

# Ten Things Common Youth Sports Misconceptions

by Fred Engh, Parks and Recreation Business Magazine, December 2006

During my career, which has ranged from administering recreational youth sports to presiding over an international organization whose aim is to promote the value of sports for boys and girls everywhere, I've been asked a number of times, "What are the biggest misconceptions about sports for children?" So to address this question, I decided to list what I feel are the top 10 misconceptions and give you my take on them. As with many things, you may not agree with my comments: these are just things I have observed after more than 40 years in the trenches of youth sports.

**1. If children play on a travel team, they have a better chance of securing an athletic scholarship.**

For this one, it really depends on how good the youngsters are. If they are top-notch athletes, they will be recognized no matter where they play. Too many parents feel that when their children are good enough to make the travel team, they are on their way to stardom and an athletic scholarship. The truth is that colleges have only so many scholarships to give out and the odds are against an individual boy or girl getting that free ride. Keep in mind, besides athletic talent, that child better also have high grades.

**2. Team sports are better for children than individual sports.**

The truth is one could argue that one is not better than the other. Obviously, in team sports children learn the value of working together in a group; in individual sports, they learn the value of self-discipline and personal motivation. The bottom line is that all sports teach a multitude of things that have long-term benefits. That's way the National Alliance for Youth Sports (NAYS) is focused on promoting the value of sports for children worldwide, while keeping sports safe and fun.

**3. Teaching children to play while injured builds character.**

Teaching kids to play while hurt can cause great harm, and opens coaches and leagues up to all kinds of lawsuits. This is the bottom line.

**4. Letting children quit a sport sets them up for a lifetime of quitting.**

Too many parents never ask their children if they want to play sports before they paid the money and signed them up. If a boy or girl simply is not ready for sports and is forced to play, whose failure is it? In reality, pushing a child to play before he or she is ready actually increases the chance of dropping out and never playing again.

**5. The younger I get my child started in a sport, the better he'll play it in the future.**

In certain cases, this could be true for an early-maturing, gifted athlete who happens to LOVE sports. But the overwhelming majority of kids mature socially, physically, and emotionally at different ages, so there is no "right age" to start kids in sports. Like flowers, some children take longer to bloom than others.

**6. Aggressive behavior by coaches is acceptable because they just want to win.**

In general, sports have a whole new meaning to boys and girls when they reach 10-12 years of age. At this point, kids have decided that sports are for them and the things that go with sports, such as discipline, training, dedication, commitment and aggressive behavior by some coaches are part of the package. However, it is important to note that coaches with any kind of aggression have no place in youth sports before this age, and that there is a big difference between aggression and out-of-control behavior that puts young athletes at risk. The latter situation is never acceptable.

**7. It's ok for parents to get angry with their children if it gets them to play better.**

Being negative with children hardly ever yields positive results, and it is the same in this case. Parents should always maintain a positive attitude about their children's sport experiences, as they are more likely to shut you out and become disillusioned with sports if you go on the offensive.

**8. Parents who verbally or physically attack coaches can't be blamed for their behavior since they are protecting their children's interests.**

Sure, as a parent, you consider it a great injustice if your child is not getting enough playing time or the ref makes a bad call for a late hit. But violent and overly aggressive behavior will get the same in return, and in the end, everyone loses. This is why organized youth sports have acquired a bad name over the years. Too many coaches and parents don't have the emotional maturity to step back and look at things from a rational point of view. Trust me, violent behavior by parents will scare and embarrass their children, hurting them in the long run.

**9. Parents assume that every youth sports coach must have had a background check, since they work with children.**

Parents assume that this is true because they figure, if teachers have to get background checks, coaches have to also. Many parents fail to realize that most leagues are volunteer organizations with a very small budget. Leagues tend not to conduct thorough background checks because of the expenses involved. That's why we need a groundswell of support to have local governments pay for a system that will identify people who should not be allowed to coach children. After all, the good people who are the overwhelming majority save local governments thousands of dollars by volunteering their time to coach, raise funds and do a host of other things that make the programs available for boys and girls in their respective communities.

**10. People who volunteer to coach have a total grasp on working with kids and the sport they are coaching.**

At NAYS, our estimate is that 85 percent of the volunteers who coach children are the parents of one of the boys or girls out on the field. The fact that they are parents does not necessarily mean they will be good coaches. Volunteer coaches should always undergo a simple but effective program that will introduce them to their roles and responsibilities, and hold them accountable for their behavior. Training programs like those in the National Youth Sports Coaches Association are designed to introduce parents to the ins and outs of coaching and maintain accountability among volunteer coaches.