

A Parent's Goals for Their Child In Sports



You want the best for your children. You want to see them prosper and grow into successful, happy adults. But I know from extensive personal observation of sporting events that many parents do the near opposite of what will help their children perform well in sports and grow to be successful adults. What happens?

The Big Picture and Youth Sports Myopia

Parents give huge symbolic meaning to a simple physical act performed by a child. They often subconsciously confuse how well their child performs in sports with the following issues:

- How successful she will be in life (“My child scored the winning goal. It’s clear she is going to be a great doctor – or attorney, teacher, police officer, etc.”)
- How good they are as parents (“That’s my boy who made the big save to win the game. I’m his dad and the reason he’s a good goalie is because I’ve done such a good job of parenting him.”)
- Their own personal worth (“My kid lost two face-offs in the fourth quarter. What’s wrong with me? Nobody else’s kid did anything like that!”)

Perhaps you are able to chuckle with me at these examples of subconscious parental “self-talk” and recognize its absurdity. Or maybe not, because the intensity and immediacy of the youth sports experience can cast a powerful spell on parents. We get so little validation for doing a good job that we grasp at whatever straws are available – for example, school grades or success in sports – and endow them with symbolic meaning far beyond what they actually mean.

The harsh reality of having our child’s performance (and, it seems, our parenting skills!) exposed for the world to see makes it harder to remember what’s really important – what the Big Picture is. Whether my child makes the big play is the Little Picture. There is virtually no value beyond the moment, except for my ego, if my child comes through in the clutch with a big goal or a game-saving ground ball. It’s what I call “Youth Sports Myopia” that makes me think it’s a portent of what’s to come for my child.

The Big Picture in lacrosse is what my child learns from the experience that she can take with her as she matures, to help her be successful on the field that really matters – the field of life. But the desire to win can become so potent, so drug-like, that it overpowers everything else. The only thing that seems to matter is winning *this* game, *right now*. That’s the Little Picture, but Youth Sports Myopia makes it a very seductive picture.

The Second-Goal Parent

We begin our PCA Sports Parent workshop by asking parents to talk about their goals for their children in youth sports. Among the goals we ask them to choose from are – having fun, promoting life-long health, making friends, winning, learning to bounce back from defeat, increasing self-confidence, and earning a college scholarship. Before reading further, put in order from that list the most important things you want your child to achieve from playing lacrosse.

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We find in our workshops that many parents resonate with the idea of learning how to deal with defeat as essential to success in life. And it's always interesting to me that so few parents mention winning as a high priority, which makes sense if you think about it. How can you learn to bounce back from defeat if you always win?

But what so often happens when parents get to a youth lacrosse game? Frequently the great benefits of youth sports go out the window with one exception: winning! It's as if parents are saying, "I want my child to learn to deal with defeat but *not today! Not this game!* Let him learn to deal with defeat *another day!*"

We ask coaches to be Double-Goal – that is, concerned with trying to win and with using the sports experience to teach life-lessons – shouldn't a (noncoaching) parent be the same? Actually, no.

It's okay for parents to want their children to do well and for their team to win. Parents often have all kinds of ideas about how to help their children perform better—some pretty good, many not so good.

A parent's primary goal, however, should be the Second Goal: to help the child process the sports experience so that he or she is a stronger, more responsible and confident person who will be successful in life. I have seen many relationships between parents and children strained almost to the breaking point because the parents are obsessed with giving advice to their children. And what is the advice about? It's usually about how to perform better, about how to win games.

It is the responsibility of the players and coaches to try to win. It is not yours as a parent. You have a much more important responsibility: making sure your children draw from the sports experience the lessons that will help them become successful, contributing adults. Although this is not easy, given the seductive nature of the Little Picture, it can make all the difference in your children's lives if you learn to do it well.

A win-at-all-cost parent might look on his child missing a shot on goal at the end of the game as a tragedy. But as a Second-Goal Parent, you see the silver lining. This is an opportunity to encourage your child to develop resilience. Failure on the lacrosse field becomes a teachable moment for life lessons *if* you play your crucial role: the role of the Second-Goal Parent.

This was adapted from PCA Director Jim Thompson's Book: The Double-Goal Coach.