



## A Guide for NNYYSL Parents

NNYYSL takes pride in encouraging and fostering a positive playing environment for all players. We all recognize that soccer is a very passionate game - for players and fans. But when it comes to youth soccer, the soccer pitch can bring out some of the worst instincts that we have. We all want our sons and daughters to play, to play hard, to play well, and have fun. So with the soccer season underway, here is a primer, a reminder, of little things that we can do on the sidelines to make the soccer season more pleasant for all concerned - most importantly, **for the kids**.

### 15 things to keep in mind while watching from the sidelines this season

1. **Let the coaches' coach.** If you are telling your son or daughter - or any other player for that matter - to do something different from what their coach is telling them, you create distraction and confusion.
2. It is very unnerving for many young players to try and perform difficult tasks on the field on the spur of the moment when parents are yelling at them from the sidelines. **Let the kids play.** If they have been well coached, they should know what to do on the field. If they make a mistake, chances are they will learn from it.
3. Do not discuss the play of specific young players in front of other parents. How many times do you hear comments such as, "I don't know how that boy made this team...." or "she's just not fast enough..." Too many parents act as though their child is a 'star', and the problem is someone else's kid. Negative comments and attitudes are hurtful and totally unnecessary and kill parent harmony, which is often essential to youth team success.
4. Discourage such toxic behavior by listening patiently to any negative comments that might be made, then address issues in a positive way. Speak to the positive qualities of a player, family or coach.
5. Do your level best not to complain about your son or daughter's coaches to other parents. Once that starts, it is like a disease that spreads. Before you know it, parents are talking constantly in a negative way behind a coach's back. (As an aside, if you have what you truly feel is a legitimate beef with your child's coach - either regarding game strategy or playing time, arrange an appointment to meet privately, away from a soccer field.)
6. Make positive comments from the sideline. Be encouraging. Young athletes do not need to be reminded constantly about their perceived errors or mistakes. Their coaches will instruct them, either during the game or at half-time, and during practices. You can often see a young player

make that extra effort when they hear encouraging words from the sideline about their hustle.

7. Avoid making any negative comments about players on the other team. This should be simple: we are talking about youngsters, not adults who are being paid to play professionally. I recall being at a rep baseball game some years ago, when a parent on one team loudly made comments about errors made by a particular young player on the other team. People on the other side of the diamond were stunned - and angry. Besides being tasteless and classless, these kinds of comments can be hurtful to the young person involved and to their family as well.

8. Try to keep interaction with parents on the other team as healthy and positive as possible. Who's kidding whom? You want your child's team to win. So do they. But that should not make us take leave of our senses, especially our common sense. Be courteous 'till it hurts; avoid the 'tit for tat' syndrome.

9. Parents on the 'other' team are not the enemy. Neither are the boys or girls on the other team. We should work to check any negative feelings at the door before we hit the pitch.

10. What is the easiest thing to do in the youth sports world? Criticize the referees. Oh, there are times when calls are missed, absolutely. And that can, unfortunately, directly affect the outcome of a contest. That said, by and large those who officiate at youth soccer games are hardly over-compensated, and give it an honest - and often quite competent - effort. At worst, they at least try to be fair and objective.

11. On that note, outbursts from parents on the sideline made toward the referees only signal to our on children on the field that they can blame the refs for anything that goes wrong. Blaming others is not a formula for success in sports.

12. Yelling out comments such as "Good call, ref" or "Thanks ref" may only serve to alienate an official. The ref always assumes they made the proper call, that's why they made it. Trying to show superficial support because the call went 'your' way is simply annoying to the officials, and to anyone within earshot.

13. Walking up and down all game long along the sidelines, following the play, is unnerving to players and totally unnecessary - particularly so if you are trying to yell out instructions to various players, including your own son or daughter. It is likely embarrassing to the player/players involved and simply counterproductive. If you want to coach, obtain your coaching certification and then apply for a job.

14. We all feel things and are apt to be tempted to say things in the 'heat of the moment'. But we don't excuse athletes for doing inappropriate things in the 'heat of the moment' (there are penalties, suspensions, etc.) so we should apply similar standards to our own sideline behaviour. Quickly check yourself and ask: Will I be proud of what I am about to say or do when I reflect on it tomorrow?

15. The parking lot is not the time to 'fan the flames'. Whether it is a coach's decision, a referee's call, a comment that was made, let it go. Don't harass the coach, or an official, or a parent on the

other team after the game is over. Go home, relax, and unwind. Talk positively with your child. The ride home is sometimes as important as the game itself. Make that time a good memory for your son or daughter by discussing as many positives as you can about him/her, her coach, her teammates, etc.

## **The 8 Winning Practices for Parenting Athletes**

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As a parent you have the most powerful and long-lasting influence on your child. As you understand and apply the following eight concepts, you support your child's sports and lifelong success. They are called "winning practices" for a reason. Athletes must first understand a key concept or technique. Then they must implement it and continue to practice it until the skill becomes second nature. So it is with these eight winning practices for parenting your athlete.

Winning Practice 1: Support your athlete emotionally. Emotional support is the bedrock for developing a child's self-acceptance and self-assurance – critical traits for long-term sports and life success. Children are naturally sensitive to the emotions and feelings of their parents (and coaches). They are adept at "reading" emotional undertones, not to mention more obvious body language. Make sure your child never feels they must earn your approval or love on the athletic field. Parents who lose control or push hard create too much pressure. This contributes to unhappiness and poorer performance. Michele Uhlfelder, one of the best female lacrosse players in the world and currently coach at Stanford, says having a pushy parent stacks the cards against an athlete. Coaches don't want to have to deal with difficult situations so a talented young athlete can get turned away for this reason alone. Pressure exists naturally in competition. While it's fair to expect your child athlete to put out their best effort, it's your job to relax the pressure.

Winning Practice 2: Allow your athlete to guide the sports experience. It's a great idea to expose your athlete to champions in their sport and point out what's possible. Children rely on parents and coaches to expand their vision. However, a child knows when a parent takes over their goals and claims the victories and losses as their own. If you care more than your athlete does, helpful encouragement will turn into detrimental pushing in a heartbeat. Let your child lead the way by their words and their actions. This will reveal their commitment. Have you asked your child what her sports goals are? Invest your time and energy equal to, but no greater than, the interest and effort that your child demonstrates. Keep in mind this comment in "U.S. News & World Report" (6/7/04): "Fewer than 5 percent of children can be called elite athletes." Of course, even less go on to play at collegiate or professional levels.

Winning Practice 3: Champion your athlete. Knowing how to champion your athlete will do more to ignite and sustain your child's enthusiasm and persistence, especially through the tough periods, than anything else. It's a natural human tendency to focus on and express what's wrong rather than what's right. We do it to ourselves when we self-criticize, or when we zero in on everything we didn't get done rather than what we accomplished. Championing skills go beyond mere compliments and typical praise. You can champion actions, progress, dreams, traits, commitments, gifts, and qualities. To champion most powerfully, speak to a deeper level. Become more aware of and acknowledge the qualities and character traits that your child demonstrates. These qualities might include persistence and determination, focus, resilience, team spirit, or honesty, to name just a few. Whether or not your youngster wins a particular competitive event, nurturing these kinds of qualities in your child will make a lifelong difference.

Winning Practice 4: Respect your child's individuality. It never works to compare your child with another. Each child has unique strengths, limitations, temperament, and natural abilities. For example, the ideal temperament for ice skating would be different than for football or soccer. Also, some kids are more naturally competitive than others. Children mature physically and emotionally at different times so expectations need to be adjusted accordingly. Some coaches say parents are often surprised that kids who mature early physically do not always outshine the late bloomers, who had to work harder at their sport.

Winning Practice 5: Teach and model the bigger picture continually. Participation in sports is potentially an amazing vehicle for growing character, honing key life skills, and teaching important life lessons. But it's only a potentiality, not a certainty. Sports can also pervert character and impair long-term well being and lifelong success. What do you want your athlete to learn through participating their sport? What core qualities and sense of ethics do you want her to develop? Being crystal clear about all of this and weaving these topics into conversations with your child – as well as demonstrating them yourself – will provide a strong foundation for your child's future. Many athletes over-train and cause themselves extremes of fatigue, strain, and pain. We hear of athletes, often teenagers, on steroids or struggling with eating disorders. In the bigger picture, over the span of a precious lifetime, what will it cost these athletes? As adults we hopefully have a broader life perspective, a wiser patience. You can help your child athlete understand that in sports, as in life, any particular loss, or victory for that matter, is small and relatively insignificant. Even seemingly devastating slumps can be put into a healthy perspective.

Winning Practice 6: Focus on mastery and enjoyment rather than winning. Whether it's sports or a business situation, it is best to focus 100 percent where you have the full control. Winning the game or tournament can be an inspirational end goal, but it is not the ideal focus! There are many elements not under an athlete's control. An athlete needs to focus on what he has control over -- his development process, skill mastery, and attitude. In doing this, tension decreases and the increased relaxation and enjoyment will boost performance. Notice what thoughts are upper most in your mind. As a parent you can model focusing on mastery and enjoyment. Simply help your child stay focused on the process rather than the outcome. Be interested in what's she's learning about herself and what skills she's developing. Find out what he enjoys about his sport. This is a key concept for coaches, as well as parents, to understand and implement.

Winning Practice 7: Honor your family unit. Sports might involve a sizeable chunk of your family's time, especially if you have more than one child participating or you are involved in multiple sports. No doubt it's a challenge, yet find a way to commit to some family time that focuses on other interests. Let your child and yourself have regular unstructured, unscheduled time. The mother of world champion tennis pros Venus and Serena Williams says they never talk tennis away from practice and matches. Could this be at least a part of the secret to their amazing success? It's easy to spread your child and yourself too thin by signing up for lots of extracurricular activities. There's no set rule here except to know your child's natural energy level, capacity, and level of desire. Be on the alert for any signs of burnout, fatigue, or stress. At the early signs, have a talk and make a change.

Winning Practice 8: Build supportive relationships with your sports family (coaches, refs, administrators, other parents, and child's sport mates). You're all in this together, bonded by common goals. Mutual respect and support pays big dividends. With this in mind it's possible to communicate concerns to coaches and other sports officials in a respectful, thoughtful manner. Some ways to be a positive influence include letting the coach do the coaching and addressing any concerns with administrators, coaches, or others privately. You can model upbeat behaviors such as cheering for the good efforts of all team members and refraining from spreading negativity. Instead, go directly to the source of any problem or upset and seek to resolve it in a respectful manner. If another parent is talking or acting negatively, don't feed it any energy – starve it. Steer the conversation in another direction, or simply move away. Keep your conversation continually focused on the positive. The more harmonious the relationships in your extended sports family, the more “happy success” is made possible.