

Fostering Good Sportsmanship from KidsHealth for Parents

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.

A child who bullies or taunts others on the playing field isn't likely to change the 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 a first or second grader who won a game, and that child may answer, "I think it was a tie." It's likely the question isn't of any real interest at that stage. 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.

If a child has a coach who cares only about being in first place and says that anything goes as long as they win, that child picks up the message that it's OK to be ruthless on the field. If parents are constantly pressuring them to play better or second-guessing every move they've made, children get the message that they're only as good as their last good play - and they'll try any method of achieving 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 child:

- 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 your child's coach or with a league official.
- When you're talking to your child after a competition, it's important not to dwell on who won or lost. Instead, you might ask your child, "How did you feel you did during the game?" If your child mentions that he or she didn't do well at a particular skill, like throwing or catching, offer to work on these skills with your child 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 child, not you, who is playing. Don't push your child into a sport because it's what you enjoyed. As your child gets older, let your child choose the sport he or she wants to play, and let him or her decide the level of commitment he or she wants to make to it.
- Keep your perspective. It's just a game. Even if your child's team loses every game of the season it's unlikely to ruin his or her life or chances of success.
- Look for examples of good sportsmanship in professional athletes and point them out to your kid. 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 him or her all through life.