



## Kids Just Want to Have Fun !

By Emily Tipping

By now, we're all familiar with stories of parents behaving badly during youth sports competitions. It seems hardly a month goes by without some new, jaw-dropping tale of a parent fighting with a coach, with a ref, with a player on the other kids' team. But even when parents aren't over the top with bad behavior, are they having a negative effect on how their kids feel about sports? A recent survey says, "Yes."

This national survey of children ages 8 to 14 who play team sports revealed that 84 percent said they had quit a team or wanted to quit. Almost half of these (47 percent) said the reason for this was because it wasn't fun. Another 29 percent said teammates were mean, and 23 percent said there were too many practices that interfered with other activity.

Almost a third of the kids surveyed—31 percent—said they wished adults weren't watching, mostly because the grownups yell too much, are distracting, make players nervous, and put too much pressure on playing better and winning.

President and **CEO of i9 Sports, Brian Sanders**, said that there are a couple of reasons why parents are putting too much emphasis on competition and winning. "There's an element of parents living vicariously through their children," he said. For example, maybe Mom was an athlete and wants to see her daughter follow in her footsteps. Or, maybe Dad wasn't an athlete and wants his son to live his dream.

He added, "In this period of very difficult economic times, there's an element of the parental population that hopes by channeling kids into sports they'll get a college scholarship and go on and play in the pros." Of course, statistics from the NCAA show that less than a percentage point of kids who play sports in high school will ever make a living of it.

Parents, coaches and the organizations that run youth sports can make things more fun for the kids again. It's all a matter of putting emphasis on the right things, according to Sanders. For parents, he said, "It's all about how parents talk with kids about their experience." There are four things to focus on, and parents can ask the right questions to show that they're not thinking about who won the game, but about their child's experience, Sanders added:

**1. Skill Building:** "Instead of asking how many points they scored today or if they scored a touchdown, ask, 'Did you learn something new today? Did you stretch yourself or learn something you didn't know before?'"

**2. Sportsmanship:** "Did you learn to be a better teammate? Did you learn to cooperate with others or how to take turns?"



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3. **Self-Esteem:** "Did you feel good about the way you played today? Do you feel like you gave your best effort?"

4. **Fun:** "Did you have fun today?"

"If the child walks away with a smile on their face, then they've done what they were intending to do," Sanders said.

For the organizations that are bringing kids together to play sports, there are also ways to improve kids' outlook and ensure they're learning and having fun. The leagues emphasize recreation and allow all players to learn the sport, regardless of skill. They're also co-ed. "I think it starts from the top," Sanders said. "One of the things that makes our leagues different is it's recreational sports. We set these expectations at the start. It's recreational in nature, and everyone gets to play regardless of ability or talent level. ...Everybody's going to play and be rotated through positions and learn the game."

Another thing i9 does, which is different from many sports leagues, is allowing parents to make requests, such as putting their children on a team with a friend. And while i9 believes competition is healthy, they add additional experiences to their games by sharing a sportsmanship value with kids, with examples of what it means to exemplify that value. At the end of the game, the child who exemplified the value most, wins a special award and recognition.

### ***And what about parents' behavior on the sidelines ?***

"We're the first national youth sports organization to institute a parental pledge, and we require all parents to sign it," Sanders said. Parents pledge that they understand their kids are playing to have fun and promise to refrain from any negativity as spectators. "It really makes a difference on the sideline culture," Sanders added. "You hear positive encouragement. You don't hear heckling and screaming and screeching."

Another way the organization keeps things fun is by limiting practices and play to a single day of the week. Kids come early for practice, play a game and are done. Parents with overscheduled kids surely appreciate this restraint.



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Sanders said that i9 Sports works in many communities with schools and school districts, as well as park districts and other organizations, but all of the leagues fall under the i9 brand. In a time when budget cuts have forced many to cut back on programs, a public-private partnership can offer a means for bringing kids—and fun—to sports.

Currently, i9 leagues can be found in 275 locations across the country, Sanders said, from as far east as Massachusetts to as far west as Hawaii. The first franchise began in 2003, and there are now leagues in 28 states.

"It's a concept that's taking hold," Sanders said. "People forget how important the role of the parent and the overall league culture is in the experience kids have. It's not about the sport; it's about the experience, and parents contribute to how kids feel about it."  
To learn more about i9 Sports, visit [www.i9sports.com](http://www.i9sports.com).



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