

## Quitting Time?

---

Each year, more than thirty-five million kids register for organized youth sports, yet a staggering 70% of kids quit playing sports by age 13. Seventy percent! And most never return to play these sports again. So less than 20% of high school students play sports.

Why do kids quit sports? This month, the team at Responsible Sports, together with the experts at Positive Coaching Alliance, delve into this topic and provide some insight for parents, coaches and administrators on what steps we, as youth sports advocates, can take to try to reverse these statistics.

When you ask kids why they stop playing sports, here's what you hear:

- "It's not fun anymore"
- "I just stand around on Saturdays. I don't ever get to play!"
- "I'm not getting any better. I'm not learning new stuff."
- "I'm sick of being yelled at and called names."
- "The travel is taking away our family vacation time"
- "I'm not good enough to play anymore"
- "My team keeps losing and I'm the reason. I just shouldn't play this sport."
- "I'm just disappointing my parents. I'm not as good as my Dad used to be."

In the early years of youth sports (ages 5-12), coaches and parents should emphasize the fun in youth sports. These are the formative years when kids discover their passion for a sport. And this passion comes not just from trying to win, but from experiencing the sheer joy of the sport. As we all know as parents, kids at this age are at varying levels of development physically, emotionally, intellectually, and socially.

How many of us have sat in the bleachers and commented how an opposing team has some players who are incredibly tall for their age and others who are so small for their age. It's just the nature of this growth period for kids. Just getting muscles coordinated and staying focused is tough at this age. And patience and understanding from adults is key to nurturing the passion for the sport.

During these early years, kids need to be busy and active while participating in the sport. Sitting on the bench or just standing in the outfield, never touching the ball is no fun at any age. Kids also want to learn the skills of the game – but they need an individual plan that recognizes where they are today and rewards improvement.

Set realistic expectations here! Programs like cross-ice, dribble and shoot, or skills challenges provide 'competitive' environments for kids of all development levels – and are far more encouraging and rewarding than game environments. Rethink what it means to compete at this age! Consider creating league-wide skills competitions or practices where kids can show off their newfound skills without the pressure of winning and losing.

In the middle years, players really start dropping out of sports. Most often they report that having fun has been replaced by a focus on winning. As the experts at PCA consistently remind us, "[Coaching For Mastery](#)" is a far more productive method than coaching with a focus just on the scoreboard. Even nationally recognized and highly accomplished coaches and athletes – like [Doc Rivers](#), [Summer Sanders](#), [Joy Fawcett](#), and Jennie Finch – talk about the need to focus on the fun of the sport and let the scoreboard take care of itself. Listen to almost any professional athlete and coach from any sport and they'll share with you their experience as a child simply having fun with their sport.

These middle years, leading into high school years, also seem to start the idea that somehow you have to be great to play a sport. Whatever happened to playing a sport simply to play? Pick-up games, intramurals and neighborhood games with friends are just as important to a continued love of sports and the lifelong benefits of playing. [Doug Wilson](#), the former Chicago Blackhawks standout and current GM of the San Jose Sharks, talks about how his parents encouraged him to play a sport that he was interested in but wasn't particularly good at. The experience was life-changing. He appreciated the value of sport even when he wasn't the best on the team. [Alexi Lalas](#) to this day, still plays adult hockey. That's right – hockey! This former World Cup® soccer defenseman started playing hockey as a kid for fun. It stayed fun.

And is still fun today!

Not making the team can be a really challenging time for a youth athlete – and a critical time for Responsible Sport Parents to help kids find another outlet for their passion for sports. Many of the same principles that PCA recommends for Responsible Coaching apply to youth sport parents and can help guide these potentially tough conversations and determine some next steps with young athletes.

Finally, in the high school years, many kids struggle to manage the demanding rigors of school, friends, family and sports. This balancing act is made even more challenging when kids join both house and travel teams, school and club sports. And that balancing act can become tougher when athletes concentrate on a single sport and feel pressure to excel and lack a release for the fun side of their sport personalities.

Last but not least, sometimes kids just want to quit. It's a tough discussion! On the one hand, as youth sports parents we want to encourage our kids to stick with it and not give up on themselves so quickly. We want them to honor their commitments ('you signed up for the season and your coach and teammates are counting on you'). And we want them to learn the lessons that sports can provide, not the least of which is overcoming adversity.

If you're like us, you think to yourself, "This is life, and I want my daughter to get used to it and learn these lessons." But on the other hand, forcing a kid to play when she doesn't want to doesn't help much either. Work hard to try to understand why they don't want to play and partner with your kids to find an alternative sport or activity.