

# Sporting a good attitude- an olympian effort

✖ My kids and I cheered as we watched the Olympic swim races together on TV. Having just finished their first summer swim team season, they were especially interested in these events. While we joked about how much faster Olympian swim times were than their own, we also noted that “just like on swim team” at the end of the races, the Olympians shook hands with the swimmers in the adjacent lanes. It got me thinking about sportsmanship.

The adage says, “It’s not whether you win or lose, it’s how you play the game.” But our society puts such heavy emphasis on winning, coming in first, being the best (and thus beating out others) that kids can feel extreme pressure to win. Parents should resist adding to that pressure.

We, as parents, have to accept that our kids can’t always come in first, get the perfect score, or win everything they do. From an early stage, we need to praise our children’s effort, and also teach them to appreciate other kids’ efforts, skills, and accomplishments. We can say to our kids, “Wow, Bobby sure is a fast runner. I bet if you practiced running (or hitting, or catching, or kicking) you could get better too. I’ll help you if you want.” Teach your child that if she wants to improve a skill or test grade, she will have to work at it. Friendly competition that inspires us is a good thing. Kids cheat when they feel too much pressure to win, and fail to understand that there are no “quick fixes.”

When parents (and coaches) fail to model good sportsmanship, kids blame their pitcher when the other team hits, blame their goalie for letting up scores, blame their parents for not buying the most expensive equipment

that would have enhanced their performance. At one of my kid's games, I saw a young athlete punch a child on the winning team during the end-of-game "high five/good game" ritual because he was so angry that his own team lost the game.

Unfortunately, some teen athletes convince themselves that "because everyone does it," it's okay to cheat by taking steroids to enhance their performance. Students without a diagnosis of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder cheat by taking their friends' ADHD medications so they can concentrate longer when studying for exams or completing homework. Even Olympic athletes cheat. Discuss with your children why [eight badminton players were disqualified](#) when they attempted to throw their games in order to get a "better" placement in the tournament. Because they cheated, they were given NO place in the tournament.

The 2012 Olympics is a perfect opportunity for parents to point out examples of good sportsmanship to their children. Even the Olympic athletes who cry from disappointment express support for their teammates and gratitude at the opportunity to compete at such a high level. So as we cheer for our own country or for our favorite athletes, let's also teach our kids to cheer the athletes' sportsmanship and performance.

Kids should learn to work hard, study hard, do their best all of the time. We hope that as adults they will value themselves and others for having good work ethics and improving their skills. Of course we should teach our kids to "go for the gold." But we also need to be clear that we still love them even if they never claim a medal.

For tips on fostering sportsmanship in kids, see this post from the Nemours Children's Health System.

Julie Kardos, MD and Naline Lai, MD

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