

BE A GOOD SPORT

We want our kids to succeed at sports, to demonstrate sportsmanship, and to enjoy themselves. Let's make sure that we're good role models.

BY DEBORA M. COTY

What's a mother to do when she witnesses her mild-mannered husband turn into a hulking monster because of an umpire's call, while her first grader watches intently from the dugout? Or how should she deal with her daughter's pain after she has poured every ounce of energy into a sport, only to spend an entire game on the bench?

Having had kids involved in Christian school sports through soccer, softball, baseball, and basketball seasons for a decade, I have witnessed various kinds of parental behavior at sporting events. The actions and attitudes of Christ's followers can reflect the character of Christ during victory or defeat. But there are other times when Christ's image is decidedly blurry.

Aren't we supposed to get out there and support our offspring by getting involved in their activities? Doesn't our cheering demonstrate loving concern? And doesn't freedom of speech include expressing our opinions on everything from the nearsightedness of the referees to the insani-

ty of the coach's choice of uniform colors? Our hardest task as Christian parents is to channel our enthusiasm and opinions productively so that we remain ambassadors for Christ while encouraging our kids and their teammates.

We love our children and want them to succeed. But sometimes we misdirect that fervor into an us-against-the-world mentality where we misinterpret human error by a referee, a coach, or another player as an intentional assault against our child. This perceived injustice enrages us and inflames our righteous indignation. Somehow it seems socially acceptable to say and do things at a ball game that we would never consider saying or doing anywhere else.

We've all seen them, and some of us have been them—overzealous parents who scream, spit, and spew, caught up in the delirious frenzy of competition. But instead of thinking that winning is the only thing, most of us want our children to have fun while developing discipline and new skills. As believers, our greatest desire is to see our kids include God in every area of their lives.

The following three principles can help us build up our children while honoring the name of Christ.

1. Think and speak positively!

While our children are trying to gain proficiency in new skills, they face frequent failures and ongoing instruction

from coaches. This process is the best way for them to develop skills in a sport. But what happens when we disagree with our children's coaches?

We may be more knowledgeable about a sport than volunteer parent-coaches or even paid coaches, but these people deserve our respect for committing their time and energy to the betterment of our children. Likewise, volunteers who clean the fields, sell hot dogs, collect tickets, and organize fundraisers deserve our thanks and recognition. Showing gracious appreciation is a wonderful way to demonstrate God's love.

Because we have a responsibility to protect our children, it's important for us to monitor interactions between our children and their coaches and teammates. And because coaches are human, they'll make mistakes at times. We should handle these mistakes with the same courtesy with which we wish to be treated when we make mistakes.

Inevitably at some time during our children's sports careers we'll disagree with some aspect of the instruction process. If the problem persists, it's best to express our concern privately to the coach as calmly and objectively as possible. Often, that's all that's needed to change things in a positive way. If we can't achieve compromise or corrective action, we may consider approaching a coach's supervisor, being careful not to air grievances to our children or to other parents.

Negative comments have a way of developing into negative attitudes, which can have a cumulative effect, often snowballing into an out-of-control avalanche of criticism that can bury people alive. The apostle Paul warns, "If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other" (Galatians 5:15).

Grumbling in the stands will eventually find its way onto the field and affect our children negatively. Conversely, if we approach games positively and avoid criticizing or making negative comments from the sidelines, our children will enjoy the game more.

2. Plan ahead.

Parents struggle with self-control at every level of competition and in every environment, including community, private school, Christian school, and public school sports programs. Christian school games can be as intense and emotionally charged as those in any other arena.

I recall my son's ninth grade regional basketball final between two rival Christian schools. Hostile comments, name-calling, and even fist-fights broke out among parents in the stands as the teams competed. I was embarrassed by the behavior demonstrated by these normally devout in-

dividuals—especially when one of my own family members became involved in a shouting match with an opposing fan.

What is it that turns followers of Christ into angry, obnoxious, vengeful sports fanatics when their children are competing? Is it pride? Perhaps an overactive, misdirected, protective instinct? Whatever its root cause, it results in sinful, destructive behavior.

I've found that before any sporting event, it's important to ask myself: Is my primary purpose to glorify God in this place? If so, how will I achieve that goal when tensions rise and tempers flare? I can either influence others or repel them. As the apostle Paul advised, "Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace" (Colossians 4:5-6).

Making a peace plan and sticking to it can defuse a potential bomb before it detonates. If you are married to a person who also struggles with an overly competitive spirit, discuss this issue during a quiet time at home. Agree on a system of cues to keep each other in check when a game approaches a tense point, and remind each other that your goal is to be ambassadors for Christ. During an intense game, it can sometimes be helpful to take a strategic trip to the concession stand or bathroom in order to let the stress subside.

3. Remember the memories.

Your son kicks the game-winning goal, your daughter gets the MVP award, your 8-year old hits his first home run—these are the makings of wonderful family celebrations that turn into lifelong memories.

But what happens when your daughter drops a teammate at the cheerleading competition or your son strikes out with the bases loaded? Un-

Time-Outs for Parents

If you get too tense when your child plays competitive sports, try one of these stress-busters.

- Stand up and move around during the game.
- Take a time-out; go to the concession stand.
- Socialize with someone during a tense moment.
- Do mental chores like personal scorekeeping or videotaping.
- Watch from a distance.
- Volunteer at the concession stand, but make sure that you can see your child.
- Express your feelings to someone, such as your spouse.

—excerpted from *How to Win at Sports Parenting* by Jim and Janet Sundberg

fortunately, disappointing moments like these are also part of the sports experience, the stuff of not-so-pleasant memories. How we deal with them can make or break the spirits of our children. Experiencing the agony of defeat is an opportunity to teach our children the lesson of perseverance and grace.

Demonstrating unconditional love to our children after a poor athletic performance mirrors the unchanging love of our heavenly Father for us despite our mistakes and shortcomings. For example, when my daughter's disastrous turnover during a basketball game brought her coach's and teammates' wrath upon her, I tried to think of something to lift her discouraged spirits when she got home. Unable to come up with anything profound, I propped a handmade sign on

her bed that read, "You played your heart out! We are proud of you!" Hearing no sound when she arrived at home, I peeked around the door to see her standing motionless in the center of her room, clutching the sign to her chest while silent tears dripped down her face. She cherished that simple symbol of the way we valued her and displayed it prominently on her wall for years.

Encouraging our kids after a loss teaches them that their worth in God's eyes and ours isn't dependent upon their skills or accomplishments; just because they lose doesn't mean they are losers. A Christlike attitude and demonstrating God's grace even under pressure—not the score of a game—determine who is a winner.

What will our children remember about these years? Our role as parents

is pivotal. Ross, an excellent baseball catcher with college prospects, quit the sport during his senior year because of his dad's criticism after every game. Jason's father refused to speak to him for days after bad games. Both boys are now grown and have bitter memories of what should have been some of the best times of their lives.

God is glorified when we make good choices and exhibit the fruit of the Spirit at our children's sporting events—especially patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, and self-control. We are the role models for the next generation of Christian bleacher parents. What are they learning from us? ■

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