

TOP TEN SPORTS PARENTING MYTHS Rick Wolff, Chairman of the Center for Sports Parenting

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One of the constant concerns about trying to raise a youngster in sports these days is that there is so much misinformation and misleading advice that parents often don't know where to turn. As such, I thought I'd take a moment to highlight some of the more common sports parenting "myths," so that parents and coaches can get a better lay of the land when it comes to working with their kids.

1) The younger you can get your child on a travel team, the better.

In some teams, travel teams start as early as age 5 or 6. That's nonsense. Nobody has ever produced a scientific study that shows that having your child play on a travel team at a very early age is going to guarantee athletic success down the road. However, on the other side of the coin, there are lots of studies that show that burnout is a real problem for kids in their early teens - and burnout usually affects kids who have been playing one sport for a long, long time on a travel team.

2) All travel team coaches are certified instructors, have degrees in physical education or psychology, and have a solid background in coaching kids.

In fact, anybody can say they're a travel coach and start their own team. There are no rules, no regulations, and no licenses needed. Unlike teachers, who have to be certified by the state in which they work, travel coaches have no such requirements. Unfortunately, too many parents automatically assume that travel coaches are well equipped to work with kids when, in fact, they aren't. Do your homework on any travel team coach before your son or daughter tries out.

3) The sooner your child specializes in just one sport, the better chance they have of advancing to a higher level (e.g. college, professional ranks).

Most of today's top professional athletes didn't even think to specialize in just one sport until they were in high school, around the age of 15. When they were younger, they played a variety of sports, depending on the season. Some coaches will pressure kids to play just one sport. As a parent, you should be wary of this! In addition to burnout worries, ask yourself, "how does your child know which sport will be his/her best one, unless they try a bunch of different sports?" When they're young, let them try a bunch of sports.

4) The very best time to teach your youngster how to improve their play is immediately after the game; ideally, in the car ride on the way home while their game actions are still fresh in their mind.

In most cases, that's absolutely the worst time to critique your child! Wait until a quiet moment later in the evening, or the next day. Evaluating your child's game right after the match is finished will drive them away from the sport -- and from you!

5) A youngster who is a top athlete among his or her peers at age 8 is clearly destined to be a star when they're 18.

While this happens sometimes, more times than not, it doesn't. There is very little predictive value when it comes to saying an 8 year-old will grow to be a superior athlete when they're 18. There are too many factors - the adolescent growth spurt (or lack thereof), the youngster's personal motivation, skill level, etc. - that might influence how that athlete will develop when it comes to sports.

6) Creatine, as well as other nutritional supplements such as Andro and ephedra, that are sold in health stores have been proven to be safe for kids; otherwise, it would be illegal for the stores to sell these products.

While creatine, Andro, and ephedra products are legal in most states, that does not mean that they are healthy for your youngster. Be forewarned! There are no long range medical or scientific studies that show that these supplements are safe to ingest!

7) Sportsmanship is something that can only be taught by your child's coach.

Not quite. In fact, being a good sport starts with you -- his or her parent. First, starting when they're young, you should teach your child how to behave not only after a loss, but also after a win. Explain to them the right way to act. Secondly, during the heat of games, you have to set a positive example of how to behave - especially when a call goes against your child or your child's team. Kids watch carefully to see how you react when things aren't going your way. Leaving the lessons of sportsmanship up to the coach is a mistake. The coach should be reinforcing good sportsmanship - not teaching it as well.

8) All coaches are created equal.

Unfortunately, that's just not true. There are a few exceptionally good coaches. There are also a few very bad coaches. Most fall somewhere in the middle. Like anything else in life, you hope that your child is lucky enough to play for a couple of those gifted coaches along the way, and can somehow manage to avoid the not-so-good ones. Again, do your homework before the season begins. Ask other parents. See if you can find out which coaches care about the kids - and which coaches simply care about winning. It is important to try to determine which coaches will provide the best environment for your child.

9) Kids will be happy as long as they are part of a winning team.

No, this is not true. All kids prefer to play - and play a lot - on a losing or not-so-good team, so long as they're playing in the games - rather than play only sparingly on a championship team. Kids instinctively know that the fun of sport is in the actual playing - not in always being on the sidelines and applauding their teammates.

10) The vast majority of Moms and Dads tend to be honest and fairly objective about their child's ability in sports.

While we like to think we are, the truth is - we really aren't. Most parents see their child as being better looking, smarter than the other kids, and certainly at least as athletically talented, if not more so, than the others. Relax. It's all part of being a sports parent.

Excerpted from Rick Wolff's forthcoming book, *THE SPORTS PARENTING EDGE: The Winning Game Plan for Every Athlete - From T-Ball to College Recruiting*.