

Ten Tips For First-Time Sports Parents

Rather than concern with scoreboard wins and losses, PCA hopes that you, as a sports parent, keep your eye on the Big Picture – the life lessons in teamwork, resilience, overcoming adversity, communication skills, etc., that sports can uniquely teach.

Here are 10 tips for parents of kids new to organized sports.

1. It's easy to get wrapped up in the excitement of youth sports – we all want our children to succeed. But before your child's season starts and emotions run high, write down your goals for your child in sports. Keep this list close by and refer back to it throughout the season to help maintain your focus on the bigger picture.
2. There are a lot of youth sports organizations out there. Take the time to evaluate options for where your child may play. Look at various organizations' websites to understand their mission statements and what kind of training they offer their coaches. Talk to other parents whose kids have played in those organizations to learn what kind of experience they had. You may want to take as much care in this matter as you would in selecting the school your child should attend.
3. Learn the names of the other kids on the team, and during a game cheer positively for all the players...even the other team! You can try "no-verbs cheering" or otherwise limit yourself to shouts of encouragement. Either way, let coaches coach, and don't confuse or overwhelm your child by shouting instruction from the sidelines or stands.
4. Sometimes, parents or other spectators behave in a way that feels out of place or just too intense for the situation – berating officials or screaming at their children or other players. You may be unsure how to respond. One key is to consistently model the appropriate behavior. Then, if you want to help an over-exuberant spectator, sometimes all it takes is a glance or a gesture, such as lowering your palms to indicate "calm down." You might choose to distract them with conversation about another aspect of the game, or if you feel comfortable, you can remind them about the role of parents in upholding a positive sports culture.
5. After the game, resist the temptation to critique. Ask open-ended questions that elicit longer responses, "What was your favorite part of today's practice?" Kids love sports so much they will even talk to their parents about it! When they do, listen. Put the phones away. Maintain eye contact. Nod and interject and smile so your child knows you're engaged.
6. When you do have that conversation with your child about their teams or games, focus on the life lessons available from the experience. If your child seems discouraged by his or her performance, reinforce a sense of self-worth with "You're the kind of person who..." statements: "I know you are disappointed with the loss, but one thing I like about you is you're the type of person who bounces back and tries hard the next time."

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7. Coaches put a lot of time into planning practices and ensuring a successful season, so be sure to acknowledge their efforts often! Encourage your child to thank the coach after each game or practice. Offer to help the coaches however you can. That may mean anything from occasionally helping out at practice to creating the snack schedule or coordinating carpools. Coaches need parents' support, and your children may appreciate seeing how enthusiastically you support their team.
8. One key to a positive relationship with your child's coach is a pre-season parent meeting, where the coach explains his or her philosophy and goals for the season to the parents or guardians of all the players on the team. If any of your children's coaches do not call such a meeting, be sure to ask about their goals so that you know what to expect.
9. If you're asked to coach, or to be an assistant, strongly consider accepting! You do NOT need to be a sport-specific expert to provide a fun environment for kids to participate. Good organizations provide training and resources to coaches to help them do great work with their players. Remember, the top goal of a coach at this age is to be positive and create a fun and safe place for kids to play!
10. At every possible turn, let your children know that you love them unconditionally (by saying it!), regardless of their athletic performance.

Enjoy your child's time in youth sports. It is fleeting, and you will want to look back, in conversation with your grown children, on the good old days.

For more insight on sports parenting, subscribe to PCA's *Sports Parent Conversation Starters*, a weekly e-mail series with advice on talking to your children about their youth sports experiences.