



Tools of the Trade  
for family improvement

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# THE COMPETITIVE EDGE

As a licensed professional counselor, wife and mother of three school aged children, I certainly see the difficulties that families are faced with in today's fast paced world. Be sure that whatever you are struggling with, you are likely not alone. We all hit bumps in the road and could use a little help and support from time to time. Check in with me each issue as I offer you some "Tools of the Trade" to help you better manage and enjoy your life and your family.

**Sports play a huge role in our society.** Twenty million kids register each year for youth hockey, football, baseball, soccer, and other competitive sports. The National Alliance for Sports reports that 70 percent of these kids quit playing these league sports by age 13 -- and never play them again.

According to Michael Pfahl, Executive Director of the National Youth Sports Coaches Association, "The number one reason (why they quit) is that it stopped being fun." With figures like these, it's time we rethink how we present youth sports to kids.

As a starting point, parents and coaches need to be aware of what kids can accomplish at their differing developmental levels -- physically, intellectually, emotionally, and socially. Don't hold unrealistic expectations concerning your child's sports performance.

### Preschool

Focus on the element of play in any sports activity you introduce to very young kids. Make it fun! Don't burden them or concern them with competition, keeping score, and rules. Get them running, kicking, throwing, catching ... and laughing. Use equipment that suits their bodies and coordination levels (toss a beanbag instead of a ball). Adapt games according to their abilities. Always offer encouraging words for all their efforts.

### Elementary School

Sports psychology expert Rick Wolff, author of *Good Sports*, stresses that parents of kids ages 5-12 need not be concerned with their child's excellence at such refined sports skills as corner kicks and drag bunts. "Those are unimportant," Wolff advises. "The key here is having your child develop a sense of passion for

the sport."

### Middle School

Kids start dropping out in big numbers at this stage. Playing sports loses its enjoyment for them and "fun" takes a back seat to winning. Pick-up games and just "playing for fun" should be encouraged. The key at this vulnerable stage is to keep them playing the sports they enjoy -- if not on school or youth teams, then informally with friends. Not being on a team does not mean they have failed as athletes. It just means that they have to find other pleasurable ways to continue enjoying their sports.

Some kids just haven't found the right sport yet. A child that doesn't have the eye hand coordination for baseball may have the drive and build to be a swimmer, cyclist or runner. The idea of an individual sport can also be more appealing to some kids that like to go it alone. Be open to your child's interest in varied sports or activities. (This can be especially tough, especially if a parent loves basketball and wants to continue the family legacy.)

A child might also be afraid of getting hurt or not being able to keep up. A child who is much bigger or smaller than other kids his age may feel self-conscious and uncomfortable competing with them.

Try to address your child's concerns by being understanding and providing a supportive environment; you'll help foster success in whatever activity your child chooses. Even kids who once said they hated sports might learn to like a team sport as their skills improve or they find the right sport or league.

