

GOT A SORE LOSER?

Winning Ways to Help Kids Who Hate to Lose.

By Antoinette Donovan Hemphill • January, 2011

Anyone who's been to a Little League game knows that some kids – and adults – handle losses better than others.

And it's not just on the baseball diamond.

Some children become fiercely competitive playing a game of checkers or Go Fish or even tag with friends on the playground. When things don't go their way, they might throw a tantrum, sulk, or feel bad about themselves.

Darrell Burnett, a sports psychologist and author of *It's Just a Game! Youth, Sports & Self Esteem: A Guide for Parents*, believes that competition can give children a sense of belonging, and teach them respectful behavior and self-control. "Those are the worthwhile and wonderful parts of youth sports," he says.

Sometimes, however, the competitive environment has a dark side.

Experts agree there are strategies for turning sore losers into good sports if parents are willing to examine their own attitudes toward competition and have honest conversations with their kids.

Start Them Young

While playing a game might seem like a fun way to pass some time with your eager preschooler, be sensitive to your child's developing skill set.

"Your average 4-year-old often struggles with taking turns or even bouncing a ball, so organized sports or games can be frustrating for them since they're still learning," says Sue Adair, director of education for The Goddard School® franchise system of childcare and preschool education programs nationwide, including 10 in Massachusetts.

If your child's frustration results in a tearful meltdown over the outcome of Candy Land, calmly put the board game away and remove her from the situation. "Once the emotions have quieted down, then you can go back and talk about what happened and why they felt so upset," Adair says.

If another child is involved, bring him or her into the conversation to reinforce the importance of good social behavior, such as taking turns and following a game's rules. And even though it can be difficult to watch children become emotional during an activity that should be fun, they are learning from the experience.

"Preschool children are building social skills and learning how to get along," Adair says. "Frustration can teach children about failure and that it's part of life." Parents can help with this lesson by explaining that it's fine to feel frustrated when things don't go your way, but there are appropriate ways to express these feelings. And remember, young children look to parents for cues when it comes to good sportsmanship.

"Actions speak louder than words," Adair says. "If parents and adults around them exhibit appropriate behavior in sportsmanship, that's what they will learn. If they see their parents in the stands yelling over a mistake, then that's not a good role model."

While your preschooler may not fully understand competition, he can comprehend your attitude toward it, so set the right tone now for the years to come.

Emphasize Playing, Not Winning

During the elementary school years, children are presented with more opportunities to participate in organized sports, and their reasons for wanting to play are refreshingly positive. “Research shows that the top three reasons kids play are to have fun, learn skills and enjoy lots of action,” Burnett says. “Winning is on the bottom of the list.” And experts agree that it needs to stay there.

“If your child has a hard time losing, then parents need to help them focus less on winning,” says Wendy Grolnick, a professor of psychology at Clark University in Worcester and co-author of *Pressured Parents, Stressed-Out Kids: Dealing With Competition While Raising a Successful Child*. Parents can do this by changing how they discuss the outcome of a game. When your child walks in the door after a competitive experience, don’t ask, “Did you win?” Ask, “Did you have fun?” or “Did you make any good plays?” With this shift in focus, you teach your child that it’s not only about the end product, but the whole process.

“Regardless of outcome, it should be about, ‘How am I doing?’ and ‘How are my skills developing,’” Burnett says. “Kids need to see themselves making progress.” That’s why he recommends that parents motivate their children with a “task mastery” approach rather than the “go-for-the-trophy” mentality.

Parents can comment on how a specific skill keeps improving, regardless of a game’s outcome. “Kids stay in sports and are positive when they are focusing on developing skills,” Burnett says. “When kids hate to lose and get stressed, the emphasis is not being placed on the right things.”

Teach Teens to See the Whole Picture

While teenagers may not stomp their feet or pout after a loss, their less obvious disappointment can have serious consequences. “With older kids, they often link their own feelings about themselves to winning, and that’s troublesome,” Grolnick says.

Factor in the increased competitiveness in high school sports, which Grolnick describes as at an all-time high, and it’s understandable that teens never want to lose. To ensure that self-esteem doesn’t suffer after a loss, however, parents must be prepared to help children see themselves as more than just an athlete.

“You don’t want them to tie their self-worth into their athletic level, so they need to see themselves as a kid first,” Burnett says. “Parents need to explain to them that sports are wonderful, but it’s one thing. It’s alluring for parents to get sucked into ‘my son, the athlete’ but that’s the wrong message. Don’t put all your eggs in one basket.”

Teenagers are usually mature enough to understand and appreciate the other parts of themselves if a parent initiates the conversation. It can also be helpful to have a talk about the meaning of competition, Burnett says. Parents can discuss how the word literally means “to seek a prize with somebody” and the idea that true competitors want to play with others who will challenge them and give it their all. If you lose to someone with that attitude, then it shouldn’t be a completely negative experience.

Parents can also remind their teens to be competitive with themselves instead of always focusing on the end result. “They can learn to ask themselves, ‘Did I give it my best shot?’ and ‘What can I work on?’” Burnett says.

Lastly, parents should always pay attention to the atmosphere surrounding the competitions where their teens spend so much time. “Remember, it may not be a matter of what your child needs to do to deal with losing,” Grolnick says. “Keep an eye on the level of competition in a situation. Parents can usually spot if it’s too pressured and where the stress is coming from, whether it involves a coach or peers. It could be time to have a conversation with the adult in charge.”

Regardless of age, honest conversations will play a major role in transforming a sore loser or stressed-out child into a good sport who can enjoy a game no matter the final score.

Resources

Books

- ***It's Just a Game! Youth, Sports, & Self-Esteem: A Guide for Parents***, by Darrell Burnett, Ph.D., IUniverse, 2001. Practical parental advice for how to make competition a positive experience for children and keep it in proper perspective.
- ***Liam Wins the Game, Sometimes: A Story About Losing With Grace***, by Jane Whelen Banks, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2008. Lively drawings and text teach young children that it's OK to be disappointed if you lose, but it's not OK to pout or throw things.
- ***Pressured Parents, Stressed-Out Kids: Dealing With Competition While Raising a Successful Child***, by Wendy S. Grolnick and Kathy Seal, Prometheus Books, 2008. Explores the "Pressured Parent Phenomenon" – intense worry and anxiety over when children compete – and shows how to avoid burn-out in both parents and children.

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