

Please Remember: These Are Kids. This Is A Game. Most Coaches Are Volunteers. The Referees Are Human. No College Scholarships Will Be Awarded Today. Dr. Tim Elmore, founder of Growing Leaders, noticed this sign near a youth sports field just north of Atlanta. He states that it says so much about adults who watch youth games. This time of years lends to busy schedules of sports for all ages. Occasionally we need to be reminded that as parents and adults, our reactions have an obvious impact on youth participating in sports activities.

Studies show a direct correlation between physical activity and academic performance indicating a graduation rate of 10% higher for student athletes versus those students who had never participated in sports. Physical activity naturally increases blood flow to the brain and activates endorphins that can have an impact on mood and work performance.

Research conducted by the Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute revealed that team sports can lead to a state of short-term relaxation that helps with emotional development. This relaxation can promote better memory, increased concentration, and more effective problem solving that carry over into the classroom.

Other suggested soft skills that can be improved with team sports include communication skills, teamwork, time management, self-esteem and a sense of belonging. While all of these aspects seem to be positive, too many times pressure from coaches and parents overshadows the positive and creates a negative outlook about sports participation.

Elmore reflects on a conversation with a 15-year-old student whose dad makes him practice soccer four to five hours every day. At one point, this youth enjoyed the game of soccer, but now feels he's playing for his dad, not for himself or his own fun. He feels pressure from his dad to choose soccer as a life sport striving for a soccer scholarship at some college. Dr. Elmore realized that as the conversation continued, he sensed that the very sport the youth's dad pushes him to play no longer serves as a source of pleasure for him. He is anxious to graduate and move out of the house. His dad doesn't realize that the sport that brought him and his son closer together is now pushing them farther and farther apart.

Let's reflect back on the sign mentioned at the beginning of this article. In his own style, Dr. Elmore breaks down the meaning of the words as follows:

Please Remember: I know you know this, but keep this in mind.

These Are Kids: they're still forming; not fully mature. Let them be kids.

This is a game: it's not a predictor of career choices. It is organized play.

Most coaches are volunteers: they're not paid, but do it for the kids.

Referees are human: they're imperfect and make mistakes like you do.

No college scholarships will be awarded today: this one speaks for itself. Dad, your son will likely be a software programmer and will not go pro in the sport.

A survey across the nation was conducted asking students what they most wanted to hear from their parents as they perform a sport, a recital, concert or play. The results? - Student performers reported the following: "Parents don't see how stressed out I am with everything going on in my life." So parents, take note of three things to say before the game and three things to say after the game:

Three things to say before the game: 1) Have fun. 2) Play hard. 3) I love you.

Three things to say after the game: 1) Did you have fun? 2) I'm proud of you. 3) I love you.

The last thing our youth need are armchair quarterbacks second-guessing the coach or someone critiquing their play when they are not ready to talk about it. Our youth need you to be a parent by simply supporting them.

Be the best parent you can be - offer unconditional love and support and only provide tips when your child is ready to listen. Elmore suggests three actions parents should take at their child's game:

- 1) Focus on Affirming the Effort of Your Child: Carol Dweck, a Stanford psychologist, teaches us to affirm variables that are "in their control" rather than "out of control." Praise their effort, discipline and sportsmanship instead of affirming a win. Practicing this type of response will cultivate a growth mindset - what gets rewarded gets repeated.
- 2) Communicate How Much You Love Watching Them Play: Straight from research, the healthiest and most satisfying statement a parent can make following a game (regardless of the result) is this: "I love watching you play." These are the five simple words that our youth crave to hear. Youth that hear this statement from their parents continue to love the game and play for the right reasons.
- 3) Debrief their Development - Not The Outcome: It doesn't matter whether they won the game or lost the game. What matters is the development of their skills and virtues. They still may need to work on improving some of their skills even if they win the game. If they lost the game, they may have put forth every effort and only need reinforcement. UCLA's Coach John Wooden never worried about the score, not studied the opposition. He simply drilled home fundamentals and spoke of improving their past self. Wooden stressed the point of comparing past efforts, not comparing players to other players.

When the glory days of playing sports is over, remember to leave more than trophies, medals and news clippings. Build a strong foundation of character in your child that will keep growing as he or she becomes an adult.

Contact Patsy Maddy at pmaddy@ksu.edu or any of your local Twin Creeks Extension District offices in Norton (785-877-5755), Decatur (785-475-8121), Sheridan (785-675-3268) or Graham (785-421-3411) to get your youth involved in our 4-H program that focuses on developing the 5 C's - Competence, Confidence, Character, Connection and Caring that leads to the sixth C of Contributions.

Information in this article has been adapted from Dr. Tim Elmore, founder of Growing Leaders and the George Lucas Educational Foundation.

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Article Header

“Enjoy Watching Youth Play Sports”

“Chasing Clovers”

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