



Eyes on the Prize

Sports participation can be a wonderful thing for a child.

But that depends on the messages children get from adults and teammates about how they're doing at whatever activity they choose.

Sometimes it seems that everything in our culture points toward winning as the only worthwhile reason to bother competing. But for children, winning may be the least important part of growing and developing in positive ways, according to Paul R. Stricker, MD, FAAP, author of *Sports Success Rx! Your Child's Prescription for the Best Experience*.

Children are constantly growing. Physical and chemical changes bring fresh challenges to each developmental stage a child passes through; the mental and emotional development only adds to the considerations. Competition can help a child develop confidence and enjoy the experience, or it can slow development and make the experiences extremely difficult. How your child handles competition depends to a great extent on what he or she hears in terms of a parent's or coach's expectations.

"Besides influencing self-esteem, participation [in sports] can enhance leadership qualities, character development, the

concept of teamwork, discipline, and self-confidence because of self-improvement,” Stricker writes. “When a child senses or hears high levels of expectations, he can become fearful of not being able to live up to those expectations.” Stricker points out that current research has shown that the single most important factor for lowering the stress such pressure can potentially bring is “the fun experienced by children, whether they were on the winning or losing team.”

How can parents and coaches help ensure that children don’t get so obsessed with winning they stop having fun—and stop growing through sports participation? Stricker has several suggestions:

- **Beware of all the pressures to perform.** Don't be a source of more pressure by trying to rush your child's accomplishments or have unrealistic expectations.
- **Understand development.** Many unrealistic expectations occur because parents and coaches don't know what kids go through to be able to run, jump, catch, and throw. Milestones for sports grow in a sequence as a child matures, and involve physical, chemical, and mental changes. They don't stop after potty training.

- **Redefine success.** Kids need to understand that doing their best is a good thing, regardless of the result. Reality success involves children improving compared to themselves, rather than to other kids. Reality TV won't last; reality success is an approach that can be passed on from generation to generation!



- **Keep it positive.** Kids want to have fun, and that fun has a very good purpose. Encourage kids to do just that by giving them positive feedback. It helps them build the confidence and character they'll need to rely on later in life. That doesn't mean there isn't a place for constructive correction.
- **Emphasize having fun; de-emphasize winning.** When kids relax about outcomes, they tend to improve their skills, develop better physical fitness, and build confidence along the way. Remember, kids want to have fun.
- **Teach sportsmanship.** Learning to show respect and appreciation for others is a skill that will pay huge dividends down the road.
- **If they need more encouragement, give more.** Some children respond quickly to positive feedback and need little reinforcement. For others, it takes longer to understand that doing their best is a good thing, regardless of the result. The idea is to build excitement and enjoyment, not pressure and stress. ●

Is your child ready to get into the game?



Sports Success Rx! *Your Child's Prescription for the Best Experience* *How to Maximize Potential AND Minimize Pressure*

By Paul R. Stricker, MD, FAAP

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