

Introducing “Honoring the Game” to Your Children

At the start of the season, let your children know you want them to Honor the Game. Honoring the Game means that you will have respect for the ROOTS of the game:

■ **RULES**

Refuse to bend/break the rules to win.

■ **OPPONENTS**

Value and recognize that a worthy opponent brings out our best, and we take a “fierce and friendly” attitude into competition.

■ **OFFICIALS**

Respect officials even when we disagree with them.

■ **TEAMMATES**

Never do anything to embarrass your team (on or off the field).

■ **SELF**

Live up to our standards of Honoring the Game, even when others don't.



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Responsible Sport Parenting: Tools for Creating Coach/Parent Partnership

■ **RECOGNIZE THE COACH'S COMMITMENT**

Coaches commit many, many hours of preparation beyond the hours spent at practices and games. Recognize that they do not do it for the pay! Try to remember this whenever something goes awry during the season.

■ **MAKE EARLY, POSITIVE CONTACT WITH THE COACH**

As soon as you know who your child's coach is going to be, introduce yourself, let him or her know you want to help your child have the best possible experience, and offer to assist the coach in any way you are qualified. Meeting the coach early and establishing a positive relationship will make conversation easier if a problem arises during the season.

■ **FILL THE COACH'S EMOTIONAL TANK**

When coaches are doing something you like, let them know about it. Coaching is a stressful job, and most coaches only hear from parents when they have a complaint. A coach with a full Emotional Tank will do a better job.

■ **DON'T INSTRUCT DURING A GAME OR PRACTICE**

Your child is trying to concentrate amid the chaotic action of a game and do what the coach asks. A parent yelling out instructions hardly ever helps. More often than not, it confuses the child, adds pressure and goes against the coaches' instruction, which undermines the player-coach relationship, the player-parent relationship and the parent-coach relationship.

■ **DON'T PUT THE PLAYER IN THE MIDDLE**

When parents share their disapproval of a coach with their children, it puts the children in a bind. Divided loyalties hinder people. Conversely, when parents support a coach, it is easier for children to put forth maximum effort. If you think your child's coach is mishandling a situation well, do not tell your child. Just take it up with the coach.

■ **OBSERVE A "COOLING OFF" PERIOD**

Wait to talk to the coach about something you are upset about for at least 24 hours. Emotions can get so hot that it's much more productive to wait a day before contacting the coach. This also gives you time to consider exactly what to say.



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Mastery Approach Tools for Parents

■ TARGETED CHEERING

We all do it. Our kid's team scores, and all the parents in the stands start cheering. When the other team scores, of course we don't cheer. (Unfortunately too many of us have witnessed parents booing from the stands.) It's reflexive. It's how we are as fans at professional sports.

But as Responsible Sport Parents, we need to go beyond reflex to cheer for the things we want to see happen again. We call that Targeted Cheering. When we notice and reinforce desired behavior from our kids (and others on the team), we help ingrain into our kids those important life lessons we want them to get from their youth sports experience. Before a game, remind yourself of the priorities you have set for what you and your children want out of sports. Consider keeping a "cheat sheet" in your pocket listing things you'll cheer for during the game, such as great effort or demonstrating good sportsmanship toward opponents.

To send your children messages about teamwork, cheer for their teammates by name. To teach sportsmanship, stretch outside of the box, and cheer great plays by the opponent. (Sure, it's tough sometimes to cheer for the other team – but if they make a great play, isn't it just the right thing to do to celebrate it?)

■ MISTAKE RITUAL

In the ELM Tree of Mastery, mistakes are OK. One way to help reinforce this is through what the professionals call a Mistake Ritual – something that reminds players to bounce back and focus on the next play.

You may have seen these Mistake Rituals and not even realized that's what they were. And some of the best coaches in sports today use them. Rutgers University Head Football Coach Greg Schiano has his players make a "chopping wood" gesture as a means of an effective mistake ritual.

Establish a physical signal you can flash to your child from the sideline after a mistake, such as the "no sweat" motion of wiping your brow. Maybe even get all the parents together and agree on a team Mistake Ritual. (Responsible Coaches often have their own Mistake Rituals they use with their players.)

Whether you use the same signal as the rest of the team or your own private signal you establish with your children, it is important to let your children know that mistakes really are OK.



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Key Safety Measures for Responsible Sport Parents

■ **CONDITIONING**

Check with your family doctor to assess your children's fitness before they begin any sport programs.

■ **HYDRATION**

As you may have seen in the news recently, hydration is a big issue in sports. Teach your children the importance of hydration – send them to practice with water bottles, remind them to have water throughout the day, and greet them after practice with a nice cold bottle of water.

■ **NUTRITION**

We all know nutrition is important. It becomes even more important for our youth athletes who are burning lots of calories during practice and games. Do your best to ensure your athlete is eating a balanced diet and touch base with your coach on special nutritional needs before practices and games.

■ **EQUIPMENT**

Make sure the equipment your children use for practice and games is safe. Make sure your children wear adequate protective gear and ask your children's coaches if you can examine training and field equipment for safety. Also, teach your children to use equipment only for its intended purpose.

■ **INJURY PREVENTION AND TREATMENT**

Partner with your children's coaches to ensure greater safety. For example, keep a first aid kit in your car to supplement the coach's first aid kit. Consider getting certified in first-aid and CPR and encourage other parents to do the same. You can never have enough qualified hands in case of an emergency. A first-aid kit and at least one adult trained and certified in first-aid and CPR should be present at all practices and games.

■ **DRIVING**

We take driving safety seriously – and we know you do, too! Anyone responsible for driving youth athletes to and from practices or games should be licensed and insured. Consider updating your own insurance policy to reflect carpooling care of passengers.



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Responsible Sport Parenting: Game Day Tips

Here are some helpful Game Day Tips:

■ BEFORE THE GAME

- Tell your children you are proud of them regardless of how well they play.
- Tell them to play hard and have fun and remind them that “nervous is normal.”
- Commit to Honoring the Game no matter what others do.

■ DURING THE GAME

- Let the coaches coach. Avoid instructing your child (or other players).
- Fill your child’s (and teammates’) Emotional Tanks.
- Cheer good plays and good efforts by both teams.

■ AFTER THE GAME

- Thank the officials for doing a difficult job.
- Thank the coaches for their effort.
- Remind your child that you are proud of him or her – especially if the game didn’t go well!



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Filling Players' Emotional Tanks Tools

■ BUDDY SYSTEM

Coaches should not be the only people responsible for filling emotional tanks. Partner athletes before a practice or a game, and ask them to be responsible for filling each others' tanks. When their partners make mistakes, they are responsible for helping them bounce back quickly. When their partners do something well, they are the first to praise them. At the end of the practice/game, ask your athletes to share what their teammates said or did to keep their tanks full.

■ POSITIVE CHARTING

Coaches tend to think that they add value only by telling players what they are doing incorrectly and then correcting them. But it is equally important to point out when players are doing things correctly and to reinforce them, so players will continue to do them. "Positive Charting" is a technique for recording positive efforts and plays made during practices or games. Your positive chart can simply list of all of your players with space to note two or three of their specific positive acts. The role of filling in the chart can rotate between your assistant coaches, your bench (if players are mature enough), and even parents. Reading the completed chart to your players to start the next practice never fails to fill tanks.

■ WINNERS CIRCLE

After the game is over, it's tempting for you to comment first. The "Winners Circle" has your players talk first. Depending on how many players you coach, you can all gather in a circle, or divide into different groups of players. Once gathered, have each player comment on something specific that a teammate did well during the game. As the coach, you go last, and it's your job to have something specific, truthful and positive to say about each player who has not yet been recognized. Players grow to look forward to this closing ritual, which builds a tank filler into the end of every competition.

■ COACHING YOUR OWN CHILD

Coaching your own child can offer some of life's greatest moments, though it requires a delicate balance between coaching and parenting. Make it clear to your child when you are in coach "mode." Be sensitive to favoring or penalizing you child. Serving as both coach and parent gives you even greater than usual influence on your child's emotional tank! Emphasize that you love your child, regardless of on-field performance. When your child is still young enough, it can be effective to have one piece of clothing that signifies when you're in coaching mode. You can say, "Now I'm putting on my coach hat, where I need to give equal attention to everyone." When coaching your older children, leave your coaching mode at the field, so your children don't feel they are being coached by you 24/7.



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Responsible Sport Parenting: Empowering Conversations

When it comes to sports, we as parents can fall into the trap of thinking that it is our job to talk and our children's job to listen. We need to remember it is also our job to listen and to create space for our children to talk. Here are some suggestions for talking sports with your kids.

■ A CONVERSATION AMONG EQUALS

True conversation – not instruction or admonishment – occurs between equals. Dictators don't have conversations with their subjects. They tell them what to do. Prepare yourself for a conversation with your children by remembering that youth sports is for them, not for you.

Remember that you want to be supportive and be on their level. Your goal is not to give advice on how to become a better athlete but to help your children learn.

■ LISTEN!

In many instances you may know exactly what your children can do to improve on the field, which life lessons you want them to learn, and how to apply those life lessons off the field. However, this is a conversation. Your goal is to get your children talking about their sports experience, so ask rather than tell.

Use open-ended questions: Some questions lend themselves to one-word responses. "How was your game today?" "Fine."

To get your children to talk at length, ask open-ended questions that elicit longer, more thoughtful responses, that can't be answered with a one-word answer like yes or no.

- "What was the most enjoyable part of today's practice/game?"
- "What worked well?"
- "What didn't turn out so well?"
- "What did you learn that can help you in the future?"
- "Any thoughts on what you'd like to work on before the next game?"

Show you are listening. Make it obvious that you are paying attention through nonverbal cues such as making eye contact, nodding your head and making "listening noises" ("uh-huh," "hmmm," "interesting," etc.).

MORE >

Empowering Conversations (Continued)

■ ASK ABOUT LIFE-LESSON AND CHARACTER ISSUES

Be explicit. For example, say, "Any thoughts on what you've learned in practice this week that might help you with other parts of your life?"

It's important to have in mind specific "teachable moments" of a practice or game that you want to discuss with them, but resist the temptation to lead your children to the conclusions you want them to reach.

They will learn and apply life lessons more effectively if they arrive at conclusions on their own. Of course, you can always share your ideas with them, but try to avoid doing so in a way that will shut down their desire to have a conversation with you.

■ LET YOUR CHILDREN SET THE TERMS

Forcing a conversation right after a competition, when there may be a lot of emotion, is often less successful than waiting until your children indicate they are ready to talk. (Boys may take longer than girls to talk about an experience.)

Look for prompts that your children are ready. Don't fear silence. Stick with it and your child will open up to you.

Conversations don't have to be lengthy to be effective. If your children want a brief discussion, defer to their wishes. If they feel like every discussion about sports is going to be long, they may begin to avoid them.

It's really too bad when that happens because an essential truth in the youth athlete-sports parent relationship is that kids like talking about sports so much, they'll even talk sports with us! (Unless we make it unpleasant for them to do so.)



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Responsible Conversation:

Parent & Coach Intervention Strategies

■ EMPOWERING YOUR CHILD TO SPEAK

There are several advantages to having your children, rather than you, speak directly to the coach. Many coaches are more open to suggestions from players than from parents. The biggest plus is that this can be an empowering experience for children, even if they don't get the change they want.

Mustering the courage to talk to the coach can be a great life lesson. Your children may gain important experiences about dealing with people above them in the power structure, at school or in future jobs, by talking with the coach on their own.

■ WHEN YOU NEED TO INTERVENE

You would only have your children take up an issue with their coaches if you believe the coaches are basically well-meaning people trying to do the right thing. The sad truth is that some coaches do not always put their players' interests first.

If the coach is abusive to players, you must intervene. Youth sports has no place for a coach who verbally or physically intimidates athletes. You would never allow a teacher to bully or humiliate a student, and you must not allow it from a coach, even one who often gets a pass due to scoreboard success.

Unless your children are too young to understand what is going on, talk with them before acting to intervene. If a child is against the idea, but you believe the situation demands that you intervene, say, "I understand that you don't want me to talk with your coach, but I believe that this is so important that I have to do it."

■ APPROACHING THE COACH

If you are angry about the situation, gain control of yourself and know exactly what you want to say. Pick a time and place where only the coach can hear you—not during a game or practice, and not where you might be overheard, which could make the coach more defensive.

You may need to write and even rehearse what you want to say until it sounds the way you want. Be prepared to support your assertions with specific examples. Then listen carefully to what the coach says in reply.

If the results are unsatisfactory, you may need to go higher up in the organization, and you should be open with the coach that this is your next step. Again, be clear about what you want to say when you meet the athletic director, principal, coaching director or league president.

Even though intervening feels uncomfortable, remember you are not just standing up for your child, but also for all of the other children that play on the team, or who might play for this coach in future seasons.



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Responsible Sport Parenting: Kid-Friendly Criticism

We know that as parents, we have to sometimes correct our kids to help them improve. But we can deliver this feedback with useable information that helps empower our children. For example, "You need to focus!" contains virtually no useable information, but "Remember that coach wants you to keep both feet on the ground on throw-ins." contains very useable information.

Here are a few more tips:

■ **AVOID NON-TEACHABLE MOMENTS**

The ride home from a game ended by a costly mistake is not the time to offer instruction.

■ **WAIT FOR PRIVACY**

People hear criticism better in private than in front of a crowd.

■ **ASK PERMISSION**

If you ask, and your child prefers not to hear your criticism, honor that, and ask again later. (Do not use this technique in areas where your child needs an immediate lesson, such as poor sportsmanship or dangerous behavior.)

■ **USE IF-THEN STATEMENTS**

To help your children feel in control even while you are criticizing, phrase your feedback in the form of an if-then statement. "If you call Ava off the ball, you'll be more comfortable under that pop-up."

■ **MAKE A CRITICISM SANDWICH**

"Sandwich" the criticism between a truthful, specific compliment on each side. The criticism is the meat, while the compliments are the bread. For example: "You've been exploding off the line great. You seem to get under the lineman's pads almost every time now. Just make sure you keep your hands inside. If you combine keeping your hands inside with that explosiveness, you'll be hard to beat."



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Introducing the ELM Tree of Mastery to Your Child

AT THE START OF THE SEASON, LET YOUR CHILDREN KNOW THAT:

- You will always be proud of them as long as they give 100% effort (regardless of the outcome on the scoreboard).
- You want them to constantly strive to learn and improve. This involves them comparing their own past performance to their own current performance (i.e. Are they better than they were two weeks ago?).
- Mistakes are an inevitable part of the game. If they are giving 100% and trying new things (as they strive to improve), mistakes are bound to occur, and the best players are those who find ways to quickly bounce back from mistakes.
- Teams that focus on giving their full effort, constantly learning and improving, and bouncing back from mistakes, actually win more than teams who consistently focus on the scoreboard.
- You want your child to focus on the ELM Tree of Mastery (Effort, Learning and Mistakes) because players who do this well are less anxious during competition and have a greater sense of confidence in themselves and their abilities.



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