, parents and coaches, behave in relation to the players and the sport. Sociologist and volunteer coach, Martin Miller identified ways that sports participation can influence a teen's attitudes, values and behaviors:



- When coaches and parents emphasize playing their best, never giving up, learning new skills, and having fun over scoring more points, youth can begin to develop positive values about winning and losing.
- By seeing adult role models encourage team members to do their best and support each other, while accepting each player's abilities and limitations, teens can learn respect for others.
- When everyone's contributions are recognized – not just those of a few “stars,” youth can learn cooperation.
- When having more points is not considered as important as being fair and truthful, teens learn the value of honesty.

When competition is balanced with cooperation and fun, a “we can all win” philosophy emerges and fosters a great way for all members of a team or club to achieve their goal together. When competition is based on the comparison of individual performance between competitors, an “I win, you lose” attitude takes over. If win/lose competition is the only kind of competition teens are involved in, they won't learn the fun of competing in other ways.

How can our family make the most out of opportunities to participate in sports activities?

- Discuss the role competition plays in the lives of family members.
- Discuss how family members can set realistic goals.
- Encourage the idea that everyone who achieves their goal receives rewards.
- Consider the age and personality of each child. Families may need to increase efforts to manage competition and its impact on a youth's development.
- Develop in your child a lifelong commitment to an active lifestyle. Encourage your child to play because he or she enjoys it. Intrinsic motivation is a key ingredient for lifelong commitment to physical fitness.
- Focus on teaching life skills, and allow your child to be involved in the decision making about sports participation. Reinforce and support your child's decisions.
- Encourage your child to try various physical activities.
- Communicate with your child's coaches. Be involved in the sports program and seek out coaches that have a positive philosophy focused on skill building.
- Do not instruct; let the coach instruct and teach.

Suggestions for ways to emphasize the importance of good sportsmanship in every type of competition.

- Applaud and cheer for everyone on the team, not just your child.
- Avoid insulting other team members and those of the opposing team.
- Talk to the parents of the other team members.
- Be respectful of the officials during the game. After the game, thank the officials.
- Focus on the positive. Compliment players, coaches, and officials.
- Be positive and congratulate the winning team. Do not forget to congratulate the losing team on their efforts.

Adapted with permission from Positive Parenting of Teens, "Teens, Competition, and Sports" (University of Minnesota Extension Service, 1999, no longer in print).

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If we teach our kids that the only way to reach our full potential is through competition, they learn that the most important thing in life is winning. Sometimes this can lead to being dishonest to win. Some research indicates that excessive pressure to win can lead to more fights and violence among teens. Those who don't win may feel like they failed. If youth feel that they have to constantly win, they often lose interest in learning and in the activity. Competition should be an opportunity for young people to learn to compete or participate for the sake of becoming good at a skill or ability, not just to get ahead of others.

Where you can go for more information:

Families with Teens – University of Minnesota Extension
www.extension.umn.edu/familieswithteens/

Afterschool Alliance
www.afterschoolalliance.org/

The Forum for Youth Investment
<http://forumfyi.org/>

Minnesota Commission on Out-of-School Time
www.mncost.org

Parents Making Youth Sports a Positive Experience: Role Models – Pennsylvania State University
<http://pubs.cas.psu.edu/freepubs/pdfs/ui349.pdf>

Parents Making Youth Sports a Positive Experience: Spectators – Pennsylvania State University
<http://pubs.cas.psu.edu/freepubs/pdfs/ui350.pdf>

You may also want to look at:

Murphy, S. (1999). *The Cheers and the tears: A healthy alternative to the dark side of youth sports today*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.