

A PARENT'S GUIDE TO YOUTH SPORTS PARTICIPATION



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The Iowa High School Athletic Association has been supervising boys' junior and senior high school sport programs since the 1920's. During that time, it has become very apparent to us that **participation in sports must do more than teach skills and encourage students to be physically fit.** The Iowa High School Athletic Association sincerely believes participation in youth sports should have an educational focus in order to help develop the total person. **A young person's physical, social, emotional, and spiritual health improve as a result from such participation.** The Iowa High School Athletic Association has published this booklet for parents of youth sport participants to assist them in understanding the true benefits of sports participation.

Parents of elementary school students must often decide whether their children should participate in youth sports and, if so, at what age is it appropriate for that participation to begin. It is important to note that no relationship has been established linking skill training in early childhood (ages 3-5) and the later development of sports skills. **Child development researchers believe that it is never too early for children to participate in a wide range of sport activities, but participation in organized sports competition should generally not begin before the age of eight.** Researchers believe by age eight children are

psychologically mature enough to accept coaching and physically mature enough to participate in sports with a minimal risk of injury. The **emphasis for sports participation at the youth level should be on skill development** and not intense competition. **Age thirteen has been suggested by researchers as the age at which most children can cope with, and benefit from, more intense competition.**

Participation in athletics has been proven to be very beneficial to young participants. **Students who participate in organized athletic programs with an educational focus often perform better academically in school and have more success later in life than nonparticipants.** Research from across the country indicates that **students involved in high school athletic and activity programs are absent from school less, have higher GPA's, have fewer discipline problems, use drugs less, and display better sportsmanship and citizenship than nonparticipants.**

A 1987 survey of individuals at the vice-president level or above in Fortune 500 companies indicated that 95% of those corporate executives participated in sports during their high school careers! **Participation in high school sports and activities was a better predictor of success for these individuals than were grades or SAT and ACT scores!**

The American College Testing Service (ACTS) has defined success as self-satisfaction with employment and participation in a variety of community activities two years after college. **When predicting this type of success ACTS has stated, "The one yardstick that could be used to predict success later in life was achievement in school activities. Not useful as predictors were high grades in high school, high grades in college, or high ACT scores."** Attaining success in high school athletics begins with childhood participation youth sport programs.

Youth sports is meant to be fun! Since 1984 the Iowa High School Athletic Association has surveyed high school student-athletes periodically to determine their reasons for participation in high school athletic programs. High school student-athletes surveyed have consistently indicated "having fun" is the number one reason they participate in athletics! Student-athletes surveyed indicate other reasons they participate are because they have a strong personal desire to do so, participation allows them to be with their peers, participation provides self-satisfaction from setting and achieving goals, they learn self-discipline, they learn self-confidence, they take pride in their personal accomplishments, and they learn good sportsmanship and citizenship.

It is very interesting that even at the high school level student-athletes are more concerned about coaches personal qualities than in their ability to teach skills, or winning games! **A "win-at-all costs" attitude might be fun for those who are talented and successful, but it almost certainly will not be fun for those who experience less success.** An overemphasis on winning has become a major

concern in youth sports. **Having fun, being with friends, developing physical fitness, learning skills, learning to give total effort, enjoying the excitement of sport participation, and developing self-confidence are only a few of the true benefits of sports participation.** These benefits can be emphasized by focusing on performance goals rather than outcome goals. Performance goals are based on improvements in personal and team performance rather than winning a contest. Performance goals help motivate children to improve and experience success.

Participation in youth sports is a favorite pastime for millions of children across the country. While all children are not meant to be superstars, **every child should have the opportunity to participate in sports, if it is something he or she wants to do.** Too often parents sign their kids up for sports without asking their son or daughter if he or she wants to play. Once it has been determined that your child wants to participate it is important to choose a program that is going to provide a positive and safe experience, and one that has the welfare of children at its focus.

Parents must be realistic about their child's abilities. Each sport offers a unique learning experience for the participants. Individual sports are vastly different from team sports. Sports in which performances are measured by time or distance offer challenges other sports don't. Contact sports present unique challenges others don't. Lifetime sports can be learned as a youth and participation continues for many years. Children, who have the desire, should be provided opportunities to experience a variety of sports.

Researchers caution parents and coaches against pressuring children into specializing in one sport or one position at an early age. While specialization may help a child develop talent in a particular sport, it may not always be in the best interest of that child. As few as 10 percent of high school student-athletes will continue participating at the college level. A truly educational sports program encourages students to participate in a variety of sports in order to provide a complete learning experience.

The importance of keeping youth sport participation in proper perspective is illustrated by the following example. Millions of elementary children play basketball in this country on a yearly basis. Of the approximately one-half million boys who play high school basketball in the United States each year, one-fourth, or approximately 125,000, are freshmen. If we use a conservative estimate of two million elementary children playing basketball each year, **there is a 6% chance an elementary child will become a high school freshman basketball player!**

There are approximately 15,000 men who participate in NCAA college basketball in a given year. Of these players approximately 3750 are college freshmen. If there are 125,000 high school seniors playing basketball, **there is a 3% a high school basketball player will become a college basketball player!**

There are approximately 50 NBA rookie positions available each year. If there are 3750 college seniors vying for those 50 positions, **there is a 1% (1 in 100)**

chance a college senior basketball player will become an NBA rookie! The chances of a high school senior becoming an NBA rookie are .04% (1 in 2,500), and the chances of a child playing elementary school basketball becoming an NBA rookie are .0025% (1 in 40,000)!

The odds of getting a college scholarship for athletics are even less. **A child has a much greater opportunity to become successful in life due to the intrinsic values learned through sport participation than through the skills they acquire through such participation!**

The following is a brief checklist to assist parents and program organizers in determining whether a program has the welfare of children as its focus.

Program Philosophy:

- 1. There is a written philosophy relative to fun, skill development, fair play, and an educational focus.**
- 2. Having fun is a priority.**
- 3. Children's emotional and physical development is considered.**
- 4. Rules provide for adequate opportunities for all players and limit the time per week players are required to be involved in the program.**
- 5. Performance and success are judged using developmentally appropriate standards.**

Program Administration and Organization:

- 1. Coaches are carefully selected.**
- 2. Discrimination of any type is not tolerated.**
- 3. Sufficient and age-appropriate equipment is available.**
- 4. Administrators of the program are honest and fair in all dealings.**
- 5. The number of games, practices, and tournaments is appropriate for the age level of the participants.**
- 6. Awards and recognition emphasize participation, sportsmanship, skill development, and fun, as well as winning and elite performance.**

Coach's Qualifications and Development:

- 1. Children are treated fairly and with dignity.**
- 2. Coaches use encouragement and positive feedback.**
- 3. Coaches interact effectively with participants and parents.**
- 4. Coaches consider psychological and physiological development when planning practices.**
- 5. Coaches demonstrate, teach, and encourage good sportsmanship.**
- 6. Fundamental skills are taught correctly and progressively.**

Safety:

1. **Playing areas are kept in good repair** and receive scheduled maintenance.
2. **Equipment is of the proper size** for participants.
3. **Coaches are trained in basic first aid** and injury prevention.
4. **First aid supplies are accessible.**
5. **Adequate water and rest periods are available** during practices and games.
6. **The ratio of coaches to participants is adequate** to allow for proper supervision.

Parents often take an active role in their children's sports participation. Usually such involvement is very positive. However, there are times when a parent becomes too demanding and has a negative impact on the child. Some parents are aggressive and hard-driving, expecting their son or daughter to excel in everything they do, others are attempting to live an unfulfilled dream through their son or daughter. **Parents who only provide positive feedback to their child when he or she excels in a specific activity are subtly telling their child that his or her personal worth is dependent upon successful performance in a particular sport or activity.**

To help parents evaluate their attitudes regarding their son or daughter's participation in youth sports programs, the following code of ethics is provided.

PARENTS' CODE OF ETHICS

1. **I will encourage good sportsmanship** by demonstrating positive support for all players, coaches, and officials at every game, practice or other youth sports events.
2. **I will place the emotional and physical well-being of my child ahead of any personal desire to win.**
3. **I will insist that my child plays in a safe and healthy environment.**
4. **I will provide support for coaches and officials** working with my child to provide a positive, enjoyable experience for all.
5. **I will demand a drug, tobacco, and alcohol-free sports environment** for my child and agree to assist by refraining from their use at all youth sports events.
6. **I will remember that the game is for the children** and not the adults.
7. **I will do my very best to make youth sports fun** for my child.
8. **I will ask my child to treat other players, coaches, fans, and officials with respect** regardless of race, sex, creed, or ability.
9. **I will promise to help my child enjoy his or her youth sports experience** within my personal constraints by assisting with coaching, being a respectful fan, providing transportation or whatever I am capable of doing.

To help participants evaluate their attitudes regarding participation in youth sports, the following code of ethics is provided.

PLAYER'S CODE OF ETHICS

1. **I will be a good sport at every game and practice** and will encourage good

sportsmanship among my fellow players, coaches, parents and officials.

2. I will attend every practice and game that it is reasonably possible for me to attend and call the coach if I cannot attend.

3. I will expect to receive a fair amount of playing time.

4. I will do my very best to listen and learn from my coaches.

5. I will treat my coaches with respect regardless of race, sex, creed, or abilities and I will expect to be treated accordingly.

6. I deserve to have fun during my sports experience and will tell parents and coaches if it stops being fun.

7. I will do my very best in school.

8. I will remember that sports is an opportunity to learn and have fun.

To help coaches evaluate their attitudes regarding their involvement in a youth sports program, the following code of ethics is provided.

COACH'S CODE OF ETHICS

1. I will place the emotional and physical well-being of my players ahead of any personal desire to win.

2. I will remember to treat each player as an individual, remembering the large spread of emotional and physical development for the same age group.

3. I will do my very best to provide a safe playing environment for my players.

4. I promise to review and practice the necessary first aid principles needed to treat injuries of my players.

5. I will do my best to organize practices that are fun and challenging for all my players.

6. I will lead by example in demonstrating fair play and sportsmanship.

7. I will insure that I am knowledgeable in the rules of the sport that I coach, and will teach these rules to my players.

8. I will use those coaching techniques appropriate for each of the skills I teach.

9. I will remember that I am a youth coach and that the game is for the kids, not the adults.

Effective communication between parents, coaches, and sport participants is very important in helping children reach their performance goals. Three basic types of feedback are usually given as one learns a skill. Encouragement given when the athlete does something correctly is called "**positive feedback.**" Telling a child that he or she has performed a skill incorrectly without giving any further guidance is called "**negative feedback.**" Constructive criticism focusing on what an athlete needs to do to correct errors and improve their performance is called "**corrective feedback.**" While all of these types of feedback can be important to the learning process, **research has shown that a 4:1 ratio of positive and corrective feedback to negative feedback is most effective in shaping children's behavior.**

SOURCES: “Athletic Participation: Students Give Their Views,” Results of an Iowa High School Athletic Association Survey, 1984 & 1990; “Beware of Early Sport Specialization,” by Dick Schriver, Ph.D. The United States Sports Academy’s Sport Supplement; “Coach-Parent Relationships in Youth Sport,” by Chris Hopper and Stephen Jeffries, *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance*, April 1990; “Emotional Injuries in Youth Sports,” *Sidelines*, National Youth Sports Safety Foundation, Winter 1995; *It’s Not the Score That Counts, It’s You*, National Youth Sports Coaches Association; *National Standards for Youth Sports*, National Youth Sports Coaches Association; *Parent’s Checklist for Quality Youth Sports Programs*, Youth Sport Coalition, 1995; “Parents of Student-Athletes,” by Linda Dawson, *Drug-Free Athlete*, May 1991; “Proactive Programs to Assist Parents,” Presented at The National Federation of State High School Associations, July, 1996 by Rex Spain, University Interscholastic League, Texas; “Springing Young Athletes From the Parental Pressure Cooker,” by James Thornton, *The Physician and Sports Medicine*, Volume 19, Number 7, July 1991; “The Case for High School Activities,” published by The National Federation of State High School Associations, Kansas City, MO; *The Role of Sports in Youth Development: Report of a Meeting Convened by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, March 18, 1996*, Alex Poinsett; *What We’re All About*, National Youth Sports Coaches Association.