

The Parent's Influence on Sportsmanship (2003 Third Place-tie)

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As a high school athlete, I have observed how behavior involving sportsmanship on the field often translates into how athletes carry themselves as people in everyday life. Playing sports is often the first time a child experiences competition and important values such as fair play, respect and hard work. The parents' approach to how they teach sportsmanship to their child is critically important in building the foundation of a better and stronger individual.

Sportsmanship is defined in the Webster New World Dictionary as "characteristics of or behavior befitting a person who can take loss or defeat without complaint or victory, without gloating, and who treats his opponents with fairness, generosity, courtesy, etc.

Whether a young athlete behaves in a "sportsmanlike" way is influenced by their parents and the behavior they demonstrate. Parents who attend their children's sporting events and complain to officials or berate opposing players are forgetting that playing sports is not about winning at all costs. It is about learning to play as a team, achieve as a team, and overcome adversity as a team. It is about the joy of being young and being able to enjoy these experiences.

When I was fourteen, I worked as a U-10 soccer referee. It was interesting to observe how not a single player or myself could control the quality of the game as much as the parents on the sidelines. When they behaved and kept their remarks positive the kids responded by playing hard and having fun, even the U-10 team. The problem was that sometimes the parent's behavior was not positive. I remember one team I dreaded refereeing because their parents would constantly barrage me with insults and complaints. Sadly, the children would respond by playing dirty and parroting the complaints of their parents. I remember on one occasion the kids started mumbling to me *after* the game, saying that I was the reason they lost when the score was 6-0 and they clearly got outplayed.

Doctor Marty Ewing, a sports psychologist for the Institute for the Study of Youth Sports says, "Children learn to assess their social competence i.e ability to get along with and gain acceptance from others, in sports through feedback received from parents and coaches."

As a seventeen-year-old that has played many sports, I can testify that parents, more than any other factor, influence the behavior of their children in sports. The way they act on the sidelines and after the games basically dictates the way their child will perceive what is happening and how they will end up acting as well. It is so unfortunate that many parents don't realize that while they're yelling at the referee of their child's U-10 summer league game saying, "You stink, you're blowing the game!" that they're actually blowing the chances of their children growing up to be fair and respectful sportsman. Clearly, one of the best opportunities and most natural ways that parents can help their children build character is through sports and it is always such a shame to see these precious opportunities missed.