

Good Sports: Raising a Young Athlete
By Sheila King

We've seen them on TV and the local playing fields: overbearing parents so over-involved in their children's sports that they undermine growth and performance. Consider the plight of 17-year-old Australian tennis sensation Jelena Dokic. Not only did officials eject her father from a Wimbledon warm-up tournament for shouting at officials, but he was also arrested "for his own safety" after he laid down in traffic and jumped on the hood of a car.

Want to hear an even sadder story? Gymnast Dominique Moceanu became an Olympic gold medallist at the ripe old age of 14, while ignoring a painful four-inch stress fracture in her left leg. "Who is looking out for this child?" ESPN sportswriter Mark Kridler wondered at the time. At 17, Moceanu asked a judge to declare her a legal adult so that she could free herself from her parents (former gymnasts who had nursed gold-medal dreams for Dominique since her birth). After a very public battle, she won the right to choose her own coaches, control her own money and lead her own life.

Let's not kid ourselves, parental interference isn't just found at the level of the professional athlete. In recent years, police had to break up a fistfight between coaches and parents at a Little League game for 10-year-olds; one father was accused of beating another parent to death after a dispute at their sons' hockey practice. Such violence is "epidemic" and is turning off many young athletes, says Fred Engh, president of the National Alliance for Youth Sports and author of *Why Johnny Hates Sports*. In fact, approximately 73 percent of children who compete in organized sports quit by age 13. Many drop out because they say the pressure from coaches and parents simply takes all the fun out of playing and competing.

So how can we keep our kids motivated and help them achieve their sports goals without burning them out? We need to shift the emphasis from competition and winning to fun and play, whether we've got a budding Mia Hamm or Michael Jordan on our hands or a kid who's happy playing intramural ball. We need to let our children take the lead in defining their sports commitments. Our job as parents is to help set healthy limits and reasonable expectations. While there are no recipes for creating star athletes, we can nurture elite talent and promote healthy exercise habits in young people.

a.. Parents, take a chill pill. Lose the attitude of winning at all costs. Many children do not enjoy organized sports because coaches and parents put too much pressure on winning. Moms and dads with Olympic dreams must not lose sight of the long-term reality. Fewer than 1 percent of the children participating in organized sports today will qualify for any type of athletic scholarship in college and an even smaller number of those will go on to professional sports or the Olympics, according to the National Center for Educational Statistics. Coaches and parents who instill a life-long love of fitness and sports are the real winners.

b.. Choose the right coach. Providing good coaching can help children develop the skills and abilities they need to excel and succeed in sports. The best coaches are positive and offer lots of encouragement, emphasizing both skill development and good sportsmanship. They are organized and set limits for both players and parents. They do not chastise or punish players for making mistakes. Instead, they praise the effort and emphasize fun, not winning at all costs. Most youth league coaches are volunteers and have not had professional training but that doesn't mean you have to put up with a verbally abusive coach or one who arrives late and doesn't organize practices. If you end up with one, try to move your child to another team as soon as possible. If you can't get a transfer, discuss your concerns with the coach in a private, non-threatening conversation.

c.. Stress success. Be sure your children are playing at the appropriate level for age and skill development. Nothing can be more discouraging to children than playing over their heads. Confidence is key — especially for girls, who more often express lower perceptions of physical competence than boys. Emphasize effort over result. By the same token, nothing can be more frustrating than playing below your potential. If your children are highly skilled, make sure they're challenged on the field or on the court. If they're playing above their peer level, find groups that meet their needs. Like the child who's always the last one picked when teams are being chosen, a child with the potential to be an elite athlete deserves special

attention and consideration. There are plenty of resources out there; it's up to you to take full advantage of them.

d.. Avoid instant replays. Don't rehash every detail of the game with your child. Over-analyzing play can take the fun out of it. And focusing only on mistakes can backfire: Some kids will do anything to avoid making another mistake, including not doing anything at all. Children need to develop their instincts and learn to trust them. They don't need to dwell on every misstep. Let the coach provide feedback during practice when children can readily make changes.

e.. Introduce competition at the optimal time. Some children are ready for competition at an early age. But from a developmental standpoint, competition is best introduced in adolescence when children are more comfortable testing themselves against others. Most pre-adolescents do not enjoy the competitive nature of sports. The emphasis in this age group should be on fun, movement variety, social and skill development.

f.. Whose sport is it anyway? Children have to have the desire within themselves to compete and excel at sports. Parents cannot force children to succeed as athletes. The best approach is to expose kids to a variety of sports. Then let them choose the sport. Examine your personal motives for wanting your child to compete. If you are trying to live vicariously through your child, reassess what your child wants and needs and put those desires ahead of your own.

g.. Be a good sport on the sidelines. Remove all obscenities from your vocabulary. Never let your child hear you criticizing the coach or other players. Let your child know it's not the end of the world if they lose an important game. It could be their most important lesson. Parents who shout obscenities and criticisms embarrass children and squelch their desires. Keep the sideline comments positive and encouraging. Refrain from blaming umpires and referees for "bad" calls. Teach your children that such judgments are part of the game and must be overcome. Realize that most of the referees and umpires are volunteers who provide a service for your children.

h.. Keep sports in perspective. Help children learn to balance sports in their lives. Richard Williams, father and coach of tennis stars Venus and Serena Williams, says that he stresses school, religion and then tennis. Keeping children well rounded will provide them with the confidence and skills to respond to the ups and downs in life.

Parents do have an important role to play in helping support and encourage star athletes. Tiger Woods, the Williams sisters and Cal Ripken Jr. are all examples of athletes whose parents helped them develop a love of their sport and maintained healthy relationships. While your kids may never become pro athletes or Olympic stars, you can guide them to a lifelong enjoyment of sports and physical activity. Then no matter what the score of their games, they'll be winners!

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