

**PROMOTING THE HEALTH,
WELLBEING,
AND ENJOYMENT OF
CHILDREN AND
YOUNG PEOPLE INVOLVED IN
SPORT:**

TIPS FOR PARENTS



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1. SUPPORTING PARENTS OF CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE INVOLVED IN SPORT

Sport Parent EU is an international project that aims to minimise the physical and psychological risks that young athletes encounter by improving the support that is provided to, and available for, parents, guardians, and careers. We created this project because we know children and young people's opportunities to participate in sport, and subsequently gain the associated benefits, is largely dependent upon the support they receive from their parents, guardians, or careers.

However, we are also aware that it can be difficult for parents to know exactly what to do to help their children when they are involved in sport. Particularly, it can be hard to know what to do to promote the health, wellbeing, and enjoyment of children in different sporting contexts. As such, our aim with this project was to produce a range of easily accessible resources that provide parents with accurate, up-to-date information across a range of topics that we believe are critical to enabling parents to optimise their involvement in youth sport.

Led by Swansea University, this project has drawn on the expertise of academics and practitioners working across Europe in the field of youth sport. Through a series of meetings, evaluation of current evidence and practice, and extensive discussion, nine topics deemed particularly pertinent and timely to help parents protect and promote the health and wellbeing of children involved in sport have been identified.

These topics are:

1. Parents' roles in sport;
2. Growth and Development;
3. Physical Training;
4. Nutrition;
5. Psychological strength and wellbeing;
6. Talent identification and development;
7. Sport integrity and moral development;
8. Safeguarding, and;
9. Parents' experiences.

Based on our discussions and available evidence, the following pages detail top tips for parents regarding each of these topics.

Further information on each of these nine topics, and much more, can be found on www.sportparent.eu.



2. OPTIMISING PARENTS' ROLES WITHIN YOUTH SPORT

Without your support, it is unlikely your child would be able to participate in sport, enjoy their experience, or reach their potential. By being positively and actively involved in your child's sporting life, you can enhance all aspects of your child's experience.

To optimise your involvement in your child's sport, you can:

1. Seek to understand the range of ways in which you influence your child's sporting experience; from providing opportunities and helping children to interpret their sporting experiences, to role modelling appropriate etiquette and emotional control.
2. Engage in frequent communication with your child regarding their reasons for participating in sport and what they are trying to achieve. This is particularly important around key transition points (e.g., changing teams, schools, injury etc) when your child's reasons for participating in sport may change.
3. Talk to your child about the types of behaviours and comments that they find useful before, during, and after communication. Remember children may perceive behaviours differently to the way in which they were intended.
4. Develop strategies to cope with the positive and negative emotions you may experience at competitions.
5. Encourage your child to develop independence and increasingly take control over her or his own development and sporting journey.
6. Help your child to develop strategies to cope with the inevitable challenges they will face in their sporting journey and highlight what they will be learning or gaining as a result of being involved.
7. Develop strong relationships with your child's coach. Learn about the coach's philosophy, their goals for your child, and what support they may need.
8. Learn about your child's sport; the rules, the etiquette, the benefits, and the challenges.
9. Keep sport in perspective and focus on the multiple benefits that children can gain from being involved in sport. Sport is about much, much more than just winning and losing.
10. Enjoy the experience of watching and supporting your child's sporting experience and development.



3. UNDERSTANDING CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENT

Throughout childhood and adolescence, children are developing physically, cognitively, and psycho-socially. Understanding how children develop, and ensuring children have access to developmentally appropriate opportunities, is important to maximise children's sporting experiences.

To help foster a developmentally appropriate sporting experience for your child, you can:

1. Exposed your child to a variety of experiences both within and beyond sport to facilitate optimal physical, cognitive, and psycho-social development. Remember, sport is just one part of your developing child's life.
2. Make a distinction between your child's chronological and developmental age. Two children, although both aged 11 years, may vary substantially in terms of physical, cognitive, or psycho-social development. Avoid comparing your child to others.
3. Recognise that your child may not reach developmental milestones within set-time frames. Development is age-related not age-dependent so some children will reach developmental milestones within set-time frames, but others will not. Age ranges are general guidelines not strict rules.
4. Understand that children reach physical maturation at different ages and this will vary between boys and girls. Physical maturation may lead children to appear more (or less) physically able than their peers.
5. Anticipate and accept that your child's development will be non-linear. Many models and theories present development in linear, stage-like fashions. However, the reality of development is often much more complicated. Children will experience periods of rapid development, plateaus in development, as well as periods of regression.
6. Help your child to understand how their development may impact on their sporting performance. Be ready to provide emotional support if their performance starts to plateau or decline.
7. Tailor your expectations, discussions, and feedback in line with your child's cognitive development. Children's ability to understand instructions, solve problems, and focus their attention on necessary information to execute sport skills and tactics varies substantially in relation to their cognitive development.
8. Identify which social relationships are important in your child's life at different times. The importance of parents, family, coaches, peers, and friends will change as children develop and will influence their behaviours, thoughts, and feelings.



9. Ensure your child has access to coaches who tailor their delivery and expectations in line with children's development. The types of training provided, the language used in sessions, feedback provided, and expectations of children should all be appropriately tailored.
10. Most importantly, remember that children are not the finished product nor are they mini-adults. Their abilities and performances will constantly change as they cognitively, physically, and socially develop.



4. PHYSICAL TRAINING FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

Appropriately designed physical training improves health and fitness, enhances physical performance, reduces the risk of injury, and develops confidence and perceived competence in children and young people. Given these benefits, we believe physical training should be a core component of your child's sporting experience.

To maximise your child's physical training, you can:

1. Encourage your child to engage early with physical training to prepare them for the demands of their sport.
2. Understand why your child is engaging with physical training. Physical training is about more than simply becoming physically fitter or stronger. It is concerned with developing a child's all-round athleticism, which will help them avoid injuries and to transition between sports if they decide to change their focus.
3. Ensure your child is receiving coaching from a suitably qualified coach. A child's coach should provide training that is developmentally appropriate and based on a child's technical ability rather than age.
4. Support your child's development of a broad range of movement skills. Developing a breadth and depth of motor skills will ensure your child fully develops their athleticism and is less likely to get injured.
5. Prioritise the development of muscular strength. Regardless of a child's sport, they will be required to both produce force and absorb high amounts of force so having a strong, robust body is important.
6. Provide opportunities for your child to sample lots of different activities as a young child and avoid early specialisation.
7. Be patient and don't compare your child's performances against peers. Children develop at different rates, and this will impact on their performance. Keep your focus on your child's individual progress.
8. Understand that your child should never train when in pain, suffering from illness, or if they feel excessively tired. Encourage your child to listen to their body and talk to you about how they are feeling before training or competing.
9. Avoid your child training in a single sport for more hours than their age in a given week.
10. Help your child to enjoy the challenges of physical training and have FUN!



5. NUTRITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE INVOLVED IN SPORT

Over the last few years there has been an explosion in advice for parents regarding nutrition. With so much information available it can be difficult to know what is best for your child. Drawing on available evidence, we believe a food first approach, based upon the foundations of a healthy diet, is a good starting point.

To address your child's nutritional needs, you can:

1. Plan what a typical day looks like for your child. This should include your child's commitments and eating patterns so that any large gaps in food or fluid consumption can be identified.
2. Remember your child can drink too little and too much. Encourage your child to monitor their own hydration status by looking at their urine colour.
3. Adopt a food first approach. That is, try to identify ways for your child to obtain the required nutrients to meet the demands for growth and sport from food before considering dietary supplementation.
4. Follow some key steps before deciding to use a dietary supplement. These include:
 - 1) assessing the need for supplementation,
 - 2) assessing the risk of contamination with banned substances, and
 - 3) assessing the consequences of consuming contaminated substances, If supplements are used you should seek to minimise risks, by, for example, using batch tested products.
5. Talk to your child regarding their subjective feelings of hunger, fatigue, and stomach discomfort around training to help guide the provision of food and fluid.
6. If possible, give your child access to, and encourage consumption of, a wide variety of foods as this can help guide the provision of food and fluid.
7. Use frozen or dried fruit and vegetables to help your child gain important nutrients while also minimizing food wastage.
8. Remember that vitamins and minerals are found in a wide variety of foods, not just fruit and vegetables. So try to ensure food groups are not omitted from your child's diet.
9. Make small changes in food purchasing (e.g., wholemeal varieties), food preparation (e.g., removing visible fat from meat), and cooking (e.g., steaming) to improve your child's nutrient intake.
10. Use food labels to help guide food purchasing if eating from outlets.

6. ENHANCING PSYCHOLOGICAL STRENGTH AND WELLBEING IN AND THROUGH SPORT

Participation in sport provides numerous opportunities for your child to develop psychologically. However, parts of sport can also be challenging for children, such as performance expectations, pressure of competition, and team selection. Supporting children's psychological development is critical to facilitate success both within and beyond sport.

To enhance your child's psychological strength, you can:

1. Prioritise and develop your child's self-esteem by providing opportunities for your child to develop strong perceptions of self-worth across all key life domains (e.g., in sport, school, family, and community activities).
2. Find a knowledgeable and supportive coach who creates an enjoyable, caring, and challenging environment for your child.
3. Increasingly involve your child in decision-making as they get older to help facilitate ownership, independence, and personal responsibility.
4. Hold your child to high standards in relation to values (e.g., work ethic, commitment, and perseverance) and morals (e.g., sportspersonship, respect) to help your child maximise their potential.
5. Assist your child in developing basic psychological skills (e.g., through positive self-talk, simple breathing techniques) to help them cope with the challenges of youth sport.
6. Help your child find time for physical and mental preparation for training and competitions so they feel confident and focused.
7. Help your child develop strong and stable feelings of confidence by recognising and praising her or his progress, self-discipline, and consistency of effort.
8. Reinforce that mistakes and setbacks are an important part of learning and personal growth.
9. Encourage your child to reflect on and review his or her performance to identify both strengths and areas for improvements. There are positive lessons from every competition.
10. Be a role model for your child by demonstrating psychological strength yourself including composure, self-discipline, and supportive communication.



7. TALENT IDENTIFICATION AND DEVELOPMENT IN YOUTH SPORT

Talent identification seeks to find young children who possess qualities that predict future excellence. However, early identification and selection programmes have low overall effectiveness. As such, whether your child has been identified as talented or not, focusing on your child's individual development and seeking out environments that maximise their opportunities to progress are key.

To support your child's Sporting development, you can:

1. Allow your child to train a lot but keep it fun! Deliberate practice is important but this need not exclude fun.
2. Promote self-initiated and self-organised play activities. These provide a motivational foundation and teach creativity but can only happen if your child is not overscheduled with training.
3. Be patient. Successful talent development means your child will be a good senior athlete, not necessarily win junior championships.
4. Allow your child to play in multiple sports. Top-level athletes often specialise in one sport at a later age, so if your child has an interest in multiple sports, support them in pursuing this.
5. Promote observational learning. Young talented athletes learn a lot from observing older athletes.
6. Insist on youth friendly formats for training and competition, which allow your child to train their technique not only their physical abilities. Challenge the coach if appropriate.
7. Let your child fail. One of the most important psychological skills in elite sport is the ability to handle adversity. To learn this skill your child needs to fail (but with support).
8. Take a broad interest in your child, beyond just their sport. Show you love and respect your child irrespective of their sport results.
9. De-emphasize talent. Don't talk too much about your child or others being talented. Rather focus on effort, preparation, and improvement when you praise them.
10. Engage with your child's sporting environment. Good talent development environments are characterised by integrated efforts, such as communication and coordination between club, school, and family.

8. FOSTERING SPORT INTEGRITY AND MORAL DEVELOPMENT

The right sporting environment provides an opportunity to develop values and skills that are important both within sport and also for life outside of sport. However, certain environmental and personal characteristics can also encourage children and young people to engage in unsporting or questionable behaviours. Through your own behaviours and actions, you can help your child to develop and display moral and ethical sporting behaviours.

To foster children's Sporting integrity, you can:

1. Remember that sports are practices that can test your child's ability to do the right thing. If they demonstrate sporting behaviours praise them for this and if they engage in unsporting behaviours use these as learning opportunities.
2. Avoid environments that are solely focused on winning as it can mean that other important values and opportunities for learning may be lost.
3. Emphasise the good moral behaviour that is often present in sport. It's more common than you might think and showing examples of this to your child can be very valuable.
4. Focus on the positive values that sport can promote, such as fun, learning new skills, working with others, and building relationships. Celebrate the development of these skills.
5. Know the rules of your child's sport, and help your child learn the rules. Take time to understand acceptable and unacceptable practices.
6. Be aware of any practices in your child's sport that support fair play, such as communicating with the referee or umpire respectfully. Encourage your child to engage in these behaviours.
7. Anticipate times when your child may feel under extra pressure to win or succeed (e.g., in important matches, team selections). Re-emphasise the importance of effort, improvement, and fun at these times and be available to provide extra support.
8. Take time to understand the doping rules in sport. Only rely on official sources for such information, such as the World Anti-Doping Agency or National Anti-Doping Agencies. Athlete support personnel and club officials may be helpful in this regard too.
9. Use the negative press sport sometimes receives to start conversations with your child and teach them about the behaviors you want them to display.
10. Continually strive to create a sporting environment in which your child will thrive and enjoy their participation.

9. KEEPING CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE SAFE IN SPORT

For many children, participation in sport is a positive, fun, and valuable experience. Unfortunately, however, not all children have positive experiences in sport and in some cases children and young people can find themselves being exposed to very negative or abusive relationships and situations. As a parent, you have a right to question sport practices and keep your child safe while participating.

To help keep your child safe in sport, you. Can:

1. Check that your child's sports club or organisation has appropriate policies and procedures in place to keep your child safe in sport. For instance, do they have codes of conduct relating to social media, photography, travelling away?
2. Check that your child's sport club or organisation has a safe recruitment process. Both staff and volunteer support staff at the club should be subject to a clear and consistent safe process.
3. Find out if your child's coach has appropriate coaching qualifications and has received training in safeguarding/child protection.
4. Spend time at your child's club and talk to others who are involved to learn about the club culture and environment. Does the club prioritise safe and enjoyable experiences for all children?
5. Talk to your child regularly to find out about their sport experience and teach your child key messages about safe behaviours. For example, make sure your child understands that their body is private to them and that no means no.
6. Encourage your child to talk to you about anything they see or experience that may seem or make them feel unsafe.
7. Look out for changes in your child's behaviours or interests that may arise as a result of negative sporting experiences.
8. Identify who you can raise concerns with if you are worried about your child's safety. Clubs and organisations should have a welfare officer (or equivalent) who you can approach with any questions or issues.
9. Remember it is your right as a parent to ask questions and raise concerns if you are worried about your child's safety within their sport.
10. Always prioritise your child's safety and enjoyment over winning and performance.

10. THE EXPERIENCE OF PARENTS IN SPORT

Parenting children and young people who are involved in sport can bring a range of positive experiences and benefits, such as seeing your child physically and psychologically develop, witnessing them having fun playing sport, and developing new friendships. However, at times, supporting your child's sporting journey can be challenging, which may impact on your involvement, behaviours, and emotions.

Understanding the experience of being a “sport parent” and preparing for any challenges may be useful. To do this, you can:

1. Talk to coaches, other experienced parents, and read on the website of the sport federation to learn about your child's sport; what will be expected of you and your child as they develop, what challenges may be encountered?
2. Understand that as your child progresses in sport and encounters different clubs and cultures, your involvement and expectations are likely to change. Be prepared for such changes.
3. Remember that even with the best intentions, your involvement and behaviours will be shaped by the sporting culture. Regularly reflect on your experience so that you can remain true to your goals and values over time.
4. Think about the different situations that may be encountered at competitions, such as seeing your child be disappointed, not being selected, experiencing an injury, or perceived favoritism. Reflect on how you may feel in those situations and what strategies might help you cope.
5. If possible, develop a network of people to turn to for emotional and logistical support to help manage the inevitable training and competition demands you will encounter.
6. Talk to your child. The more you know about their sporting journey, the easier it will be for you to play an active and positive part in it.
7. Develop simple coping strategies such as positive self-talk, breathing techniques, and listening to music to help you better manage the various emotions that arise at competitions.
8. Keep sport in perspective. Remember that there is much more to your child's, and your, life than sport participation. Such perspective can help to reduce the emotional investment and subsequent impact of your child's sport on your family life.



9. Focus on your child's individual sporting journey and their needs, rather than comparing to others. Every child's sporting experience is unique. Rather than trying to do what other parents do, do what is right for your child and you.
10. Have fun! If you are able to enjoy being part of your child's sporting experience, they are more likely to enjoy it too. There will be ups and downs but focusing on the positives and the benefits your child is gaining will make it all seem worthwhile.



11. RESOURCES AND ORGANISATIONS

There are an abundance of organisations and websites providing a range of information for parents with children involved in sport. In fact, there are so many different sources of information available that it can sometimes be hard to know which contain the right or best information. Below are some of the websites and sources that contain some useful information:

Useful Organisations and Websites:

- Active for Life: activeforlife.ca
- Changing the game project: changingthegameproject.com/about
- Child Protection in Sport Unit: thecpsu.org.uk
- Coaching UK: ukcoaching.org
- Good Sports NZ: aktive.org.nz/Aktive-Lab/Good-Sports
- icoachkids: icoachkids.eu
- Inner Drive: innerdrive.co.uk
- Nutrition for Athletes - International Olympic Committee: tinyurl.com/ya5dqt5
- PYD Sport Net: positivesport.ca
- Sports Nutrition: Australian Institute of Sport: ausport.gov.au/ais/sports_nutrition
- The 5Cs programme: the5Cs.co.uk
- The World Anti-Doping Agency: wada-ama.org
- True Sport: learn.truesport.org

Further information, guidance, and links to resources can be found at www.sportparent.eu and by following @sportparentEU on twitter.

