

A new study about what makes sports fun for kids finds that winning isn't everything

In the decade that Devon Mann has been playing soccer, there's one specific day that stands out for the 17-year-old. The D.C. State Soccer Tournament was on the line, and his team from Maret School had held on into penalty kicks.

"It was the highest-stakes game I've ever played," Mann says. "It was exhilarating and so much fun."

But none of his joy came from a trophy. The outcome of that shootout? "We lost," Mann says. Turns out, winning really isn't everything. Dozens of other factors are more important for keeping kids interested in sports, according to a study published earlier this month in the *Journal of Physical Activity & Health*. Author Amanda Visek, an assistant professor in the department of exercise science at George Washington University, set out to understand why so many young people abandon athletics.

"Sport has so much to offer kids. But it's predicated on them playing and continuing to play, and we lose 70 percent of them by the age of 13," she says. So Visek decided to tackle the issue by focusing on "fun."

"The No. 1 reason kids play sports is because it's fun. If they drop out, it's because it's not fun anymore," Visek says. "So fun is that central concept we need to know more about." To quantify this elusive idea, she reached out to more than 200 soccer players, parents and coaches in the D.C. area, including Mann and his mother, Melissa, 48, who's the manager of her son's travel team.

Mann's mom admits her gut reaction was, "Do they really need to study that?" But then she remembered how many of her son's teammates had moved on in recent years. Plus, she was interested in how he would define his experiences.

So they both dove into the first phase of the study, in which participants were asked to list the elements that make sports fun. Visek was blown away by the response. "We think of fun as one thing," she says, but the group came up with 81 specific statements, including "playing your favorite position," "learning from mistakes" and "being around your friends."

For the next phase, participants ranked these statements — with some surprising results. Winning, Visek points out, is 48th. So more than half of the other statements were ranked higher. By grouping the answers by topic, Visek identified the three most important dimensions: being a good sport, trying hard and positive coaching.

This wasn't news to Mann. "If you're winning, that's never going to be a negative," he says. But what inspires him is the connection he has with his teams and his coaches. He's built up years of shared experiences with them, and they've developed rituals that have strengthened their bonds. They take practices and games seriously, so no matter what happens, he feels rewarded with a sense of accomplishment.

Now that he also referees and coaches soccer for younger kids, Mann understands that not everyone is as fortunate: "Some coaches scream the whole time. And some only play the best players." That kind of behavior creates barriers to fun, which Visek is exploring with her next study.

Another issue, she says, is the scourge of competitive parents. They too need to learn that winning isn't everything.

Ranking Fun

For the study, researchers asked participants — players, parents and coaches — to generate a list of elements that make youth sports "fun." The group came up with 81 separate statements. They were then asked to rate the importance of each. At the top of the list were these items. Most of them are related to being a good sport, trying hard and positive coaching.

- Trying your best
- When a coach treats players with respect
- Getting playing time
- Playing well together as a team
- Getting along with teammates
- Exercising and being active
- Working hard
- When a coach encourages the team
- Having a coach who's a positive role model
- Playing well during a game

Source: "The Fun Integration Theory" in the journal of Physical Activity & Health

Parental Influence – Are You Helping or Hurting Your Child

by Stewart Flaherty

Parental influence is an often discussed topic in youth soccer today. As a parent you should pay close attention to the mindset you encourage, and whether you are helping or hurting your own child on the long term. Telling a child what they want to hear may be counterproductive, and behaving in one way during a game, while encouraging your child to act in another the rest of the week will send mixed messages in issues far more important than soccer.

Example

Pay huge attention to the kind of role model you are during competition. A soccer game can be a time of heightened emotion but it should not become an all-consuming obsession. Success in soccer is based on maintaining focus through ups and downs, and not looking to external factors to blame should we lose a game. Do you think your child will be able to do that if you scream and shout maniacally at every occurrence, or blame the referee for the result of games? It is a matter worth serious thought. Not only is your child more likely to succeed in soccer if you encourage focus and not complaining but you will also teach factors important in everyday life, such as responsibility, discipline and leadership. Also, do you criticize other children on the team openly? If you do you are encouraging your own child to be a selfish player and throw blame around. Not to mention, how would you feel if someone said that about your child?

It Is Not About You

As sports fans we like to go up and down on a roller coaster of emotion with the results of our favorite teams. When the love you have for your child is mixed with that it can become a powerful emotional cocktail. As a parent you must take a step back and emotionally distance yourself from the results of the game. You cannot put stock into the wins and losses of a children's team. The result you are looking for is all relative. How good is your child now? Are they improving in an enjoyable situation? To hear parents say "we gotta win this game" is a sad thing. Particularly when coupled with the fact that when your child does win, you will just spout the exact same words the next week in a never ending, and boring cycle.

Be Brutally Honest

Children will often look to make excuses. When it comes to the performance of your child, be honest on what you perceive. Focus on their level of effort and focus, things that have no excuse to fluctuate. If your child gets in the car and complains about playing time/coaching /teammates you should not blindly agree with them to make them feel better in that moment. Act as a mirror and reflect the situation back on their behavior. Good questions are;

- What could you have done better?
- Does "insert name here" acting like that mean you have a bad game automatically?
- Do you have no motivation off your own back?
- Are you making excuses?

While it may seem harsh at the time, self-evaluation and honesty is a mentality you should encourage in all walks of life. The three rules enforced by the great John Wooden stand up well here; "Don't whine, don't complain, don't make excuses". Mr Wooden had a knack of bringing the best out in young athletes.

Do Not Take the Fun Out of the Game

Always remember children rarely begin playing sports to win State Cup's. The game is fun and they enjoy the act of playing it. If your behavior switches to being obsessed with results, motivation will drop with every loss. Reinforce the joy of playing the sport of soccer, use it as a foundation for any achievement going forward.

Trust the Coach

If you do not trust the coach of your child you should find another team. All you have the right to expect is full respect for your child and a chance to train and improve. This may not amount to as much playing time as other players. This is something you should accept, not complain you "never get to see your child play". Watch practice if this is the case and monitor development. If playing time is unacceptable, switch teams as complaining and whining will likely serve little purpose. Bench time is likely a result of performance and not some personal vendetta against your child. If practice is enjoyable and effective, 20 minutes or so less time may not be that big a deal.