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Sportsmanship For Kids Starts With Good Coaches

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Don't let the cute uniforms fool you - youth sports can be fraught with as much pressure, stress and win-at-all-costs mentality as the pro leagues. Eventually, some kids just give up.

Training the coaches might make a difference.

"If we view sports as something that's really important in the development of children, then we want to create a climate in which children are going to enjoy sports and develop healthy attitudes and values about sports - creating an environment in which people don't have high levels of fear," says Ronald Smith, psychology professor and director of the clinical psychology program at the University of Washington in Seattle.

He co-wrote the studies, which appeared in the March issue of the Journal of Clinical Sport Psychology and the February issue of the Journal of Sport & Exercise Psychology. Both followed two groups of male and female basketball players (216 total), ages 10 to 14 with similar demographics, plus 37 coaches.

About half of the players were coached by men and women who had gone through a 75-minute workshop on teaching athletes how to learn from mistakes, how to define success as doing the best one can and how to enjoy the game.

Those adults also had been taught how to provide individual attention and how to encourage players to set personal goals for improvement.

The other players - the control group - were led by coaches who coached in their usual manner. All athletes had two hourlong practices, plus one game per week for 12 weeks.

At the beginning and end of the season, both groups of players filled out questionnaires measuring their sports-related achievement goals, anxiety and feelings about themselves. They were asked if they felt more successful when they were better than other athletes or when they gave their best effort; if they felt queasy when they competed; and if they worried about not performing well.

At the conclusion of the study, those in the control group showed an increase in anxiety levels, while the study group's anxiety levels dramatically decreased. Using elite young competitors as an example, he added: "These gifted athletes get to be 13, 14, 15, and they're burned out. That's really a shame."

Jim Thompson, founder and executive director of the Palo Alto, Calif.-based Positive Coaching Alliance, which conducts coaching workshops for youth sports programs, says the average youth coach is unlikely to get any training whatsoever."

"Very few coaches get preparation in what might generally be called sport psychology - the art of coaching," Thompson says.

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