

# Teaching Sportsmanship Early

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## What does sportsmanship mean and why is it important to teach early to our youth?

It seems that over time, the meaning of sportsmanship has been watered down. Frequently thrown into mission statements and pre-season coach-speak, the spirit underlying sportsmanship is often lost in rhetoric. Sportsmanship is a state of being in which basketball players of all ages are guided by core values of fair play. Respect, integrity, compassion, honor, and teamwork represent some of these core values. We want our kids to show respect for coaches, teammates, referees, fans, opponents, themselves, and the game of basketball. It makes such a difference when players shake hands after a tough game, say thank you to the ref or thank their families and friends for coming to the game. We want our kids to play and practice with integrity in which they do the right things even when no one is looking. Maybe this means running their sprints all the way through the line when by themselves or picking up someone's left- behind basketball long after everyone has left the gym. We want our kids to be competitive and yet also maintain a sense of compassion for others, even if they are on the other team.

If an opposing player gets injured and play is stopped, one of our kids might make the effort to go over and say, "Hey, are you OK?" Or, when the injured player walks off the floor, all fans clap in support. We want our kids to honor the traditions of basketball and those great players and coaches who played before them. This requires each player to recognize that he or she is a small part of a larger entity that brings all players, coaches and fans together to benefit from exercise, camaraderie, tradition and competition. Lastly, we want our players to strive for individual excellence but also understand the value of working with others even in the face of hardship and adversity. This might mean that a talented guard joins the second string to help balance out the floor because it's good for the team.

There are numerous reasons why teaching sportsmanship is critical. Teams guided by the values described above frequently have great chemistry and are most likely to make the most of their ability because they are impervious to distraction. Yes, they are more likely to win games. Because they play for each other and for the team, they avoid the struggles of some teams that might be hampered by individual stats or focus purely on the game's outcome. Of course, talent is always critical in whether a team wins or loses. But those teams that embrace the true spirit of sportsmanship in how they train and play are the ones that keep their focus on the task at hand, ones that stand strong and together in the face of adversity. I think we saw that both teams possessed these traits in last year's championship game.

Teaching sportsmanship early does make a difference. We know from medical, educational and psychiatric research that interventions for any challenge whether it is physical, academic or emotional, are most successful when implemented early. Poor conduct on and off the floor, selfish play, inappropriate fan behavior represents some of the ills of today's youth sport world. Yet by reaching our young players early and teaching the values of fair play, we are building a more resilient group who will likely play the game the way it was meant to be played, experience great enjoyment and pass along the wonderful spirit of basketball to their friends and future generations of players and fans.

And, perhaps, most important, basketball, like many sports, is a vehicle for teaching young people critical life lessons that can be internalized and used for the rest of their lives. By teaching sportsmanship through the game of basketball, we are preparing our youth for healthy and balanced adult lives. It is for these reasons that we celebrate teaching sportsmanship as one of the most critical aspects of playing the game of basketball at any level.