

Parents should be part of the fun, not the biggest problem in youth sports

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Parents should be part of the fun, not the biggest problem in youth sports, say sport psychologists

It happens every spring. Tens of millions of American boys and girls turn out for organized youth sports. Tagging along behind them are their parents, many of whom don't understand their roles and responsibilities as the parents of young athletes.

Parents should be part of the fun, not the No. 1 problem in youth sports, say University of Washington sport psychologists Frank Smoll and Ronald Smith, who have written a new book "Sports and Your Child: A 50-Minute Guide for Parents."

"We want to shepherd parents through the minefield that sports can be," explains Smith. "Our book points out many of the landmines, and we know it is a lot easier to avoid them than it is to correct problems after they appear. What we have put together is a survival guide for parents and their young athletes."

"We want to have parents involved in youth sports, but they need to understand their role," adds Smoll. "Both parents and coaches send powerful messages to a child and those messages shouldn't be in conflict. All the good work of a skilled coach during the week can be undone in five minutes by an ununiformed parent."

"Sports and Your Child" is a practical guide based on the authors' 25 years of experience in youth sports coaching and parent education. It covers a myriad of situations, problems and questions parents may have about youth sports including:

- * the difference between developmental and professional models of sports
- * parental roles and responsibilities
- * why children play sports
- * combating athletic stress
- * sports and self-esteem
- * dealing with winning and losing
- * why children drop out of sports

- * getting along with your child's coach
- * coaching your own child
- * how to behave at sports events
- * dealing with sports injuries
- * enhancing family life and marital relationships
- * dealing with steroids and other performance-enhancing drugs.

The UW psychologists acknowledge that they wouldn't have imagined 20 years ago that eating disorders and steroid use among 10- and 11-year-olds would be problems. But they have emerged as serious concerns.

"Such things as creatine (a supplement used by baseball slugger Mark McGuire, among others) and steroid use are nothing new," says Smoll. "But today's high school athletes are using them regularly, and some parents are even encouraging use of these substances so their kids can get college scholarships."

"Sports can provide marvelous developmental experiences if they are handled correctly, with the parent and coach coming together for the benefit of the child," says Smith. "Children can learn a lot of positive lessons through athletics, and sports can build a bond between parents and their son or daughter. But, unfortunately, there are too many cases similar to the business executive quoted in our book who told us, 'If it hadn't been for sports, I wouldn't have grown up hating my father.'"