



**Championing
& Celebrating
Responsibility in
Youth Sports**

RESPONSIBLE SPORT PARENTING: EMPOWERING CONVERSATIONS

When it comes to sports, we as parents can fall into the trap of thinking that it is our job to talk and our children's job to listen. We need to remember it is also our job to listen and to create space for our children to talk. Here are some suggestions for talking sports with your kids.

■ **A Conversation Among Equals**

True conversation – not instruction or admonishment – occurs between equals. Dictators don't have conversations with their subjects. They tell them what to do. Prepare yourself for a conversation with your children by remembering that youth sports is for them, not for you. Remember that you want to be supportive and be on their level. Your goal is not to give advice on how to become a better athlete but to help your children learn.

■ **Listen!**

In many instances you may know exactly what your children can do to improve on the field, which life lessons you want them to learn, and how to apply those life lessons off the field. However, this is a conversation. Your goal is to get your children talking about their sports experience, so ask rather than tell.

Use open-ended questions: Some questions lend themselves to one-word responses. "How was your game today?" "Fine."

To get your children to talk at length, ask open-ended questions that elicit longer, more thoughtful responses, and that can't be answered with a one-word answer like yes or no.

- "What was the most enjoyable part of today's practice/game?"
- "What worked well?"
- "What didn't turn out so well?"
- "What did you learn that can help you in the future?"
- "Any thoughts on what you'd like to work on before the next game?"

Show You Are Listening. Make it obvious that you are paying attention through nonverbal cues such as making eye contact, nodding your head and making "listening noises" ("uh-huh," "hmmm," "interesting," etc.).

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■ **Ask About Life-Lesson and Character Issues**

Be explicit. For example, say, “Any thoughts on what you’ve learned in practice this week that might help you with other parts of your life?”

It’s important to have in mind specific “teachable moments” of a practice or game that you want to discuss with them, but resist the temptation to lead your children to the conclusions you want them to reach.

They will learn and apply life lessons more effectively if they arrive at conclusions on their own. Of course, you can always share your ideas with them, but try to avoid doing so in a way that will shut down their desire to have a conversation with you.

■ **Let Your Children Set the Terms**

Forcing a conversation right after a competition, when there may be a lot of emotion, is often less successful than waiting until your children indicate they are ready to talk. (Boys may take longer than girls to talk about an experience.)

Look for prompts that your children are ready. Don’t fear silence. Stick with it and your child will open up to you.

Conversations don’t have to be lengthy to be effective. If your children want a brief discussion, defer to their wishes. If they feel like every discussion about sports is going to be long, they may begin to avoid them.

It’s really too bad when that happens because an essential truth in the youth athlete-sports parent relationship is that kids like talking about sports so much, they’ll even talk sports with us! (Unless we make it unpleasant for them to do so.)

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