

Are youth sports about the kids or the parents?

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Professor Lindsey Meân of ASU's New College finds time in her busy schedule to coach youth soccer. She is pictured working with a team of 10-year-olds.

The saying "Do as I say, not as I do" might be applied to some parents at youth sporting events.

Research conducted by Arizona State University professors Lindsey Meân and Jeff Kassing examined [communication](#) behaviors among spectators at games of children between the ages of 6 and 11, playing

various sports. Their analysis, published in *International Journal of Sport Communication*, revealed a climate often characterized by a winning at all costs attitude and overly aggressive competition. The researchers concluded that communication at youth athletic events was more about the parents' identity than the children.

Does this mean you shouldn't involve your child in youth sports? Not at all, say Meân and Kassing, both of whom participate as youth sports coaches.

"Positive sport experiences encourage the development of a strong sense of achievement, identity, control, skill development, self-esteem and build the foundations of long-term physical health alongside the current and ongoing health benefits," Meân said.

"If a sport is coached well, it should also teach children about how to manage healthy competition, to win and lose, and manage both of these experiences effectively," she said. "Learning to develop and establish skills, motivate yourself and others, and play your role and help others achieve theirs are important. But how these are coached should reflect the age and developmental stage of the children who are not just learning a sport, but learning how to be coached."

Bad coaching, on the other hand, can not only fail to teach these valuable skills. It also can have negative physical and/or psychological consequences.

"Burnout and dropout from youth sport are becoming increasingly common, notably at 'elite' or highly competitive levels," Meân said.

"Research continues to show that lack of fun is one of the key components youth athletes use to account for this."

Meân pointed out that youth sport is more of an "industry" than it was in

the past. Arguably, she said, moving sports organizations out of schools has pushed this professionalization as parents now pay for their children's sport participation and training, and there is a competitive market for youth sport participation.

But is that what the kids want?

"The enjoyment for kids playing sports is often in the social aspect of being among their friends," Kassing said. "It is certainly not necessarily about winning."

Unfortunately, the simple pleasure of participating is often not at the top of parents' agendas. "I think there is an increasing tendency for parents to think about college sports scholarships when their kids are far too young and when the likelihood of this is actually happening is very small," Meân said.

Perhaps it is this vision of a child landing an athletic scholarship or pro contract that leads to some of the spectator communication behaviors Meân and Kassing documented in their study. They observed "shake-it-off" comments when a child was seriously hurt, along with messages instructing kids to be overly aggressive and linking sports with war and work. Use of inappropriate or offensive language was common at some games.

"Such behavior creates a climate in [youth sports](#) that makes it much more competitive than it needs to be," Kassing said. "Essentially, sporting practices are downloaded from professional and collegiate expectations to little league."

The researchers also documented examples of parents' [communication behaviors](#) that treated a child's lack of success on the field as if it were misbehavior. "Research suggests that kids would rather participate than

win, because playing sport is fun," Meân said. "It can be fun even if you lose, and learning to lose is important. But the adults need to let losing be okay. If the coach manages the loss and the lessons to be learned from it appropriately, kids can learn more about being effective in their sport, as well as in life generally, from losing."

Some youth sport leagues have implemented training programs to teach more effective and appropriate communication practices. These programs often involve having parents sign a pledge, with the implication that they could be excluded from games for misbehavior.

Even though he has a heightened awareness of this issue, Kassing said it can be challenging for parents and coaches to model positive behaviors. "What I find interesting is how easy it is to fall into the exact traps we have recognized in our research, like being upset with referees or wishing your children played better," he said. "Knowing better does not necessarily keep you from acting out at youth sporting events."

Given the influence coaches can have in setting the tone for a team's behavior, Meân and Kassing recommend taking care in choosing a team and coach.

"I am concerned about the ways in which I see and hear children being coached by some clubs and coaches," Meân said. "Young children have no sense of what is acceptable and unacceptable action on the field beyond what their coaches teach them. Coaches are the people who teach them what is too aggressive, what is legal or illegal in a game."

If you have done your homework and found an appropriate team and coach for your child, Meân and Kassing have some tips for making the game experience enjoyable for everyone. They include making only supportive and encouraging comments; keeping the focus on the kids, not the [parents](#), coaches or referees; keeping in mind that winning should

be secondary to skill development and enjoyment; and doing fun things like bringing after-game snacks, organizing parent cheers and doing the wave.

Meân and Kassing are faculty members in ASU's New College of Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences, the core college on the West campus. Both teach classes for New College's bachelor of arts and bachelor of science degrees in communication, as well as the master of arts in communication studies (MACS) degree. Meân serves as director of the MACS program, while Kassing is director of New College's School of Social and Behavioral Sciences.

Provided by Arizona State University

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