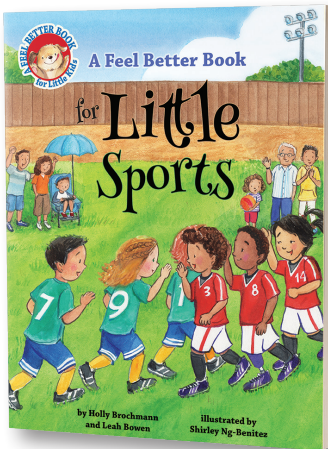




Winning Strategies for Little Athletes



Many parents introduce their children to competitive sports at an early age, as they offer physical benefits and can teach children important lessons in teamwork, sportsmanship, and more. But while sports are mostly intended for fun among kids so young, these competitions can also produce some BIG emotions when things do not go their way.

***A Feel Better Book for Little Sports* by Leah Bowman and Holly Brochmann** helps kids navigate their first years of competitive sports by addressing all the great aspects of playing, while also offering tips on how to manage the not so fun side of sports.

Here's an excerpt from the Reader's Note.

- **Sports are terrific in so many ways.** Whether a child has attended a sibling's sporting events or simply experienced their family watching a favorite team play on TV, they learn very early on that sports equal excitement. Children also quickly figure out that winning is "good" and losing is "bad." But with a little guidance, kids can discover that there's so much more to sports than winning and losing.
- **Your brain gets a boost from all that moving.** Adults know that physical activity can help improve your mood, but let your child know that, too! Sports are a great way to teach them about endorphins and how movement can help lower stress, enhance clear thinking, improve confidence, and even help you sleep better.
- **You can still be tough at the same time!** It's also important to teach children that feelings and behaviors are not mutually exclusive. Showing grace and kindness (helping a person from the other team up from the ground) does not mean that you are not a tough or competitive player. You can be both! A good way to teach this is to demonstrate through example. Cheer on your child's team and talk through the strategy and methods for winning the game. But also model friendly, supportive behaviors toward the opposing team.

- **It's okay to be proud of what you've done.** Winning is fun and it feels good. It's ok to celebrate! Just teach your child to celebrate respectfully. There's a big difference between saying, "We won!" and "You lost!"
- **But what happens when things don't go your way?** Losing or not performing your best is inevitable. This is especially tough for really young kids whose caregivers have been working to boost their confidence. Competitive sports often give children their first experience with loss, and tempers can happen as a result of those feelings of frustration and disappointment. You do not need to discount those feelings—it IS disappointing when you lose! Sometimes the best thing you can do is acknowledge your child's feelings and just show that you get it.
- **Above all BE A GOOD SPORT!** Unsportsmanlike conduct happens at all levels of sports, and kids will witness this. But they'll also see acts of kindness—an NFL player helping a player from the opposing team to his feet after a tackle, the second-place gymnast hugging and congratulating the gymnast who comes in first. Point these out and offer examples of how your child can exhibit this behavior in their own competitions, then commend them when they do.

It's most important to remember that your attitude will influence your child's attitude about the game. Whether your child wins or loses, acknowledge the effort that was made. Your job at this stage in a child's development is to foster a love of sports, encourage respectful play, and reinforce the feeling of accomplishment. It is not necessary to offer critical analysis of what they did wrong. Chances are they already know it. Well-intentioned parents have found themselves putting too much pressure on their children. Especially at the beginning ages for sports, encouraging effort, boosting self-esteem, and exercising the body and the mind are what is important.

This Article's Author

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