

Best and Fairest Sports Parenting

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Every parent wants to do the right thing by their sports-playing children. The problem is that no-one tells us exactly what the 'right thing' is.

Sure, we get bombarded with a list of things *not* to do, and we receive basic instructions on how to behave—stay quiet, understand this is not professional sport, hand your kid over to the coach and pick them up after training. Most of these rules are designed because sporting associations don't trust their parent group to do the right thing.

Best and Fairest Sports Parenting is designed to outline exactly what the right thing looks like, and to increase the level of enjoyment between parents and their kids.

Your child may go on to become a professional player, and that's great if it's what they want. However, the best outcome you can hope for is that when they grow into adults, you can both reminisce about their formative sports-playing years with heartfelt fondness, enjoyment, and love.



The Author

Nathan started his career as a schoolteacher before the demands of AFL football took over. In a career that spanned seventeen seasons at St Kilda FC, he captured numerous individual awards while captaining his Club, his State, and representing Australia in the International Rules Series. His individual highlight was being awarded the AFL Hall of Fame Membership and Legend Status in the St Kilda Hall of Fame.

Post-football, Nathan has started his own consulting company which focuses on high performance, resilience and leadership. He juggles this role with coaching elite-level Women's AFL at the Western Bulldogs.

When he isn't imparting wisdom to parents, coaches and players at the grassroots level of sport, he loves nothing more than standing on the side-lines, supporting his three daughters.

On 'sideline psychos'

Look at any world sport and you will see a litany of examples where players, some who have even 'made the grade' at the top level, do not have a parent or family to share it with due to their fractured childhood relationships. And these are just the high-profile cases we know about because the player 'made it'. What about all the other parent-child relationships that have been broken that we don't know about because the child never realized their full potential?

Most likely we have never heard of these athletes because they gave up the sport too early or couldn't cope with the mental and physical pressure applied by the poisonous sports parent.

Placing too much importance on winning

It is impossible to win every time you play a game. No player in the history of sport has ever done that, so why should we expect our kids to be able to do it? It is far better to concentrate on our kids' improvement. To achieve this, we need to understand and look at the things they are working on. In this way, success does not relate solely to what the scoreboard says—rather, it relates to what your child does in the game. In essence you can 'win' even when you 'lose'.

Many parents only focus on the scoreboard because they don't know what else to focus on. If this is you, ask your kids what they are working on, learn how the game is played and maybe even get out and have a kick or hit yourself. You may just realise that the free throw line is further out than it looks on the sideline and you can cut your kid some slack when they miss one.

How to help a child who's a sore loser

1. Praise effort, not outcome.
2. Don't 'let' them win.
3. Show them how.
4. Teach your child about feelings.
5. Remind them why they play.

Post-game conversations

After the game, no matter how they played, the best thing you can do for your child is say, 'I love watching you play' or ask the question, 'Did you have fun?' If the answer is yes, then move on. If it's no, you need to ask questions. Don't drill them for answers; wait until the mood has increased and then broach the subject.

Typically kids will stew for thirty minutes at most after a game before they are open to discussing events. Wait it out and then approach the subject from a caring perspective—not a judgmental perspective: 'You said you didn't have fun today, what was different today than last week when you were on a high?' Or, 'You didn't seem to have the same energy as last week, are you feeling okay?'

Get them to compare the two weeks, as this will prevent the likelihood of 'nothing' being the dismissive response.

On spending money you don't have

Do you have to make sure your kid has the very latest equipment? Do you pay excessive amounts for private coaching in the hopes that it will lead to something bigger, even though there are no guarantees?

Whilst there isn't anything wrong with buying things you can afford, it becomes a problem when you buy things you can't afford.

As parents, we spend big on our kids for two reasons: Firstly because we don't want them to go without, and secondly because we think that we are investing in their futures.

One of the ways to teach the value of sacrifice to kids is to ensure they do occasionally miss out on things. It may be the very latest Nike boots that cost \$300, or the new racquet that Serena Williams endorses. This 'missing out' can give them a sense of appreciation for what they have, and an understanding that talent is not a matter of equipment; it's a product of hard work.