

"My Kid Stinks at Sports!"

Jan Faull, MEd, on how parents keep from feeling guilty about sports failures, and can help their kids enjoy sports -- even when they're not athletic.

By Jan Faull, MEd

Q. My 11-year-old son does great in school, is a kind kid, respects his mother and me, loves to read and write short stories, and has lot of friends.

What he can't do is play sports, although that doesn't stop him from being on at least two leagues all year round. Neither his mother nor I am very coordinated, and we were both terrible at sports, ourselves. But my son gets frustrated and feels guilty for letting his team down when they lose. Should I tell him to quit? Encourage him to focus on one of his other hobbies?

A. No, don't tell him to quit. Children need exercise, and team sports are a super way to receive it. Instead, help him handle the feeling that he's let the team down by teaching him to be a good sport. By doing so, he'll enjoy his league play more and learn skills in sportsmanship that he can use in other arenas on or off the field.

While he may not ever be a superstar, he can be the team's epitome of a good sport -- an important role for any young athlete to play. The likelihood is great that he'll change his attitude and not be so hard on himself if you come in the back door with information and skills about sportsmanlike conduct.

A Role for Him to Fill

Look over the following attributes of a good sport. Consider each, and decide how you'll address the issue of sportsmanship with your young athlete.

A good sport:

Is a team player. It's important for your son to understand that his behavior on the field and on the sidelines reflects on the entire team. It's tough to grasp the idea that your responsibility to the team is to play your best -- and that if you goof up, it's not okay to purge your emotions. Also point out to your son that when a player scores the most points for a win, the victory goes to the entire team and is not for individual glory.

Abides by the rules of the game and plays fair. Consistently communicate to your child that it's important for everyone to play by the rules. No one wants a hollow victory, which comes as a result of cheating, playing dirty, or permitting an ineligible player on the field or team. Point out that when foul play occurs, everyone knows it and it doesn't feel right to coaches, parents, spectators, and the kids playing the game. Your son can play an important part if he gracefully holds his teams to this standard.

Avoids arguing with coaches, referees, and teammates. Explain to your son that it's okay to question some referees' calls, a coach's advice, or a player's contribution. The sports scene allows for some disagreement between those involved. But go on to explain that sometimes it becomes unsportsmanlike to go overboard with that doubt -- and with any sort of belligerence. Talk with your son about what players should overlook, condone, or reprimand.

Offers encouragement to teammates. Teach your son to be the team cheerleader (so to speak), supporting the efforts of even the weakest player, and that includes himself. Explain to your child that in order for each player to develop his abilities, each needs the chance to get out on the field and play. Essentially, teach your son to not be so hard on himself.

Respects the other team's effort. Tell your son that no matter how the other team plays, it's never acceptable to belittle or minimize the opponent's effort. Your son can acquire the maturity to understand that if an opponent outperforms them, they accept it, learn from it, offer no excuses, and move on. Additionally, it's important for you to convey the idea that if his team out-performs their opponent, it's okay to enjoy the victory, but it's not okay to gloat.

These concepts and ideals will likely intrigue your son because they contain many gray areas. Focusing on sportsmanship will take the pressure off on his performance on the field and hopefully he'll enjoy the sportsmanlike contributions he can make.

Jan Faull, MEd, is a veteran parent educator and the author of two parenting books, Mommy, I Have to Go Potty and Unplugging Power Struggles. She writes a biweekly parenting advice column for HealthyKids.com and a weekly parenting advice column in the Seattle Times. Jan Faull is the mother of three grown children and lives in the Seattle area

Originally published on HealthyKids.com, October 2005.

© Copyright 2006 Meredith Corporation. All Rights Reserved.