Competition is part of life, but so is cooperation. Children younger than 12 or so are still learning to make friends. Team sports teach cooperation, but trying to beat friends on other teams can be confusing. Working together toward common goals helps turn destructive responses into helpful ones.

Remember, sports are leisure activities. It’s the child’s feelings that count, not the parents’. It’s the child’s self-esteem that can be built-up or torn down as a result. Sports are supposed to be fun!

When you have a question, call or visit your local office of The University of Georgia’s Cooperative Extension Service.

You’ll find a friendly, well-trained staff ready to help you with information, advice, and free publications covering agriculture and natural resources, family and consumer sciences, 4-H and youth development.

REvised by Don Bower, Extension Human Development Specialist, from publications originally prepared by Mary White and Mary Anne Pace-Nichols.

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Gale A. Buchanan, Dean & Director

The University of Georgia Cooperative Extension Service
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Most parents agree that children can benefit from playing organized sports. Playing sports teaches lifelong skills and creates higher self-esteem. However, competitive sports can also create stress in children, so parents must weigh the pros and cons.

The problem is that a child may not be able to perform up to his own and his parents’ expectations.

Parents may make the problem worse by scolding a child in front of his friends or by sending confusing messages. Parents cannot tell him to “go out there and have fun” while showing a “win-at-all-costs” attitude.

Even as they get older, children can enjoy sports such as tennis, swimming, skiing, and skating as a way to stay fit. But parents’ attitudes can affect their children’s feelings about competition, sportsmanship, and success. Parents play a large part in determining whether playing sports is a good or bad experience for their children.

What can you do?

To help playing sports be a good experience:

• Let your child decide when he or she is ready to play. Forcing children into sports can lead to a bad experience or to early burnout.
• Let kids help make decisions. This may help them feel more commitment, motivation, and pride in their sports.
• Praise them for their developing skills and fitness and not only for winning. This is very important for children 10 and younger.
• Watch the coach in action before signing your child up. If the coach acts like he is working with a bunch of “pros” instead of a group of children, find another coach.
• Provide proper safety equipment for the sport. Try renting first if you’re not sure about your child’s long-term interest.
• Help a discouraged child by telling him that everyone has good and bad days and that everyone has different skills.
• Do not use sports as a babysitter. Attend games and be your child’s own private cheerleader, win or lose.
• Don’t live your dreams through your child. It’s important for kids to develop their own dreams; don’t force your child to play golf because you want him to win the Masters.
• Look for warning signs that your child is not having fun, such as
  – always running late for games and practices.
  – having headaches, stomachaches, or other symptoms of stress near game time.

It is important to allow a child who is not having fun to drop out, maybe at the end of a season. Children will find their niche in life; it just may not be that sport.

Believe it or not, most children would rather be playing members of a losing team than bench warmers on a winning team. Parents who think “winning is the only thing” should remember that second place is not second-class. Also remember that playing sports helps the child learn to cope with failure.