

What You Can Do to Stop the Cycle of Disrespect in Sports

As a parent of an athlete, part of your job is to make sure that your child has learned to be respectful to his teammates, competitors, and coaches. You also are responsible for making sure that your child knows how to stand up for themselves when they are feeling disrespected within their sport.

Wade Gilbert, PhD, a professor at California State University in Fresno and a Team USA Coaching Consultant, shares his recommendations for parents on teaching respect to an athlete.

Focus on your behavior first

You may not even realize that your behavior at a game isn't respectful, but be aware of how you act when you're spectating.

"A lot of disrespectful behavior is learned from what a child sees from his or her parents," warns Gilbert. "That means, post-game if you're being disrespectful towards the other players on the team, the coach, the opposing team, or the referee, you're teaching your child that it's the correct reaction. Ask yourself what a good sport parent should look like during the game, and what they look like after the game."

Pre-set boundaries and rules

If you can, Gilbert recommends asking your athlete's coach to hold a pre-season meeting where the team sits down as a group and sets specific rules and boundaries for behavior, as well as consequences for breaking those rules. That way, there aren't any surprises when an athlete is sent to the bench for yelling at a competitor during a game.

You can do this at home with your athlete before the season starts as well. Have a conversation about what your athlete will do if they see another player being disrespected, if they're being bullied, and any other scenarios that might come up throughout the year.

Validate your athlete's emotions

If your athlete is acting disrespectful (but not harmful), first seek to understand how they're feeling. Remember, while a minor incident may seem silly to you as a parent, your child's feelings are still valid, even if you don't understand what they're upset about.

Try to allow space for your child to work through their feelings and calm down before offering advice or disciplining them. "Give them space to learn to cope with injustice and failure," says Gilbert. "Understand that it's OK for your child to have these emotions."

Help your athlete, but don't take over

"During a competition, parents should not be involved," says Gilbert. "It's a hard thing, but there's nothing you can or should do in the moment. You can have a conversation with the coach after the game if you observe something happening on the field, or work with your athlete to come up with a solution. Kids need to learn to cope with the messiness of life, and that's one of the best lessons from youth sport."

You're not helping your athlete by taking over situations for them. Instead, help them figure out how to tackle a tough situation, whether that means having a conversation with a teammate they aren't getting along with, talking to a coach about a teammate saying something disrespectful, or going to a school administrator if a coach is bullying another athlete.

Reassess the sport

Sometimes, disrespect can come from discontent. You may think that your child loves baseball, but actually, he wanted to play soccer and he's miserable on the team, so he's acting rude to teammates and the coach.

Research has shown that forcing a child to specialize in a specific sport can lead to worse moods, stress, and fatigue, all of which can lead to an athlete acting out. If your athlete is constantly battling with other players on their team or opposing teams, getting in fights with the coach, or generally acting disrespectful to the people on the field, it may be a deeper problem. Stepping away from the sport may help the athlete refocus and find a new passion instead.

Stopping the cycle of disrespect in sports is crucial to creating a fun, safe, and positive experience for all young athletes. As parents, you can hold yourself and your athletes accountable for being respectful, even when emotions are high.



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