

# THE POSITIVE PARENT

## A STUDY ON THE LESSONS SURROUNDING YOUTH SPORTS TODAY



## PREFACE

For parents, youth sports invoke a unique sense of both nostalgia and pride as they reminisce about their favorite moments playing when they were younger, as well as getting to see their child experience the same joy of sports and watch them grow in the process.

Over the generations, youth sports have seen dramatic changes, both in the attitude toward sports themselves and in the parents on the sidelines.

Thus, Russell Athletic set out to study the parents, especially the ones who are highly involved in their children's activities, to gain insight into the benefits and challenges facing youth sports culture today.

For example, one major topic is the effect of specialization on youth sports. We wanted to learn if parents feel it's a concern and how they deal with it.

This study reveals data around these positive and negative influences and offers some key conclusions to make sure youth sports remain one of the most enjoyable aspects of growing up.



## KEY QUESTIONS

- What are the positive benefits of youth sports?
- How does a parent's youth sports experience affect their children?
- What is the current state of parent involvement in youth sports?
- How is encouragement vs. criticism viewed in youth sports?
- What is the impact of early specialization in youth sports?
- How do children and parents deal with the negatives (i.e., losses) of youth sports?

## METHODOLOGY

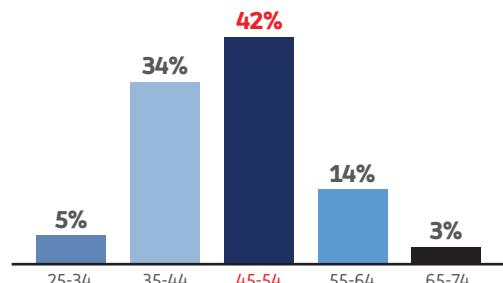
- Russell Athletic, in partnership with the Positive Coaching Alliance, Little League Baseball and Fatherly, conducted this survey in July of 2017.
- Barkley, the marketing agency for Russell Athletic, drafted, programmed and deployed the survey, with the assistance of partners.
- The survey was posted on the Positive Coaching Alliance, Little League and Fatherly social media channels, as well as sent to their email databases. Thus, this sample consists predominantly of highly involved sports parents, many of whom have been coaches.
- The survey was live July 5 - 17, 2017.
- 1,132 respondents completed the survey, with a margin of error of +/- 2.83%.



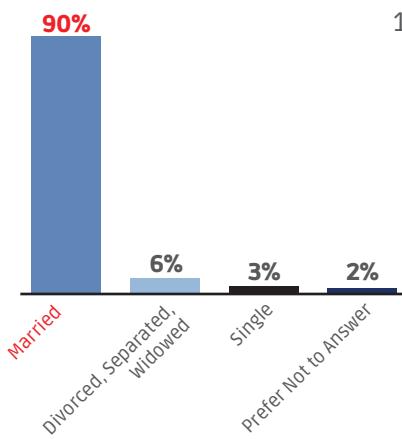
## RESPONDENT PROFILE

- Parents with children who have participated in youth sports
- Average number of children: 2.5
- Average age of children: 14 years old
- 88% have been a youth sports coach

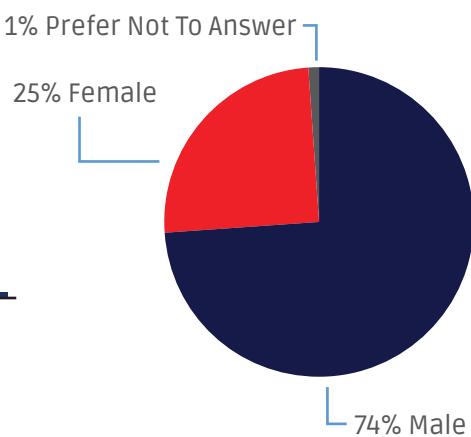
## AGE OF RESPONDENTS



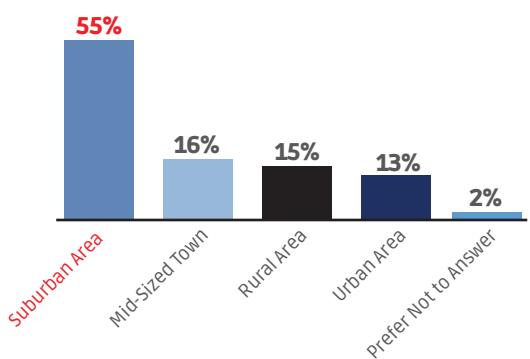
## MARITAL STATUS



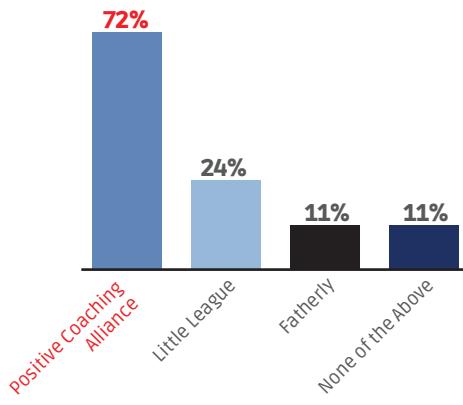
## GENDER



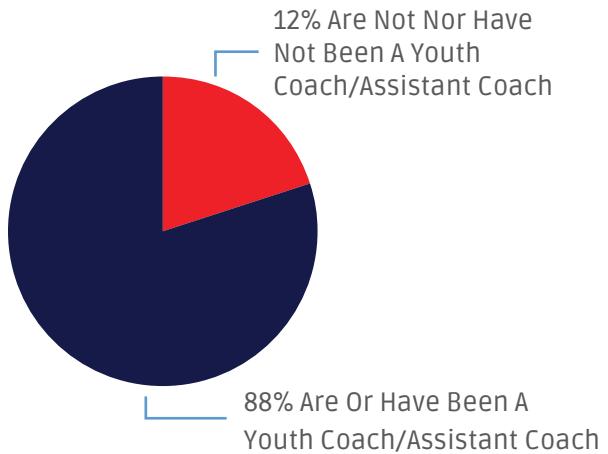
## GEOGRAPHY



## SOCIAL MEDIA FOLLOWING



## YOUTH COACHES



## KEY HEADLINES

- Children predominantly follow in their parents' footsteps and play the same sport(s).
- Teamwork is the No. 1 lesson learned in youth sports. With 85% of parents saying it's a top lesson. Hard work is second, at 61%.
- Specialization is a huge source of tension. Parents see it as a negative trend, but feel the pressure to have their child specialize.
- Sports parents take the ups and downs of sports more seriously than their children.
- Parents coaching from the sidelines is the most common behavior seen by coaches.
- Parents are huge supporters of youth sports and many positively affect the environment in which kids play, but nearly all coaches have experienced negative parental behavior.
- Parents cite positive encouragement as needing a boost from the sidelines; encouragement is also the No. 1 principle of coaching cited by coaches.
- Parents and coaches struggle to focus on more than just winning, despite acknowledging it should be about having fun.
- A majority of parents either believe 'winning matters' or are torn on the issue. They need tools and strategies to discuss sports with their kids beyond the wins-loss column.

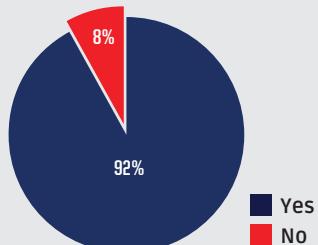


## YOUTH SPORTS: WE STILL PASS IT DOWN

**92% PARENTS PLAYED YOUTH SPORTS WHEN THEY WERE YOUNGER**

DID YOU PLAY YOUTH  
SPORTS WHEN YOU  
WERE YOUNGER?

**92% YES**



Of the parents surveyed who have/had a child in youth sports, 92% of them participated in youth sports as well. This indicates involvement of youth sports is a tradition parents feel is an important aspect of a child's development.

## KIDS ARE PARTICIPATING MORE IN NON-TRADITIONAL SPORTS

Although participation in the traditional sports like baseball, softball, basketball and football remains high among today's youth, non-traditional sports have seen a 12 percentage point increase compared to their parents. Some of these sports include: gymnastics, martial arts, cheerleading and dance.

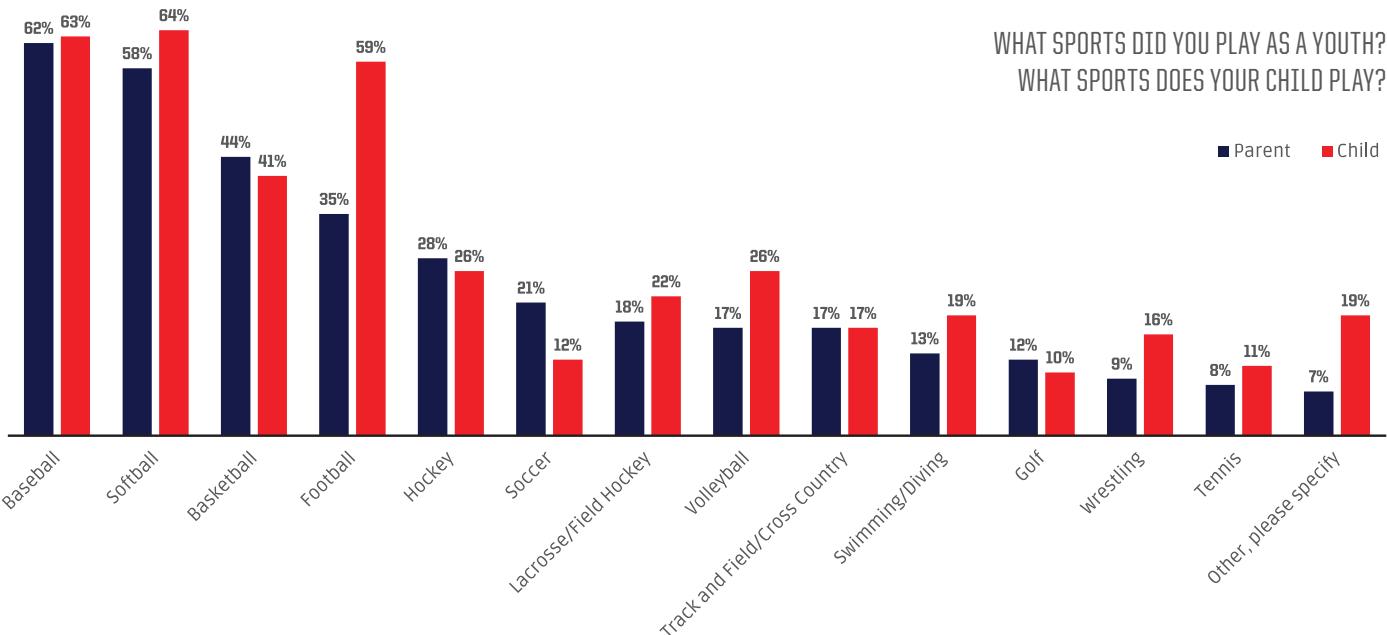
### Non-Traditional Sports Parent Played: (Top Responses)

- Bowling (8)
- Cheerleading (8)
- Gymnastics (8)
- Rugby (8)
- Figure Skating (4)

### Non-Traditional Sports Child Plays: (Top Responses)

- Gymnastics (41)
- Martial Arts (23)
- Cheerleading (19)
- Dance (13)
- Flag Football (13)
- Rugby (13)

**19% OF KIDS ARE INVOLVED IN SPORTS OTHER THAN THE TRADITIONAL MENTIONED, COMPARED TO 7% FOR PARENTS**





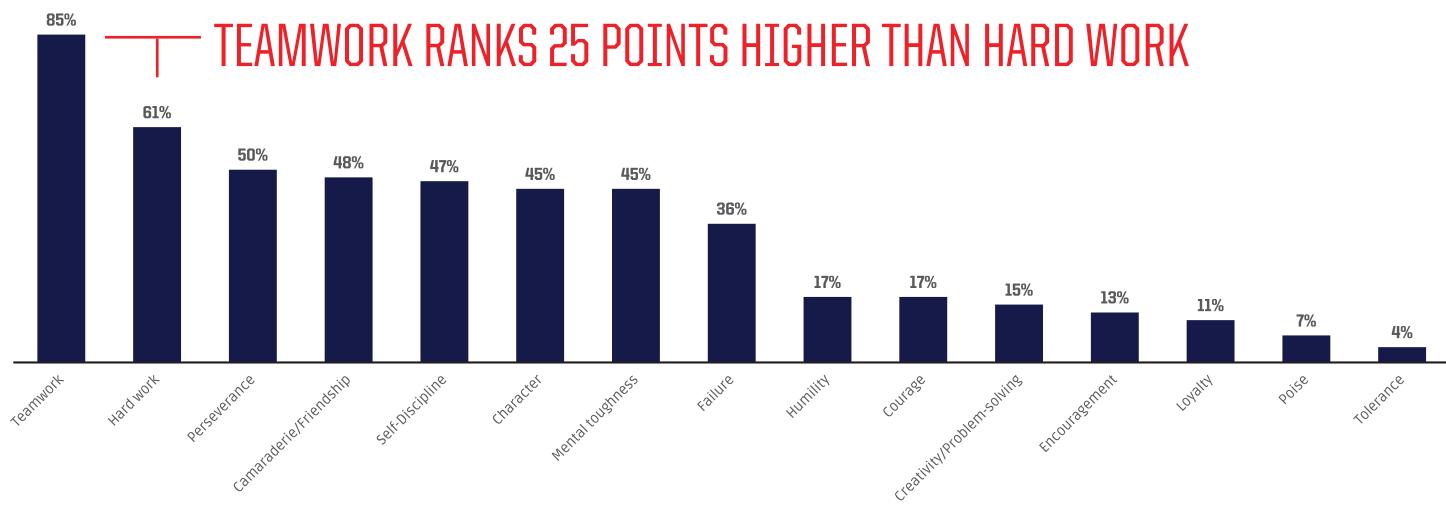
## THE CURRENT STATUS OF YOUTH SPORTS

### THE MOST VALUABLE LESSON: TEAMWORK

85% OF PARENTS FEEL THE TOP LESSON CHILDREN LEARN FROM YOUTH SPORTS IS TEAMWORK

Parents believe youth sports can teach their children a variety of lessons, but the top takeaways children get from sports are 'teamwork,' 'hard work,' 'perseverance' and 'camaraderie/friendship.'

WHAT ARE THE TOP LESSONS YOU FEEL CHILDREN LEARN IN SPORTS?



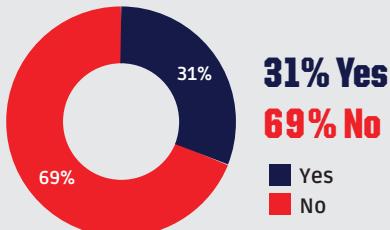
### THE GAME HAS CHANGED. THE LESSONS HAVE NOT.

The lessons reaching near or above the 50% mark are seen as the building blocks for a successful life. The culture surrounding sports may be changing, but the lessons for children are the same. Playing youth sports teaches many of the fundamental lessons children will need throughout life.



### SPECIALIZATION IS REAL, BUT NOT DOMINANT.

ONLY 31% OF CHILDREN HAVE SPECIALIZED IN ONE SPORT (I.E., QUIT OTHER SPORTS TO FOCUS ON ONE)



Specialization of sports is a very real and impactful trend in youth sports. However, among this sample (average child age of 14), only 31% of children have quit other sports to focus on just one. In fact, most sports parents disagree that children should only focus on the sport at which they are best.

"There is a pressure of [children] having to focus on one sport, i.e., club sports... It doesn't allow them to diversify and become well-rounded."

- Parent

Kids should focus on one sport to be the best they can be at it.

**85%  
DISAGREE**

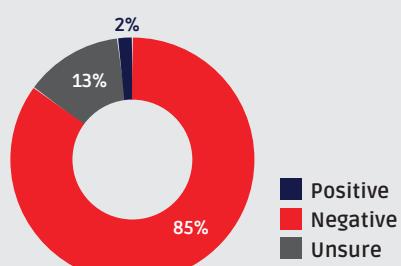
"Kids are having to commit to a single sport at such a young age. I see parents talking scholarships with 10-year-olds and all I hear is 'This kid will be burned out by senior year of high school.'"

- Parent/Coach

### PARENTS AGAINST SPECIALIZATION

85% OF PARENTS BELIEVE THAT EARLY SPECIALIZATION IS A NEGATIVE TREND; 70% OF PARENTS WITH KIDS WHO HAVE SPECIALIZED BELIEVE IT IS NEGATIVE

DO YOU BELIEVE EARLY SPECIALIZATION IS A POSITIVE OR NEGATIVE TREND IN YOUTH SPORTS?



Although the specialization trend in youth sports is increasing, 85% of sports parents feel it is a negative trend. Surprisingly, even 70% of the parents who have/had child(ren) who specialize in a sport believe it is a negative trend. Many parents acknowledge the increased pressure and development of competitive/club sports with year-round practice forming at younger ages as a reason for the trend toward specialization. This statistic indicates parents feel pressured and trapped in what can be the machine of competitive youth sports. They know it's negative, but feel it's the only option for their child.



## EFFECTS OF SPECIALIZATION ON YOUTH SPORTS

### TENSION BETWEEN TRENDS AND BELIEFS

#### PARENTS ARE STUCK BETWEEN WHAT THEY WANT AND WHAT SPORTS CULTURE IS TELLING THEM TO DO

When parents were asked what they thought was the biggest concern about youth sports today, many parents mentioned specialization. They feared that their children were being pressured into joining competitive leagues that practice year-round and aren't allowing kids to experience a wide range of sports, where they could become more well-rounded athletes and possibly discover other interests.

Below are some of the takeaways from their responses on specialization:

#### SPECIALIZATION WORRIES:

Parents are worried that specializing early may cause their child to miss the chance at finding a favorite sport later in life, when their bodies and skill are more developed.

Specializing takes away the fun and joy of youth sports.

Specializing at a later age may not be a bad thing, but the current age at which specialization occurs feels too young.

"[There is] specialization at such young ages. [It] used to be kids had an opportunity to play every sport, as they each seemed to have their own season. Now many sports are played year-round."

- Parent/Coach

### KEY TENSION: PARENTS WANT THEIR KID TO HAVE FUN AND FIND A PASSION SPORT NATURALLY, BUT THIS MEANS GETTING LEFT BEHIND

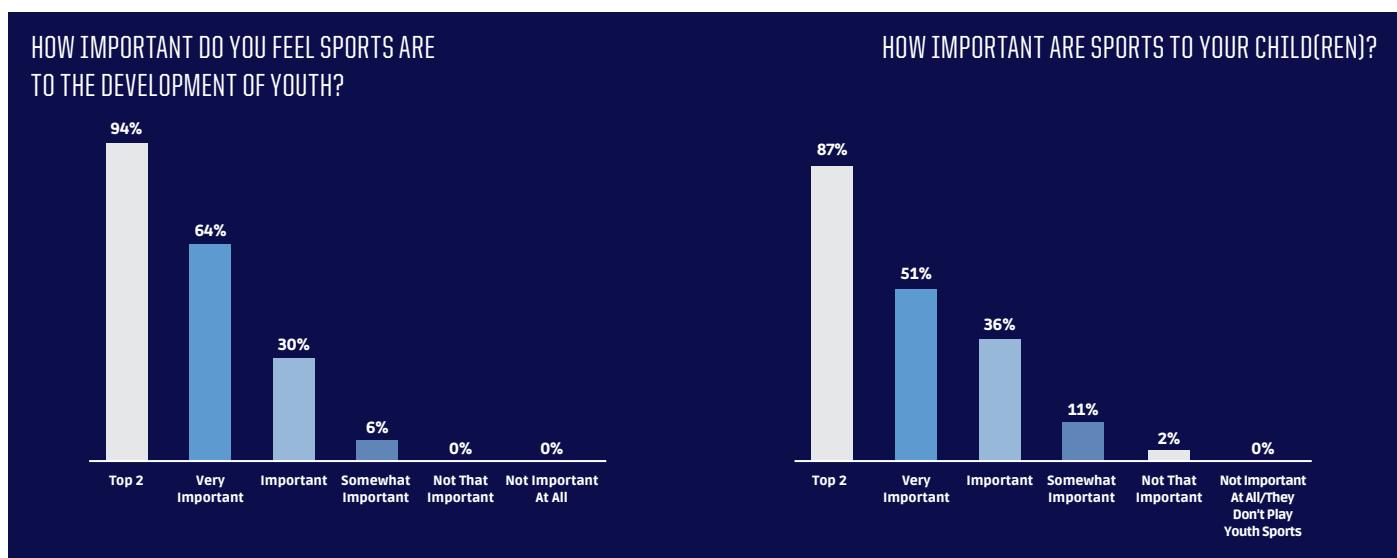
Parents see sports specialization as a negative trend but are pressured by competitive/club sports, which are being developed for younger and younger age groups. Parents feel that if their child doesn't join these teams, they will be left behind or it will be too late to be competitive. The pressure could be diminishing the 'well-rounded athlete' and parents don't have a full answer for it.



## SPORTS ARE AS IMPORTANT TO PARENTS AS KIDS

### 94% OF PARENTS VIEW SPORTS AS IMPORTANT TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF YOUTH

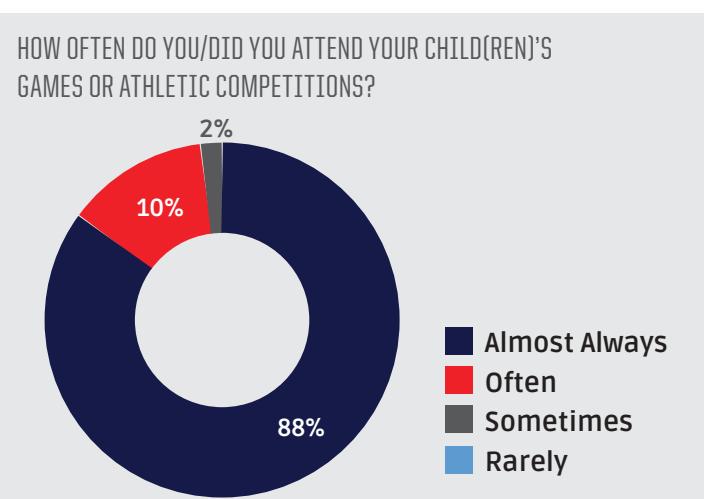
As we saw earlier, 92% of the parents who have/had children play(ing) youth sports, played youth sports themselves. A good reason for this is due to the level of importance that parents hold for sports in the development of kids. 94% of parents felt that sports were an important development mechanism of youth. It teaches them life skills like teamwork, hard work, as well as the social benefit of making friends. According to parents, their kids seem to feel the same way about sports, with 87% of parents saying their children view sports as important.



## SPORTS PARENTS DON'T MISS GAMES

### 88% OF PARENTS ALMOST ALWAYS ATTEND THEIR CHILD(REN)'S GAMES OR ATHLETIC COMPETITIONS

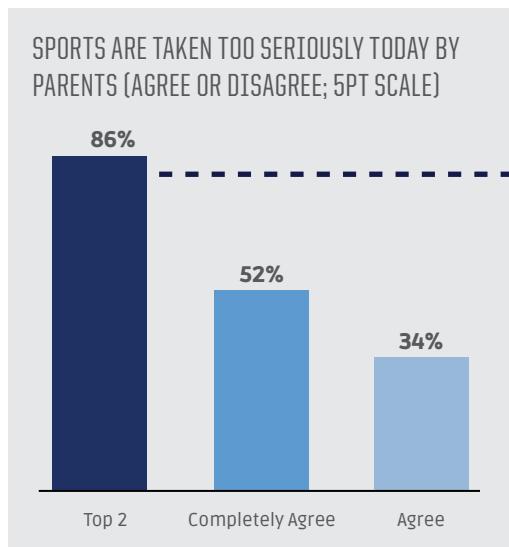
The strong value parents hold for their child's participation in sports is proven through their consistent attendance of the sporting events themselves. 88% of parents report almost always attending their child's sporting events. This has led to youth sports becoming a strong source of passion among parents who have committed a large amount of time and effort toward their involvement in their child's athletic endeavors.



## PARENTS TAKE SPORTS TOO SERIOUSLY ...

**86% OF SPORTS PARENTS BELIEVE THAT PARENTS ARE TAKING THEIR CHILD'S SPORTS TOO SERIOUSLY**

It's clear that with 98% of parents saying they are at their child's games 'almost always,' or at least 'often,' many parents feel a high level of desire to be involved with their child's sports. However, the vast majority of these involved parents say sports are taken too seriously by parents.



**86%**

of parents say sports are taken too seriously today by parents.

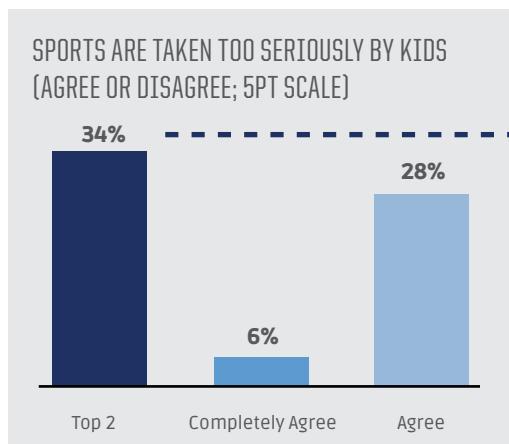
"The parents take [sports] too seriously and ruin the fun.  
[There is] too much drama from parents and their issues."

- Parent

## ... WHILE KIDS ARE JUST TRYING TO HAVE FUN

**ACCORDING TO PARENTS, ONLY 34% OF THEIR CHILDREN TAKE SPORTS TOO SERIOUSLY**

It might be assumed that parents are getting too serious because they are trying to match the passion their kids have for certain sports, but that is not the case. For most kids, sports might be something they enjoy, but only 34% of parents said that their children take sports too seriously.



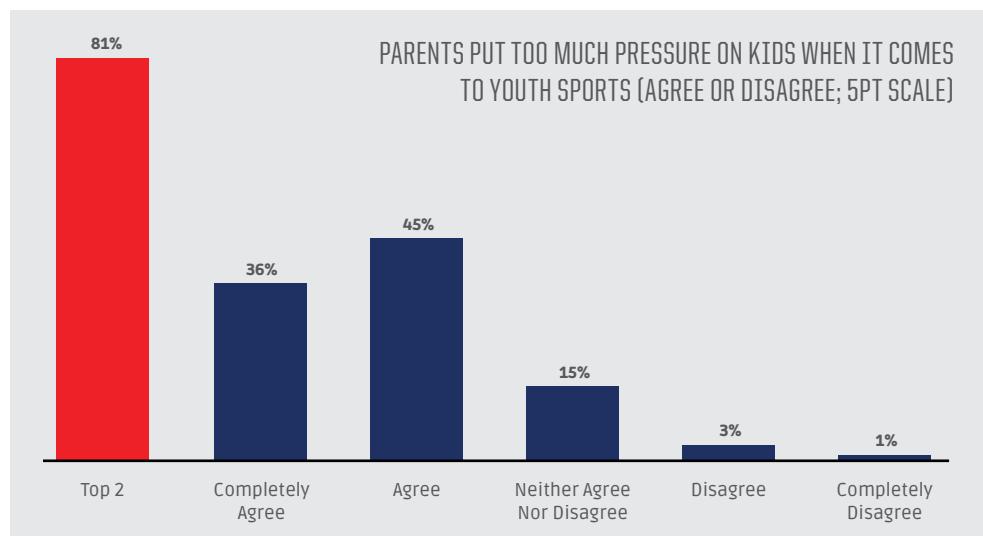
**34%**

of parents say sports are taken too seriously today by kids.

## THE PRESSURE TO COMPETE

**81% OF RESPONDENTS BELIEVE PARENTS ARE PUTTING TOO MUCH PRESSURE ON KIDS WHEN IT COMES TO YOUTH SPORTS**

Highly involved sports parents are worried about the pressure put on children in youth sports. If this pressure is real, it can be a significant barrier to children having fun and enjoying their limited-time experience with youth and team sports.

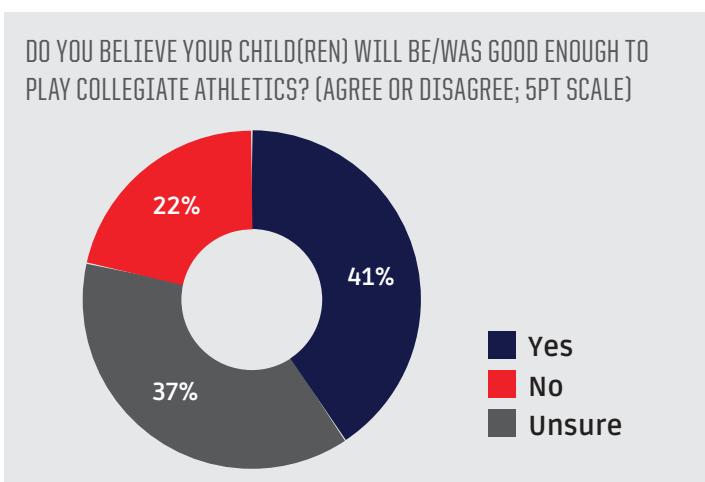


## EXPECTATIONS DO NOT MATCH REALITY

**41% OF PARENTS BELIEVE THEIR CHILD(REN) WILL BE/WAS GOOD ENOUGH TO PLAY COLLEGIATE ATHLETICS**

The pressure parents put on their kids to be successful in sports can also be seen from the amount of confidence they have in regard to their child's ability to play collegiate athletics. 41% of parents believe their child was/is good enough to play collegiately, when reality shows that only 6% of current high school athletes actually go on to compete in the NCAA.

**ONLY 6% of U.S. high school athletes will compete in the NCAA.\***

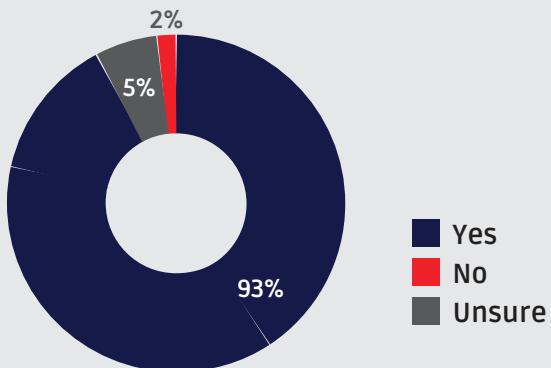


## PARENT BEHAVIOR ON THE SIDELINES NEEDS HELP

**93% OF RESPONDENTS BELIEVE PARENTAL BEHAVIOR IS AN ISSUE IN YOUTH SPORTS**

Along with too much pressure, many of the negative experiences in youth sports today can be traced back to the way parents are conducting themselves at their child's games. 93% of parents believe the negative experiences stemming from parent behavior is an issue in youth sports.

DO YOU BELIEVE NEGATIVE EXPERIENCES STEMMING FROM PARENT BEHAVIOR IS AN ISSUE IN YOUTH SPORTS?



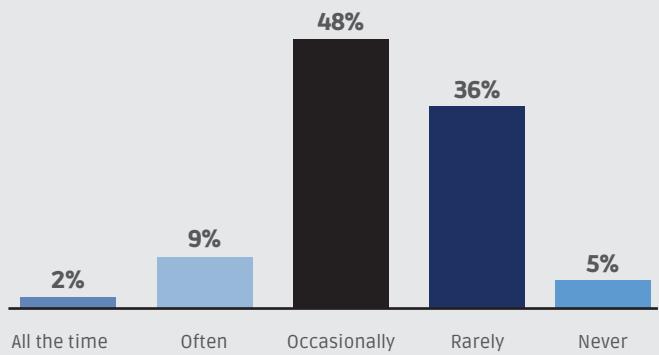
## COACHES TAKE THE HEAT

**59% OF COACHES EXPERIENCE NEGATIVE PARENTAL BEHAVIOR OCCASIONALLY TO ALL THE TIME**

A key witness of these negative parent experiences are the coaches of youth sports, who also have had much of this unfavorable behavior directed at them. It's worth stating that while this is prevalent, only 11% of coaches experience this 'often' to 'all the time.' The majority of coaches see it happening 'occasionally.'

**95%** of coaches have experienced negative parental behavior at least once.

HOW OFTEN HAVE YOU HAD NEGATIVE EXPERIENCES DEALING WITH PARENTS OR KIDS ON THE TEAM?



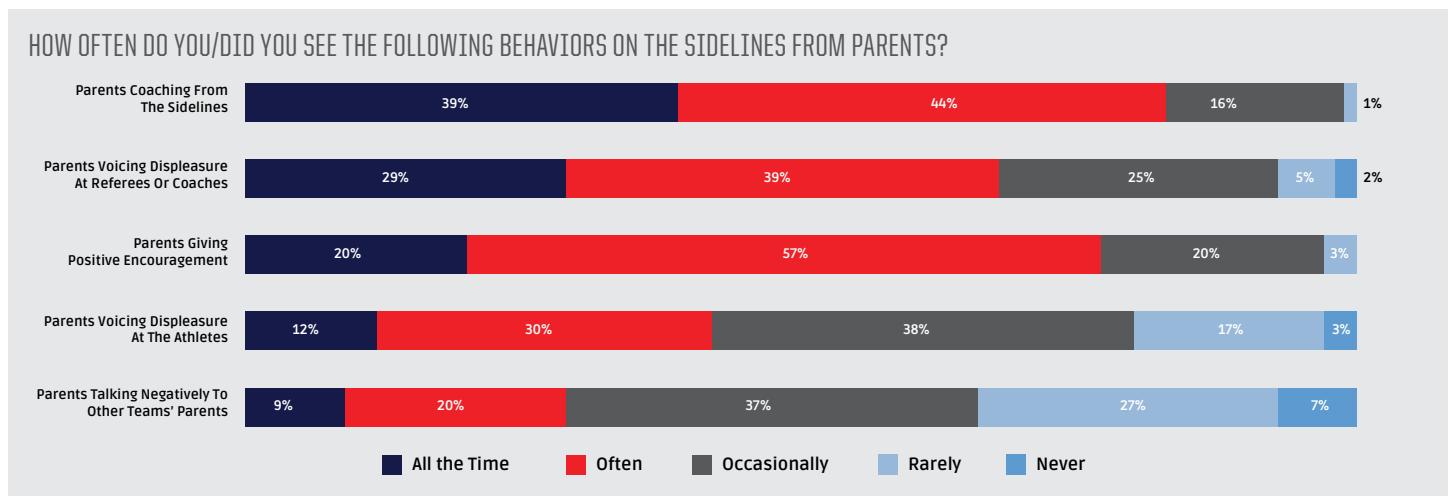


## PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN YOUTH SPORTS TODAY

### PARENTS COACHING VS. ENCOURAGING

#### 39% OF RESPONDENTS SEE PARENTS COACHING FROM THE SIDELINES ALL THE TIME

Unfortunately for coaches, the negative behavior they see from parents isn't an infrequent occurrence. 39% of respondents see parents coaching from the sidelines on an 'all the time' basis. In fact, more parents are seen voicing displeasure 'all the time' (29%) than they are giving positive encouragement (20%).



### WHAT TO DO: REMOVE THE PRESSURE AND FOCUS ON FUN

#### PARENTS HAVE GOTTEN TOO WRAPPED UP IN THEIR CHILD(REN)'S ATHLETICS AND NEED TO RE-EVALUATE THE SITUATION

One of the top concerns respondents had about youth sports today was parental over-involvement. Many parents have gotten too wrapped up into their child's participation in youth sports and are adding pressure to events that are supposed to have a focus on fun. This added pressure often leads parents to act out and create a hostile and negative environment. Parents need to take a step back and think about their actions for their child's well-being, as well as the well-being of others around them.

### CONCERN

- Parents have unrealistic expectations
- Pushing kids to be "the next big shot," which takes away from the joy of youth sports
- Parents on the sidelines yelling
- Parents getting wrapped up in winning at all costs
- Too many parents overstepping the line and disrespecting coaches, referees and umpires.

**"[The biggest concern is] parental behavior and interference with coaches."**

- Parent



## COACHING IN YOUTH SPORTS TODAY

### COACH-TO-COACH ADVICE

#### WHAT TIPS WOULD YOU GIVE TO A FIRST-TIME COACH?

88% of respondents to this survey were present or past coaches. We asked these respondents what would be their best advice for a first-time coach. The following is a summary of their open-ended answers:

#### LEARN AS MUCH AS YOU CAN

As a coach, one of the best things you can do for the betterment of the players is to be an expert in the sport. Learn as much as you can and pass on this knowledge.

#### VERBATIM RESPONSES

"Learn as much as you can from the great coaches; don't try to reinvent the wheel."

"Learn as much as you can about your sport."

"As a coach, you are the biggest factor in controlling the outcome of the season."

"Have a lot of patience."

"Be as prepared for practices and games as you possibly can."

#### IT'S UP TO YOU TO MAKE IT FUN

Parents impose a lot of pressure on their children when it comes to sports, so it doesn't help for a coach to add to this. As a coach, it is best to keep things fun and help kids want to keep coming back to get better through the enjoyment of the sport.

#### VERBATIM RESPONSES

"Give all the kids a chance and do your best to make it fun for them."

"Give positive feedback to the players and make practices fun, not boring."

"Make sure kids have fun. Watch their skills grow."

"Teach the game properly, with sportsmanship towards the other team, and make sure to keep it fun for the kids."

"Make practices fun so players will want to come and it is not a 'drop/dump' by parents."

### TOP TIP LIST

#### LEARN AS MUCH AS YOU CAN

#### IT'S UP TO YOU TO MAKE IT FUN

#### BUILDING A TEAM MEANS KNOWING EACH KID INDIVIDUALLY

#### GIVE EVERYONE A CHANCE

## BUILDING A TEAM MEANS KNOWING EACH KID INDIVIDUALLY

Don't take a passive role as a coach. Take the time to truly get to know the players that you are coaching so you can give individualized attention to each player who has different needs and abilities. Creating a connection with your team can develop a great culture that helps the kids develop a passion for the sport.

### VERBATIM RESPONSES

"Get to know your players, not just their sports interests, and accept they all have different strengths."

"Really get to know each player as an individual and bring out their best."

"Get to know your players outside of your kid's relationship with them."

"Get to know the players and bond them as a team. Players that like each other work hard as a team."

"Talk to your players about other things than just sports. Get to know them and respect them."

## GIVE EVERYONE A CHANCE

Kids are often in youth sports in order to learn a sport for the first time and develop their skills. They can't get this proper development if they never get the chance to play or are ignored during practice. Make sure to give every kid a chance to learn and improve, as well as have fun in the process.

### VERBATIM RESPONSES

"Give everyone a chance to play and always be a positive influence."

"Give everyone on your team a fair chance. Exhibit fairness, not favoritism."

"Give every member of your team the same amount of coaching and allow them to play all positions. They will flourish as a team."

"Teach the kids to play the sport and teach them all equally to give them each a chance to succeed."



## WHAT LESSONS DO PARENTS REMEMBER?

**WHAT IS THE SINGLE BEST PIECE OF ADVICE YOU WERE GIVEN OR HEARD ABOUT SPORTS AND ITS LESSONS BY A COACH OR ANYONE ELSE?**

After discussing what tips coaches would give each other, we also wanted to see what impact coaches had made on our respondents by asking them what has stuck with them the most from their playing days.

### HAVE FUN AND DO YOUR BEST

When asked about the single best piece of advice that respondents had received about sports and its lessons, the most frequently used words were 'fun' and 'best.' However, this is in opposition to the wave of competitiveness that continues to grow within youth sports.

#### VERBATIM RESPONSES

"Don't dwell on negatives. Get out there and do your best."

"Go out, have fun and be your best! If you do those things, then you've already won!"

"Believe in yourself and have fun."

"Playing is about having fun and building self-confidence, not whether you win or lose."

"Have fun and love the game."

### HARD WORK BEATS TALENT

A quote that was mentioned frequently by many respondents is the phrase, "Hard work beats talent when talent doesn't work hard." It is interesting how many people mentioned this phrase, as it reflects the drive and determination qualities parents want their kids to learn from sports, no matter what.

#### VERBATIM RESPONSES

"Hard work and dedication pays off."

"Never give up, always give 100% until the play is over."

"Work hard and the rest will take care of itself."

"Tough times don't last, tough people do."

"Work on your weaknesses and refine your strengths."

"If you work hard and give your best effort, you have succeeded in becoming a better person."

"Work hard, be dedicated; you get out what you put in."

#### TOP WORDS USED, BY FREQUENCY

**FUN: 217      GAME: 152**

**BEST: 210      HARD: 127**

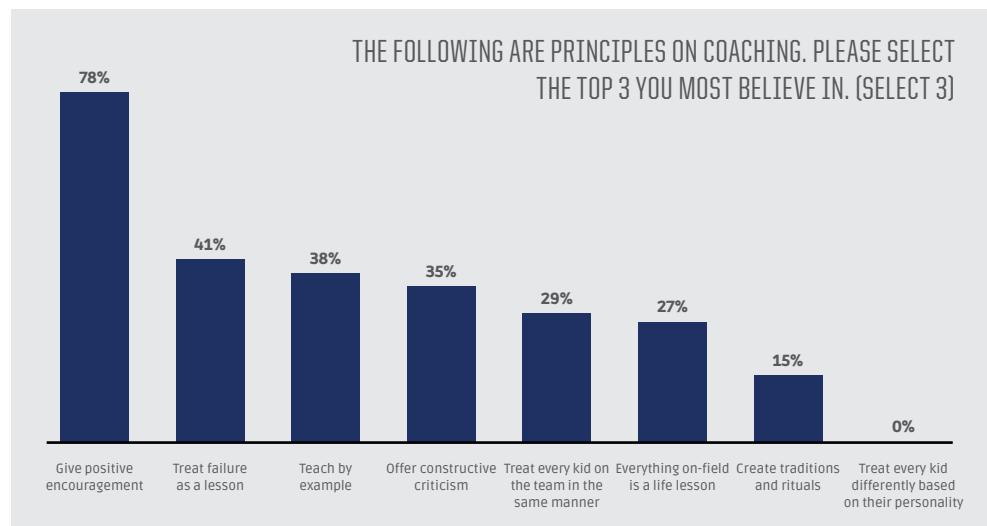
**PLAY: 195      WORK: 98**



## POSITIVITY PRINCIPLE

**78% OF PARENTS SELECTED "GIVING POSITIVE ENCOURAGEMENT" AS THE NO. 1 PRINCIPLE OF COACHING**

To help alleviate parents' concerns about coaching in today's youth sports, it is important that coaches discover and learn what is most important for the children they are coaching. The top principles respondents said they most believe in were 'give positive encouragement,' 'treat failure as a lesson,' 'teach by example' and 'offer constructive criticism.'



## COACHING IN YOUTH SPORTS TODAY

Overly involved parents might be the most direct source of pressure in youth sports, but the 'win over everything' mentality is a struggle for coaches, too. Coaches can be another source of high pressure for children. They also have a huge impact, positively or negatively, on the vibe and morale of the team.

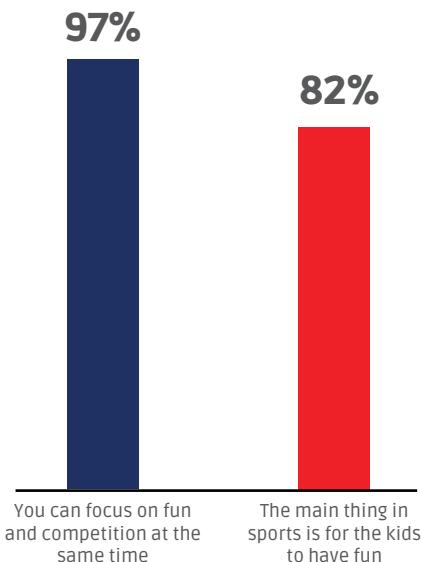
Most coaches seem to be passionate and dedicated to caring about the youth they coach. From making sure to keep it fun, to focusing on hard work over talent, coaches also have a lot of great knowledge and advice to share.

## COMPETITION CAN BE FUN

**97% OF PARENTS AGREE YOU CAN FOCUS ON FUN AND COMPETITION AT THE SAME TIME**

Parents believe competition and fun are not mutually exclusive characteristics of sports. 97% of parents agree that you can focus on fun and competition at the same time. Parents even believe that fun should take a priority, with 82% believing the main objective in sports is for the kids to have fun.

PLEASE STATE HOW MUCH YOU AGREE OR DISAGRE WITH THE FOLLOWING STATEMENTS. (TOP 2 BOX)



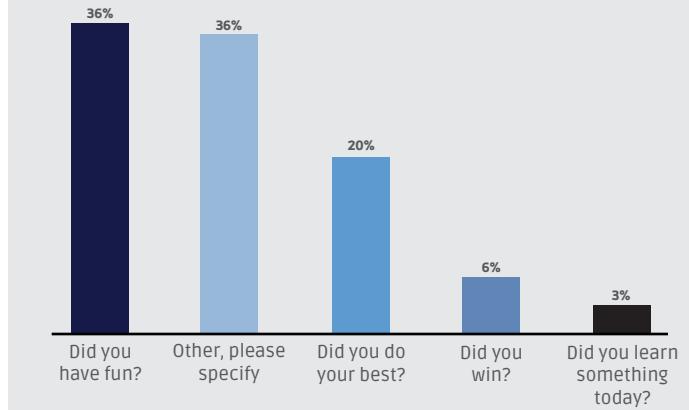
## POST-GAME QUESTIONS

### DID YOU HAVE FUN VS. HOW'D IT GO?

We asked parents what would be the first question they would ask their child if they missed the game. 36% say that they would ask, "Did you have fun?" from the choices given. However, 35% answered, "Other," and the vast majority of these responses say that they would ask a very general question like, "How'd it go?" This indicates that they want their child to lead the post-game discussion.

At the same time, only 1 in 5 parents would ask if the child did their best first and only 3% would ask if they learned something today. While these may not be the first questions, it may be wise for parents to have these specific questions in their arsenal for the post-game talk.

LET'S SAY YOU MISSED AN ATHLETIC EVENT OR GAME OF YOUR CHILD. WHAT WOULD BE THE FIRST QUESTION YOU ASK WHEN THEY GET HOME?



**OTHER RESPONSES:**  
**HOW DID IT GO? (164)**  
**HOW DID YOU DO? (97)**  
**HOW WAS YOUR GAME? (71)**  
**HOW DID THE TEAM DO? (15)**

## WINNING STILL MATTERS

**78% OF PARENTS SAY THAT WINNING DOES MATTER**

The belief that having fun is the most important part of youth sports might be more of an ideology than a reality. 49% of parents agree that winning matters and only 22% disagreed with that statement. This doesn't mean that having fun is out of the picture, as 97% of parents believe you can focus on fun and competition at the same time, but fun might be fighting a battle with the prevalent 'win at all cost' mentality within youth sports today.

**17%**  
**DISAGREE**

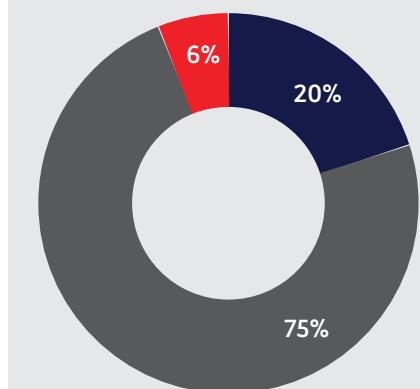
**5%**  
**COMPLETELY  
DISAGREE**

## BUT KIDS GET OVER LOSSES QUICKLY

**ONLY 6% OF KIDS TAKE LOSSES VERY HARD; 75% OF KIDS ARE AFFECTED BY LOSSES, BUT GET PAST THEM. 1 IN 5 KIDS SHRUG THEM OFF IMMEDIATELY.**

At the end of the day, it isn't whether parents think winning is more important than fun or vice versa, it's how the child(ren) enjoy the experience of youth sports. For 75% of kids, losing affects them, but they get past it. Another 20% shrug off losses immediately. This shows that parents who express negative behavior during sports events and coaches who put too much emphasis on winning should realize that the child is only there to learn a sport, make new friends and have a good time. The real goal should be to foster their child's relationship with sports and add as much positivity as possible.

HOW HARD DOES/DID YOUR CHILD(REN)  
TAKE LOSING IN SPORTS?



- He/She shrugs off losses immediately
- He/She takes losses very hard
- He/She is affected, but gets past it

## A PARENT'S GUIDE TO A MORE POSITIVE SPORTS LIFE

This study points to a few key lessons and practical tips for parents in the thick of their child's youth sports experience. Think of these as a how-to for leading a more positive sports life and becoming a change agent for a more positive sports culture.

**1**

Sports are a limited-time offer for your kids. Remember this is just one part of their development - not their entire life.

**2**

Try to match their level of passion and intensity of the sport. Don't outpace them, as this will lead to pressure.

**3**

Always default to encouragement on the sidelines. This is the No. 1 rule of parenting and coaching.

**4**

When the pressure is high, remember what you loved most about sports to reshape how you talk to your kids.

**5**

Teach your child that competing should always be fun. There's not a time for fun and a different time for competing.

**6**

Post-game is your game time. Ask specific questions, discuss lessons, not just play-by-plays. Remind yourself that they get over losses quickly.

**7**

Teach your child to love winning. But remind him/her this is only one aspect of why they play.