A New Psychology for Young Athletes – Managing Sports for Middle School and High School-aged Youth

by Mary Shein, LMFT

Close to 30 million youth currently participate in athletics, and the benefits of sports participation are plentiful. Studies show that athletes who have had positive experiences in sports report higher self-esteem, positive body image, decreased unwanted pregnancy, decreased use of drugs and alcohol, physical competencies, gender flexibility, opportunities for social development, mental toughness, and resilience (Richman and Shaffer, 2000).

However, children’s involvement in sports can also pose difficulties, particularly because training schedules are becoming more demanding and competition is more serious. According to information provided by the Center for Kids First (www.thecenterforkidsfirst.org), children are reporting that they are enjoying their sports participation less. In addition, attrition rates for sports participation are rising – 70% of youth athletes quit before the age of 15. Many children stop playing their sport because too much pressure is placed on them by their parents and coaches.

Some kids even report poor treatment by their coaches, like being yelled at, insulted, or pressured to play with an injury.

Sports participation may also affect children’s mental and emotional health. A recent study by Maniar, Chamberlain, and Moore (2005) suggests that student-athletes are more at-risk for mental health difficulties than non-athletes, such as alcohol abuse, social anxiety and depressive symptoms. Athletes also suffer from clinical depression at similar rates as non-athletes. It is possible that the new culture of athletics, which emphasizes toughness, fighting through pain, and not showing weakness, is responsible for negatively impacting children’s mental health.

Clearly, children’s involvement in sports activities impacts their lives and the lives of their families. How can parents help their children have positive athletic experiences? How can parents manage the role that sports play in their family’s lives?

In order to assess the impact of sports participation on children’s well-being, several issues are critical to understand. Are children suffering from a grueling schedule or high demands from coaches that affect the way they feel about themselves? While it may seem that this is just part of “playing the game,” these are potential problems that are important to discuss with children.

Children’s physical health is also an essential consideration. While sports participation can increase children’s physical fitness, middle school
and high school athletes can be prone to injury before their young bodies reach full maturity. Having to sit on the sidelines and watch your teammates play without you is difficult enough, but dealing with the pressure to come back from the injury can also be overwhelming for children. Many athletes feel they should just play through the pain – athletes are supposed to be tough anyway, right? And if they don’t play they may worry that they’ll lose their place on the team. It is important for kids to know that adequate rest and recuperation will be better for them in the long run - rushing back from injury can have longer detrimental effects.

Finally, it is important for parents to understand their children’s goals for their sports participation. Is the child hoping to someday become a professional athlete? Is he or she working to receive college scholarships? Or is the child simply trying to have a good time, get a good workout, and spend time with friends?

The odds of advancing beyond high school athletics are very slim. Only 1.7% of high school basketball players actually play at the collegiate level, while 0.00015% of high school football players make it to the pros (www.ncaa.org). However, there’s no harm in supporting your child’s dream or aspiration, as long as it doesn’t interfere with his or her functioning or self-confidence. Part of developing healthy self-esteem is working toward a goal, regardless of the outcome. In fact, sometimes not achieving the goal can be a great way to learn resilience and to learn how to handle adversity. On the other hand, some dreams do come true, as the parents of Tiger Woods, Tom Brady, and Serena Williams can attest!

Unfortunately, however, some kids must deal with added pressure placed on them from the perspectives of others. Young athletes can feel pressure from coaches, teammates, parents, siblings, and themselves. Whether it is pressure to get better, to maintain a certain status, to be “the best,” to receive a scholarship, or to live up to a family legacy, these expectations can be real as well as perceived. Unless it is discussed directly, children might assume that their parents have expectations for their achievement that may not be true. Some children and adolescents are reluctant to talk about these issues, so it is important for parents and coaches to talk about them directly. Once children feel that the door is opened for them to talk, it is much easier to find out if something is bothering them.

As a parent, the best thing you can do is to communicate openly about your child’s experience. Is he or she feeling badly about a recent performance? Is he or she nervous about upcoming competitions? Does he or she seem tired or ambivalent about participating in the sport? Perhaps the schedule is more demanding than the child expected, especially when coupled with tough academic standards. It is important to consider whether time spent practicing is enjoyable for your child, or if it is making him or her tired and worn out. Perhaps the extra time spent practicing is taking away from much-needed family time, social time, or time for schoolwork. This can lead to feelings of shame after failure, fluctuations in self-esteem, poor coping skills, low self-worth, short-lived satisfaction, and even feelings of internal compulsion. Good sportsmanship and character are just as important as the outcome, and should be emphasized more than wins or losses. Even though the current culture of youth athletics appears to place winning above all else, good character and sportsmanship are integral for the mental and emotional well-being of children.
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When talking with your child, allow him or her to express fears and worries, and then validate those concerns. You don’t have to solve the problem – you just have to listen to your child as he or she works it out. Ask your child if he or she would like help thinking about options. Your kids will tell you if they want your help or not – as hard as it is to do, try to respect their wishes. Sometimes kids just need time to think on their own before they’re ready to take action to solve their problems. If you do notice that your child is struggling, help is always available.

Most importantly, make sure your children know they are valuable regardless of how they perform in athletics. Healthy self-confidence is associated with knowing that you are valued and loved not for what you accomplish, but for who you are. Putting too much emphasis on the outcome of a sporting event can result in children feeling that their worth and value is related to how well they perform. This can lead to feelings of shame after failure, fluctuations in self-esteem, poor coping skills, low self-worth, short-lived satisfaction, and even feelings of internal compulsion. Good sportsmanship and character are just as important as the outcome, and should be emphasized more than wins or losses. Even though the current culture of youth athletics appears to place winning above all else, good character and sportsmanship are integral for the mental and emotional well-being of children.
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