

Sportsmanship

Emily was crying by the time the softball game ended. It wasn't because her team had lost. It wasn't because she was unhappy about her own playing. It wasn't even because of anything the other team had said or done. Emily's tears came after her dad yelled at her — in front of all her teammates — for missing the fly ball that could have saved the game. Emily is just 8 years old.

If your child has ever participated in a sport, you've undoubtedly met people like Emily's dad, parents who behave inappropriately and upset their kids. These parents get so wrapped up in winning and losing or how well their own kids perform that they lose sight of what's really important. They forget that one of the most important goals of kids' sports is to promote a sense of good sportsmanship.

What Is Good Sportsmanship?

Good sportsmanship occurs when teammates, opponents, coaches, and officials treat each other with respect. Kids learn the basics of sportsmanship from the adults in their lives, especially their parents and their coaches. Kids who see adults behaving in a sportsmanlike way gradually come to understand that the real winners in sports are those who know how to persevere and to behave with dignity — whether they win or lose a game.

Parents can help their kids understand that good sportsmanship includes both small gestures and heroic efforts. It starts with something as simple as shaking hands with opponents before a game and includes acknowledging good plays made by others and accepting bad calls gracefully. Displaying good sportsmanship isn't always easy: It can be tough to congratulate the opposing team after losing a close or important game. But the kids who learn how to do it will benefit in many ways.

Kids who bully or taunt others on the playing field aren't likely to change their behavior when in the classroom or in social situations. In the same way, a child who practices good sportsmanship is likely to carry the respect and appreciation of other people into every other aspect of life.

Good Sports Are Winners

Ask first or second graders who won a game, and they may answer, "I think it was a tie." It's likely the question isn't of any real interest at that age. Kids may be more eager to talk about the hits they got or the catches they almost made. But as they move into older and more competitive leagues, kids become more focused on winning. They often forget to have fun. Without constant reminders and good examples, they may also forget what behavior is appropriate before, during, and after a sporting event.

Kids who have coaches who care only about being in first place and say that anything goes as long as they win, pick up the message that it's OK to be ruthless on the field. If parents constantly pressure them to play better or second-guess their every move, kids get

the message that they're only as good as their last good play — and they'll try anything to make one.

Adults who emphasize good sportsmanship, however, see winning as just one of several goals they'd like their kids to achieve. They help young athletes take pride in their accomplishments and in their improving skills, so that the kids see themselves as winners, even if the scoreboard doesn't show the numbers going in their favor.

The best coaches — and parents — encourage their kids to play fair, to have fun, and to concentrate on helping the team while polishing their own skills.

Fostering Good Sportsmanship

Remember the saying "Actions speak louder than words"? That's especially true when it comes to teaching your kids the basics of good sportsmanship. Your behavior during practices and games will influence them more than any pep talk or lecture you give them.

Here are some suggestions on how to build sportsmanship in your kids:

- Unless you're coaching your child's team, you need to remember that you're the parent. Shout words of encouragement, not directions, from the sidelines (there is a difference!).
- If you are your kid's coach, don't expect too much out of your own child. Don't be harder on him or her than on anyone else on the team, but don't play favorites either.
- Keep your comments positive. Don't bad-mouth coaches, players, or game officials. If you have a serious concern about the way that games or practices are being conducted, or if you're upset about other parents' behavior, discuss it privately with the coach or with a league official.
- After a competition, it's important not to dwell on who won or lost. Instead, try asking, "How did you feel you did during the game?" If your child feels weak at a particular skill, like throwing or catching, offer to work on it together before the next game.
- Applaud good plays no matter who makes them.
- Set a good example with your courteous behavior toward the parents of kids on the other team. Congratulate them when their kids win.
- Remember that it's your kids, not you, who are playing. Don't push them into a sport because it's what you enjoyed. As kids get older, let them choose what sports they want to play and decide the level of commitment they want to make.
- Keep your perspective. It's just a game. Even if the team loses every game of the season, it's unlikely to ruin your child's life or chances of success.
- Look for examples of good sportsmanship in professional athletes and point them out to your kids. Talk about the bad examples, too, and why they upset you.
- Finally, don't forget to have fun. Even if your child isn't the star, enjoy the game while you're thinking of all the benefits your child is gaining — new skills, new friends, and attitudes that can help all through life.

Reviewed by: Steve Sanders, PhD
Date reviewed: May 2005

How to Be a Good Sport

"No fair!" ... "You cheated!" ... "It wasn't my fault we lost!"

Have you ever played on a team with somebody who hated to lose? Or maybe you have a tough time if you lose anything - even a game of tic-tac-toe. Some kids find it extra-hard to lose, but everyone needs to learn how to do it. Learning to lose without losing your cool is a skill, like learning to ride a bike. You might not be able to do it at first, but over time it will get easier. And when you can handle losing, people will call you a good sport.

Why Learn to Lose Gracefully?

Everyone wants to win. But any time two teams or kids are facing each other in a game or contest, someone will lose (unless it's a tie). Kids lose in small ways, like in a game of checkers, but they also might face losing in bigger ways, like when their team loses a championship game.

Losing is disappointing, so it's not surprising that kids don't like it. Adults don't like it either, but everyone can learn to control how they react to a loss. In other words, what should you do when you lose?

The tricky part is that sometimes you might react before you even realize it. For instance, it's the last out of your Little League game and, in a flash, the other team has won. There they are celebrating on the field and you burst into tears. Oh dear, you probably don't want to be crying right now, even though it's OK that you feel sad.

The important thing is what you do next. Do you storm over to the other team's dugout and accuse them of cheating? No! The best thing to do is to try to collect yourself and get in line with your teammates so you can congratulate the other team. Maybe you've seen Little League players do this. Each team lines up and they walk along sort of high-fiving the other team's players and saying "good game."

To be sure, the losing team may not feel like it was such a good game, but this tradition is one way to teach everyone how to be a good sport. If you feel like crying later or you want to complain about the game, you can do that - but it's best to do it off the field and after you've had a chance to cool down. After a little time passes, you might not feel as upset as you were right when the game ended.

Losing - On Your Own

Sometimes kids lose on their own, like in a neighborhood game of basketball. These situations can be extra-hard if there are no grownups around to be the referees. Then it's up to kids to decide among themselves whether something counted as a basket or a foul. It's good for kids to learn to play without a grownup deciding everything but it also can

lead to a lot of arguing. Each kid wants his or her team to win and may feel very strongly about plays that don't go the team's way.

How do you solve these disagreements? It's best if everyone tries to be fair. Some kids still might cheat or bend the rules, but you can do your best to be fair. That might mean giving the other team the benefit of the doubt. Maybe you thought a basket shouldn't count and the other team thinks it's OK. If it's close, you might say, "OK, it can count." Hopefully, the other team will be just as sportsmanlike when one of your calls could go either way. Even if they're not, you certainly can't be accused of cheating or playing unfairly. You've done your part to bring good sportsmanship to the game.

Kids who are good sports - and don't freak out when they lose - will become known as kids who are fun to play with. Kids might not be as eager to play with someone who gets angry all the time and won't ever give the other guy or girl a break.

10 Ways to Be a Good Sport

Here are some ways that you can show others what good sportsmanship is all about:

1. Be polite to everyone you're playing with and against. No trash talk - which means saying mean things while you're in the middle of a game.
2. Don't show off. Just play your best. If you're good, people will notice.
3. Tell your opponents "good game!" whether you've won or you've lost.
4. Learn the rules of the game. Show up for practices and games on time - even if you're the star of the team.
5. Listen to your coaches and follow their directions about playing.
6. Don't argue with an official if you don't agree with his or her call. If you don't understand a certain call, wait until after the game to ask your coach or the official to explain it to you.
7. Don't make up excuses or blame a teammate when you lose. Try to learn from what happened.
8. Be willing to sit out so other team members can get in the game - even if you think you're a better player.
9. Play fair and don't cheat.
10. Cheer for your teammates even if the score is 1,000-1! You could inspire a big comeback!

Reviewed by: Steve Sanders, PhD

Date reviewed: August 2005