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8 life lessons from the field

Discover surprising benefits of sports for teen and tween athletes

By Melody Warnick



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There are plenty of reasons to be thrilled your tween or teen is playing sports. Serious exercise? Check. Built-in friends? Check. A great addition to her college application? Oh yeah. The benefits of sports don't stop there, though. In addition to perfecting her jump shot or corner kick, your child is picking up skills that can help her navigate everything else in her life, from social situations to schoolwork to workplaces. Here are eight important lessons big kids learn from sports without realizing it.

1. How to handle their emotions

If you've ever seen a tennis player hurl a racket—or a sports fan hurl an insult—you know athletics can be a hot-blooded pursuit. "Sports and competition generate intense emotion," says Joel H. Fish, PhD, director of the Center for Sports Psychology in Philadelphia and author of *101 Ways to Be a Terrific Sports Parent*. "Because that's part of the package, players learn to deal with their emotions." An athlete who bursts into tears after every strike-out can get coaching on how to calm himself down, those "It's okay, I'll do better next time" reassurances. Meanwhile, repeated exposure to tough experiences, like missing shots, can dull their knee-jerk freak-out reaction. When kids learn how to handle emotions on the field, they're better able to deal with social angst without losing control and stay composed in the face of disappointments, like a college rejection letter or unrequited middle-school crush.

2. How to find their passion

For some die-hard athletes, a sport can become an all-encompassing love and, for a lucky few, a career path. But even if your kid doesn't eat, sleep and dream lacrosse, bringing his A-game teaches him how to develop a passion: working hard and experiencing joy in an activity. Sadly, some kids have forgotten about this. "Sometimes teens are so consumed with competing, winning and getting into the right college that they disconnect from what they want to feel *during* activities," says sports psychologist Caroline Silby, PhD, author of

Games Girls Play: Understanding and Guiding Young Female Athletes and an advisor to elite athletes. By pouring themselves into their sport, they can figure out what they love about it and what parts they're good at, which can help them identify future passions, like a job or a volunteer opportunity. Don't worry if your kid isn't in love with her sport at first. According to Dr. Silby, "Bringing her best self to an activity she isn't drawn to can actually create passion."

3. How to praise others

Teen and tween athletes quickly learn that when a teammate makes a good play (or even a good try), you cheer for them. This practice quells some of the jealousy kids feel for friends who are just plain better than they are. In other words, says Paul Stricker, MD, author of *Sports Success Rx! Your Child's Prescription for the Best Experience*, kids learn "to appreciate the expertise and accomplishments of others." This could make your child more comfortable dishing out sincere compliments to friends—a surefire popularity booster, since kind-hearted tweens who see the good in others are magnets for more buddies. Later on, being able to offer positive feedback in the workplace can make him a valuable leader.

4. How to make mistakes

Forget the old notion of "it's how you play the game." These days, says Dr. Fish, youth sports emphasize winning no matter what. But that doesn't mean that sports aren't still a good arena for messing up. Training sessions teach kids that everyone makes mistakes; that's why we practice. Because sports give you immediate feedback—you hold the ball the wrong way, your spiral doesn't go where you want it to—athletes learn to pinpoint errors quickly and figure out how to overcome them. Kids can apply that process of identifying and fixing mistakes to everything from calculus to cello; it's the one sure way to see steady improvement.

5. How to juggle responsibilities

"Sure, there are kids who are overwhelmed by all the practices, games and travel, or who care more about sports than their homework," says Dr. Stricker. "However, many children learn to balance school, sports and family during their years of increasing activity, so they can schedule appropriately to accomplish tasks." Since life tends to get busy and stay busy, learning how to handle multiple demands on their time can equip teens to manage all the multitasking they'll be expected to do later on.

6. How to deal with difficult personalities

As frustrating as it is when your child's coach hollers first and asks questions later, the experience can teach your kid to take criticism without taking it personally. "Athletes learn to consider the information presented as opposed to responding to the emotion with which it's conveyed," says Dr. Silby. "When athletes listen for the information, they can take positive action." It also teaches teens to communicate respectfully, negotiate for what they need and focus on things they can control (like their own thoughts) rather than what they can't. Since the future holds plenty of bad bosses and dictatorial teachers, knowing how to navigate tough personalities with aplomb helps student athletes excel down the road.

7. How to perform under pressure

Parents sometimes cringe at the stress competitive sports put on their kids, but the ability

to produce results in rough situations is practically a prerequisite for schools and workplaces. "If you learn to calm down when you're shooting a foul shot with five seconds left," says Dr. Fish, "you can use that same skill when you're taking a test and have a lot of questions to answer and just three minutes to go."

8. How to be resilient

Being on a losing team teaches kids to face loss, naturally. But some coaches are taking that one step further, teaching sports psychologists' techniques for dealing with disappointment and playing more successfully in the future. For instance, athletes are often coached to visualize positive results before a game—using all their senses to relive good experiences and imagine themselves performing better, stronger, faster. They also learn to "reframe" post-game frustration, explains Dr. Silby, by asking productive questions like "What can I do to make this better next time," instead of dwelling on "Why do I always screw up?" That kind of psychological toolkit can boost your kid's chances at success at anything he tries.

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