

If your child is **playing hockey for the first time** this season, you are probably interested in helping him or her **have the best possible experience**. Youth sports are a wonderful way for kids to get regular exercise and develop physical skills. Team sports also teach children how to get along with their teammates, how to take instructions from the coach and how to cope when things don't go so well.

**Why do kids play sports?** Surveys conducted in the United States and Canada indicate that young athletes most often list their sport goals in the following order of importance:

- To *have fun*.
- To improve skills and learn new ones.
- To be with friends or make new ones.
- For thrills and excitement.
- To win.
- To become physically fit.

The findings clearly indicate that the primary goal of professional athletes and many adults—winning—is far less important to children. What really matters to kids is *having fun*! So, the key to gaining lifelong benefits from sports is to **focus on participation and fun—not simply performance**.

**What about winning?** Winning is *fun* when it happens, and it's great when your child has good coordination and athletic talent. But it's also wise to **be realistic about the abilities and attention span of a typical hockey Mite**. For example, it takes a certain amount of motor control and understanding for a youngster to skate and handle the stick. But realistically, while some kids will focus on what's happening on the ice, you'll see others "horsing around" or telling jokes. And that's OK! It's to be expected!

**What's important is the joy of the activity.** By 9 or 10 years of age, a child usually gets more interested in playing hockey the right way. However, at any age, it's not the parent's job to push the child or live vicariously through him or her. **The parent's major role is to support the child and enjoy the moment.**

**How can you help to promote fun?** Get excited about almost everything that happens. Find something to value and encourage in your child. **Consistently reinforce indications of skill improvement, effort and good teamwork.** Say, for example:

- "I love how you skate fast."
- "Way to go! You showed a lot of effort and improvement."
- "It's great to hear you encouraging your teammates!"

At the same time, **look for opportunities to reinforce good sportsmanship, and keep things in perspective.** For example, if your child complains about losing a game, you might say, "I know it's *fun* to win. But everybody eventually is going to lose. How do you think that team felt last week when your team won? (Although this should not happen to Mites in USA Hockey as nobody is technically keeping score...) The important thing is to play, *have fun*, and do your best. Did you *have fun*?" Hopefully, your child will say "yes," and you'll see evidence that he or she *enjoys playing hockey*.

**What if your child isn't having fun?** It's possible that your child isn't developmentally ready to play hockey and follow the coach's instructions. If that's the case, you might consider an activity that's a little easier or more suited to your child's temperament and capabilities (such as soccer, gymnastics or swimming). **There's no need to rush a disinterested or poorly coordinated child into any sport.** And let's face it: Not every kid wants to grow up to be Sidney Crosby. The bottom line is to **do what is best for your child—not what is most pleasing to you.**

**Editor's Note:** Thank you to Frank L. Smoll, Ph.D., for this article. Dr. Smoll is a sport psychologist at the University of Washington and co-director of Youth Enrichment in Sports. To see previews of his *Mastery Approach to Coaching* and *Mastery Approach to Parenting in Sports* DVDs, visit [www.y-e-sports.com](http://www.y-e-sports.com).



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