



FAMILY *Matters*

Sport Psychology and Youth Sports

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As we hope for warm weather to melt the snow, our attention begins to focus on youth sports. This can bring about a sense of excitement and sometimes sense of stress. Stress can come from trying to figure out if your child should play on the select team and/or elite level leagues and the corresponding travel demands. To reduce stress, it is important to keep sports in perspective. According to the NCAA, 95% of high school athletes end their competitive sport careers in high school. This means that for the vast majority of children, sports is not about playing in college and beyond. For most children it is about fun, sense of belonging, source of identity, enjoyment of physical activity, socialization, and self-esteem development by improving skills. If you notice I didn't mention winning. While kids enjoy winning, it is not the main reason why they play sports. Winning can sometimes become more about the coach and the parents and less about the child. The field of sport psychology has studied why children play sports. The research clearly indicates that the number one reason why kids play sports is to have FUN- not to win. When a sport stops being FUN, children stop playing the sport.

The field of sport psychology is a lesser-known sub-

specialty within psychology. In order to be a sport psychologist, a practitioner needs to be a licensed psychologist and have advanced training/certification in sport psychology. As a sport psychologist, I have had the opportunity to speak with many parents, coaches and athletes. What I have tried to emphasize is how individual and team sports can teach valuable life skills. Sports can teach the value of teamwork, dealing with adversity, managing emotions, self-discipline, deferring individual needs to the needs of a team, and dealing with performance anxiety.

The most common reason why clients seek my sport psychology services is to deal with performance anxiety. Performance anxiety comes about when athletes focus their thoughts on past or future performance, engage in negative self-talk and worry about the possibility of negative outcomes. This way of thinking usually results in tentativeness and underperformance. The way I teach athletes to deal with performance anxiety is to stay focused in the present, engage in positive self-talk and focus on the process to execute their athletic skill. For example, a pitcher would be best served by focusing on the next pitch to be thrown (present focus), being confident about his/her ability to throw the pitch (positive self-talk) and focusing on the

pitching technique to throw an effective pitch (process). Once a pitcher learns this psychological approach, pitching performance anxiety can be significantly reduced.

Recommendations for youth sports:

- Keep the focus on fun and enjoyment
- Recognize that most athletes will not play at the collegiate level
- Keep parental pressure at a minimum because it can have a negative effect on enjoyment of sport and can lead to premature dropping out of a sport
- Make sure an athlete is playing a sport to meet his/her own needs not the needs of a parent
- View sport as a way to teach valuable life skills and engage children in healthy physical activity
- Keep sport as part of their identity but not their entire identity

Michael D. Zito, Ph.D. is a licensed psychologist in Warren. He practices clinical and sport psychology with children through adults. He is an AASP Certified Sport Psychology Consultant and is listed in the United States Olympic Committee Sport Psychology/Mental Training Registry 2013-2016. Dr. Zito can be reached at MichaelZitoPhD@yahoo.com and is available to work with athletes, and provide coach and parent workshops on best practices in youth sport.