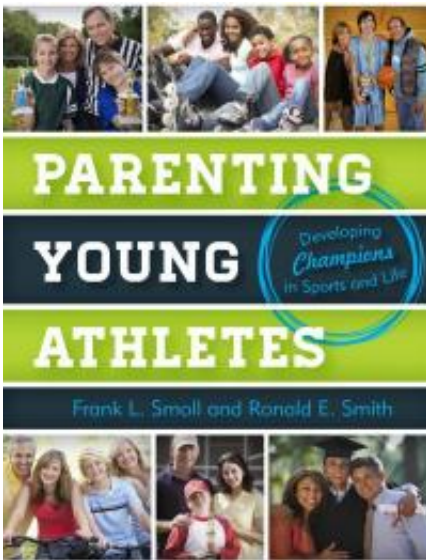


'A-game' strategies for parents, coaches in youth sports

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This is the book cover for "Parenting Young Athletes," by Frank Smoll and Ron Smith, psychology professors at the University of Washington. Credit: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group Inc.

Parents typically are the biggest headaches for coaches in youth sports. These well-meaning adults may berate their child's performance, criticize sport-officials' decisions or yell instructions that contradict the coach. Or maybe the problem is that the parent is uninvolved and only sees sports as a babysitting service.

"Unknowing" [parents](#) – as Frank Smoll, a University of Washington

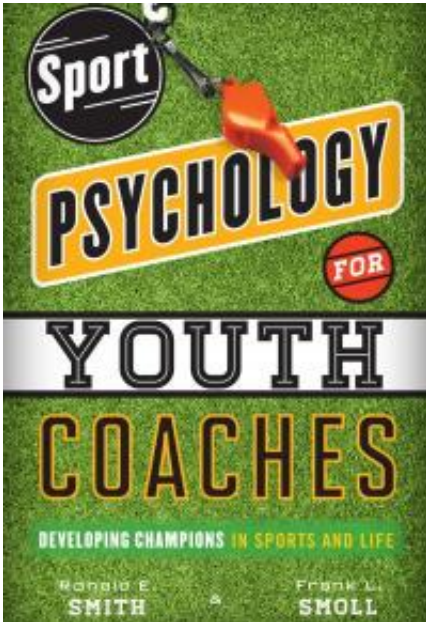
sport psychologist, calls them – can foul up the experience for [young athletes](#). "But just because they're unaware, doesn't mean that they have to be a problem," he said.

In two new books, Smoll and Ron Smith, both UW psychology professors, share strategies to help parents and coaches work together to help kids get more out of sports. In "Parenting Young Athletes" and "Sport Psychology for Youth Coaches," the psychologists sum up what they've learned from nearly four decades of research and about 500 training workshops for 26,000 youth-sport coaches. They've been youth coaches themselves, too.

"When we work with coaches, they always ask about what they can do to get parents on the same page," Smith said. "We find that good coaching skills are similar to good [parenting skills](#) in that, when done well, kids are happier, less anxious and have better self-esteem."

In their books, Smoll and Smith describe their coaching method called the Mastery Approach to Coaching, which emphasizes giving maximum effort and improving skills. They say it's the only educational program for youth-sport coaches that's been scientifically shown to decrease kids' competitive anxiety and increase their self-esteem and enjoyment of sports.

In "Sport Psychology for Youth Coaches," the psychologists focus on techniques for providing [positive reinforcement](#) as the best way to benefit both youngsters' athletic as well as personal development.



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"If an athlete makes a mistake, give encouragement and demonstrate how to make it right," Smith said. "What doesn't work is promoting the mentality of winning at all costs."

He added that "winning takes care of itself when you create kids who feel good about themselves, gain more skills, are engaged in the activity because they're having fun, and aren't shackled by fear of failure."

Smith and Smoll give tips to coaches on how to deal with "problem" parents and athletes, and the authors also provide an overview of coaches' legal responsibilities.

"Parenting Young Athletes" is directed at all parents, regardless of athletic experience, and offers advice on how to be productively

involved in their child's sport activities.

"We emphasize to parents that the coach is in charge, and they can't undermine the coach's leadership authority," Smoll said. "But parents have a responsibility to oversee their children's welfare, and we give suggestions on how they can do that."

Their recommendations to parents include finding out what time and cost responsibilities the parents take on when enrolling their child in a sport. The psychologists also advise parents on issues related to sports medicine, including how to take care of injuries, recommending water for rehydration, and suggesting other food needs for athletes.

Smoll encourages parents to volunteer to coach their kids' teams – even those who may be unsure about doing so.

"Sport programs are always looking for more head and assistant coaches. Parents don't need to have been superstar athletes, they should just be motivated to provide growth-promoting experiences for the kids."

In the end, sports aren't just a way to keep kids busy and entertained, Smoll and Smith say, but rather they provide a training ground for other life skills, like bouncing back after setbacks and cooperating with peers.

Mental toughness, or ability to perform under pressure, is one of the most valued qualities in athletes. In both books, Smoll and Smith provide tips on how to help kids learn to be mentally tough through a combination of stress management, coping with the fear of failure and developing "winning" attitudes.

More information: The books were published Sept. 15 by Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group Inc. and are based on research funded by the National Institutes of Health and the William T. Grant Foundation.

Provided by University of Washington

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