

# Kids' Sports: Playing Versus Winning

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Kids playing team sports conjures up some pretty stereotypical images - the coach's kid who gets to pitch or play first base, the screaming parents shouting play-by-play instruction, the perpetual benchwarmers who may get to wander into the outfield for the last couple innings (unless the score is close). Of course, many stereotypes have not arisen from nowhere, and sideline parenting and children who play sports have tossed up some interesting questions, such as: Is it more important to allow all the kids equal playing time, or to have a winning team that allows the best players the most play time?



Reason seems to suggest that a child will only get better at a sport with practice, with play. One school of thought in this surprisingly heated argument takes the position that all the children should get equal playing time so that they can improve with competitive game-time experience and also so their self-esteem might be nurtured in a structured way. Is there anything more pitiful than a boy who understands that he is the worst player on the team, as he sits on the bench for two thirds of the game feeling nervous about when and if he might get to play in right field? And how might he improve in the three innings he gets to cover in right field? Will a hit even come his way?

The other side is just as passionate about their argument for a winning team. Competition is at the heart of sports even within the team. Children compete for positions just as they compete with themselves to play better each game. Parents who have young champions and talented child-athletes naturally want them to use their skills to succeed. Children who practice and play better than the others may very well deserve to win - and winning, for many children and parents, is what the game is all about.

It may not be the most empathetic position, but it likewise has a strong argument. It can be very discouraging for the starters to build up a winning lead only to see it slip away by the more incompetent second stringers who seem to be daydreaming in their positions.

Many adults, especially those adults who may not have entered the world of children's sports yet, might be tempted to say a game is just a game, after all, and why not simply let all the kids play whatever their skill level. But to parents and children, it is more than just a game - it is a major part of their lives and quite important to them on many levels and for many reasons. In this realm where parents have been known to scout the t-ball players for building winning little league teams, this argument may never be resolved and may just play itself out over and over again, season after season.

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Perhaps the more important question for parents is what side they will take in the argument and what will they do about it before game day arrives. One suggestion might be to check with the league at the time of team selection. If possible, parents should talk over their concerns with registration officials. If you believe in equal time for all children, ask that your child be placed with a coach who has similar beliefs. Leagues will invariably have both types of coaches and you may want to check out some games to get an idea of the coaching styles in your child's league.

Parents who have children already playing for teams might do well to talk about this issue with their child - find out his views. If he is that pitiful right fielder, be encouraging and try to squeeze in additional practice time. Play up other talents and remind him or her that it really is just a game and something simply to work at. If your child is the star shortstop and homerun hitter, help him to learn how to encourage teammates who may not play as well. Perhaps he too can squeeze in some practice time with that right fielder and begin to learn coaching skills himself. Remind him that though he is a stand out and deserving of praise, he is still part of a team and needs them as much as they need him.

Sports has been known to make grownups act, well, like children. Perhaps the best advice is to remind adults that they are adults, and they are there to provide good examples and to foster a sense of decorum and stability for children who are destined to grow up and be... just like them.

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