

Making Good Sports

Don't let youth activities take over your faith or your family

by Richard Fitzgibbons, M.D.

IMAGES of the "Little League parent" are fixed in the American mind as a kind of psychological state. There's dad on the sidelines yelling for his kid to get a hit, as if to soothe the lingering shame over striking out during his own youth. Mom is in the bleachers, waving junior to home plate, hoping to hold her head high during the morning carpool.

Although there are fewer sideline displays by parents these days, there are still a number of subtle dangers associated with youth sports. In fact, in our sports-crazed culture, where even toddlers are dragged from the soccer field to the karate gym, we risk making sports participation a primary value in itself, and using sports as a substitute for play time and even family time.

Let me make it clear from the start that I am not anti-sports. As a marriage and family psychiatrist, and the father of three children, I recognize that youth sports can have immensely positive influences and can foster a happier, healthier family life. Benefits for children include weight control and physical fitness, confidence, discipline and learning to be a team player.

Additionally, strong, lifelong bonds between father and son — and, increasingly, father and daughter — can be built during games of catch, shooting hoops or tossing the football. Sports can give fathers a natural opportunity to talk about virtues such as hard work, persistence and self-sacrifice.

Yet, in our culture of 24-hour sports coverage and million-dollar, prima-donna players, the wrong message can be sent. In my clinical work with families, I often find serious emotional conflicts in children as the result of a parental obsession with sports. These include: burnout from excessive participation; a win-at-all-costs mentality accompanied by selfishness; excessive competitiveness; the belief that failure in sports means failure in life; a general sadness and anger over pressures to excel on the field; poor academic performance; and the notion that sports are the only source of personal values and confidence.

Sadly, I have also seen sports operate as a major source of conflict within marriages, and as a springboard toward separation and divorce. We've all heard about the "Sunday widow" — the wife who never sees her husband during professional football season because he is glued to the television. Youth sports, too, can keep husband and wife apart.

For instance, spouses may disagree over when their children should start team play and how many sports they should undertake each year. Even if they agree on these points, the couple may be separated while juggling late weekday games and the rigors of a traveling sports schedule. Family time is disrupted and meal times consist of fast food or concession stands. With games held on Sundays, even in Catholic leagues, parents are tempted to leave Mass early to get to the ball field or even skip Mass to focus on the game.

In such cases, the emphasis on sports causes families to lose focus and balance. Kids, in turn, pick up the message: Sports take precedence over family relationships and even a relationship with God. This attitude is harmful to children's physical, psychological and spiritual welfare.

As in most things in life, balance is needed when it comes to youth sports. Since there are definite benefits to team play and physical activity, every family should make the effort to find that balance. Here are a few tips:

1. Work as a couple to establish healthy family priorities and then discuss them with your children.
2. Family meals and time with your spouse should be seen as more important

than youth sports or professional sports on TV.

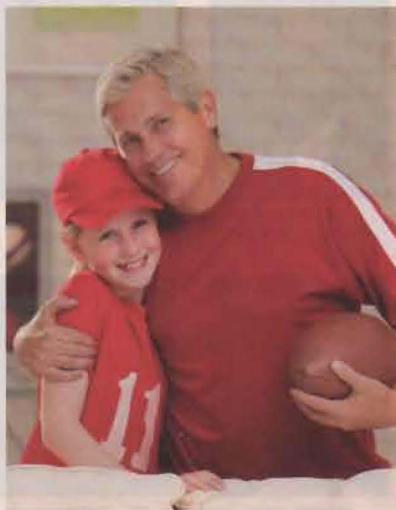
3. Don't be afraid to skip a season if your child doesn't seem ready for the next level of play.

4. Avoid leagues that have games on most Sundays and leave the Lord's Day open for family activities.

5. Don't live your dreams through your child's sports play.

6. Winning isn't the only thing; it's how you win or lose that counts.

Youth sports can be healthy, constructive and a strong support system for the values you as a father want to instill in your child. But remember, it's just a game. ♦



DR. RICHARD FITZGIBBONS is a Catholic marriage and family psychiatrist, and head of the Institute for Marital Healing in West Conshohocken, Pa. He may be contacted through the institute's Web site, www.maritalhealing.com.

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