



The Youth Hockey Experience

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Why do our kids participate in youth hockey? What are our goals and objectives for our children's participation? Is the current state of the youth hockey experience creating the ideal environment for our children so that these goals and objectives can be realized? These are the questions I ask myself in order to make a realistic assessment of the state of the youth hockey game and identify where there is room for improvement. I hope to bring a unique perspective on the current state of the game based on my experiences as a player, coach, and parent. So much can be gained through the youth hockey experience. I believe the experience offers an opportunity for our children to have fun, to develop as people, and to develop as players. It is our responsibility as adults to ensure that our kids are given every opportunity to reap the rewards that the youth hockey experience has to offer.

It is important that our kids have fun when participating in youth hockey. Fun is a vital part of the process. If our kids are having fun they will want to continue to play. They will want to come to the rink. They will be passionately engaged in the process. Passionate engagement is the foundation for all development. It is difficult for anyone to fulfill their optimal potential in any endeavor in the absence of passionate engagement.

We are all at our best when we love what we are doing. Hockey is no different. Coaches have a unique opportunity to create an environment that is fun and filled with excitement. The greatest gift we can give our players is to fuel the passion for the game. We have to get kids excited to play hockey. If our kids are having fun and enjoying the youth hockey experience, they will develop a life long love for the game. Badger Bob Johnson, one of the greatest hockey coaches this country has seen, inspired many players to reach their optimal potential. He is responsible for one of my favorite quotes:

"It's a great day for Hockey!"

The youth sports experience provides a tremendous opportunity for kids to develop certain life skills that will serve them well in their adult lives. Kids have the opportunity to learn how to work together as part of a team. They have a chance to develop decision making skills. They will have an opportunity to learn how to win with humility. Youth hockey will offer them an opportunity to learn how to deal with adversity because the game doesn't always go the way we want it to go. Most importantly, the youth hockey

experience will give our kids a chance to discover themselves and develop self esteem, a character trait so necessary to success and fulfillment. Coaches have a tremendous opportunity to influence and shape the character of our kids. This is an awesome responsibility that should not be taken lightly. We should be trying to develop people first and players second.

Finally, the youth hockey experience should provide an opportunity for players to develop their hockey skills that will give them a chance to enjoy the game and advance to various levels based on their ability. Coaches should try to create an environment that allows players the opportunity to learn and discover the game. We should allow the game to become the teacher. We should be cautious of trying to win at all costs. The biggest pitfall that I have witnessed at the youth hockey level is something I call the "Safe Hockey" phenomenon. What is "Safe Hockey?" "Safe Hockey" is a certain way the game is being played that allows teams at the youth levels a better chance to win. It is a game of territory. It's when coaches discourage players to make hockey plays for fear of losing the puck and potentially getting scored against. Coaches will encourage players to dump the puck in the offensive zone as opposed to trying to make a play on the initial rush. Get it Out! Get it Deep! Those are the phrases that are indicative of the "Safe Hockey" phenomenon.

I believe it is the biggest inhibitor of development that exists in youth hockey. We have to allow kids the opportunity to try to make plays. We have to allow the game to become the teacher. They will learn through the playing experience how to make proper decisions with and without the puck. I ask myself the question, "What would the player do if he/she were playing on the pond away from the watchful eye of coaches and parents?" I know that coaches are well intentioned when trying to teach the game of hockey to kids. I believe we have to be conscious of the "Safe Hockey" phenomenon and try to allow the kids every opportunity to develop the necessary puck skills that will give them a chance to succeed at the higher levels.

Why do our kids participate in youth hockey? I believe there are two main objectives, fun and development, development of the person and the player. Coaches are responsible for creating the environment that is conducive to fun and development. If we all make a conscious effort to creating the optimal environment for participation, the youth hockey experience will be most fulfilling for those involved. Remember Badger Bob, "It's a great day for hockey!" See you at the rink!