

PREPARE THE CHILD FOR THE PATH...

Not The Path For The Child

By
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Widely recognized for his work in the field of child psychiatry. Dr. Johnson graduated from the University of Minnesota and Medical School. He interned at Santa Barbara County Hospital, served his residency and fellowship in psychiatry at Menninger School, Topeka, Kansas.

Dr. Johnson had ample personal credentials for his observations – in addition to his professional background – having participated as a Little Leaguer at St. Louis Park, Minnesota, and later serving as coach and umpire.

I am very pleased to have the opportunity to be here because I place a high value on Little League's contribution to individuals and to communities. If the world is going to change, it will probably be as the result of how we raise our children and the experiences we give them, and not what is said at conference tables between world powers. In this respect, I think Little League has tremendous responsibility and has contributed a great deal. Sports in general are probably making as many inroads into bettering international relations than any other field.

Over the years, it has been fashionable to criticize Little League. Critics have suggested that competitive athletics for youngsters of Little League age is damaging to their psyche. As a child psychiatrist who has been involved actively in organized baseball for this age group, first as a poor-hitting, left-handed first baseman, and later as a coach, manager and umpire, I have had a chance to view Little League from a number of vantage points. As a player, I had to deal with the personal disappointment that is a normal part of defeat. As a manager, there were frustrating, provocative questions from parents: "Why isn't my boy playing more?" As an umpire, they question my vision: "you're blind, ump," they said.

I would like to discuss some of the ways in which Little League can be good and some of the dangers – how to spot and deal with them.

PREPARE THE CHILD

From the standpoint of personality development, we can divide life into a number of stages from infant with the "I want what I want when I want it" attitude to the mature adult who can be a giving parent. Some main goals of the Little League age child are to gain increased self-control over feelings and channel them into appropriate actions, to increase his ability to subordinate his own wishes for the good of others or the group, to increase the ability to accept delay in gratification, to learn new skills, and to gain the satisfaction of mastery. Finally, and perhaps most important of all, to feel an acceptance as a man by one's own father, or substitute father such as his coach or manager. This is the key to building self-esteem and confidence in children. Little League experience can provide a supportive environment for sharing in mutually accepted rules of the game. The team effort of practice, of not quitting during a game or season, are all extremely valuable. These are contributions that are important for a player who may never get a hit or catch a ball in the whole season. If they can do these things, their parents and their managers should be proud of them and praise them for their participation.

There is a saying, "Prepare the child for the path, not the path for the child." There are many of us as parents who feel the urge to intercede on our child's behalf with the school teacher or the Little League

manager about playing our child more. This is preparing the path for the child, not the child for the path. Every time we do it, we rob our youngsters of the chance to solve the problem on their own or to solve it with our support, without our actually doing it for them.

There is value in a child's experiencing some frustration, tension and anxiety. Properly dosed, it promotes psychological growth. In early childhood development, we find that some frustration promotes the child's will to move about, to communicate and to learn other skills necessary to get along in this world.

The key to frustration's being helpful is that it not overwhelm the child so that he quits or ends up spinning his wheels with a hopeless feeling. He needs support and guidelines to shift his focus and give him a new sense of direction so that he can finally accomplish some success in the task. The normal Little League age youngster can psychologically handle the disappointment of loss, of personal and team mistakes, if he feels a basic sense of self worth, if he feels the support of his parents and his manager or coach, and if he feels that his relationship with them isn't changed by his losing, not getting a hit, or dropping the ball.

PRAISE BUILDS CONFIDENCE

Little League managers and coaches should recognize the power they have to help youngsters. Even on a professional level, where I have had a chance to so consulting work with coaches, we find that the athlete brings to his relationship with the coach attitudes and expectations carried over from his relationship with his own father. The coach who realizes this can provide a strengthening of the positive aspects of the attitude and, where it exists, a corrective experience for the negative attitudes. The manager and the coach truly do become symbolic fathers even for the professional athlete. The younger the athlete, the more influence the coach may have over the child.

Here are some guidelines recommended for your consideration. Be liberal with praise. Nobody was ever ruined by being overpraised. Praise sincerely given doesn't make people rest on their laurels; it gives them confidence to continue when the going is hard.

Be sparing of criticism and surround it with positive comments. I cringe when I hear an adult mention only something negative to a youngster so that the entire encounter is about what he did wrong. For example: A youngster playing in the infield lets a ball get through. He gets over to it or makes a good try, but he bobbles it, and doesn't make the play. The coach might say, "Johnny, you got a great jump on the ball." He starts out with a positive comment about something in the play that was good. Find something to compliment and say that first. Then you can add, "I think if you'll start out with your other foot first, you'll make the play the next time." I don't claim that every child is going to do it right the next time, but I think more children are going to pay attention, try harder, and probably do better the next time when the corrections are made in that way.

We teach best by the example we set. In victory, it's important the manager not take the team, himself, or individual player too seriously. In defeat, the manager should be a good listener to the players who are taking the loss hard. The art of listening isn't just saying, "uh, huh, uh, huh," while we're listening to four other people, reading the paper, or watching television. Real listening is looking at somebody, giving him 100 percent of your attention. Run a test on yourself to see if you have really listened to a youngster by saying back to him in your own words what you think he has said to you. Say, "Is this what you mean, Johnny," and if he says, "yes, that's it," then you both know you have listened and understood. Try to help elicit the child's feelings. Remain clam yourself. If you feel and act like you have just lost World War II, and are kicking the side of the dugout and throwing bats, it's pretty tough to set a good example. Try to avoid the trite supportive phrases, such as, "It's just a game," "There'll be other seasons," and "You'll get over it." If you have played sports, you know that people who use those phrases don't seem to really understand the way you are feeling at that moment.

Here are some signs a manager or parent can look for if he feels a youngster is experiencing undue emotional stress from athletics, school, or other areas.

In children, depression seldom presents itself as just plain sadness. Children of 8-12 age group show depression more often in physical complaints. If you get an unusual number of physical complaints, one of the things to consider is that the youngster may be depressed about something.

The “I don’t care” or “I won’t try,” attitudes may be masking the child’s fear of failing. In Aesop’s Fable, “The Fox and the Grapes,” when the fox who wanted the grapes tried but couldn’t reach them, he ended up by saying they were probably sour anyway. This is the kind of defense mechanism we may be dealing with in the “I don’t care” child.

Parents and managers frequently will ask, “How do I get the youngster to care?” Children feel free to care when they have the self-confidence that makes them think they have a chance for some satisfaction in the activity. You can help a person care by increasing his sense of confidence. Start by praising the small successes and his efforts.

MAINTAIN PERSPECTIVE

One area that perhaps some people have not thought about as a potential problem is the team clown. I’m not referring to one of your better players who clowns around, but the child whose main source of recognition is in being the oddball or clown. The manager should set the example for the way the other kids deal with him because a youngster like this is having troubles or he wouldn’t resort to being the clown for attention. Don’t be too quick to laugh at his jokes and pranks. Take him seriously. It’s easy to slip into a pattern of using nicknames that the other children use for the overweight, awkward or slow child. If they are all calling him “Fatso” it’s easy for the manager to use that name too. It’s better if he doesn’t. Even if it looks like Fatso doesn’t mind and the youngsters say, “Oh, he doesn’t care, we’ve always called him that and he just laughs,” don’t believe he doesn’t care. He’s got a first name or another name that’s not humiliating. Use it and maybe you can, by example, encourage the players to drop that nickname “Fatso.”

Managers, parents, all adults who are close to a child and his team should keep a sense of perspective. Little League baseball is a game for the children to enjoy and not something to be brought up before the Security Council of the UN. It is when adults let their own wishes to succeed become tangled with the achievement of an individual or a particular team that there is a danger of too much psychological pressure. The adult who is bitter or angry after an error or a loss should consider helping the Little League program in some other capacity than as a manager or coach. The danger is that he will fill the players with an undue sense of guilt, failure, and shame. If you can’t walk away from the losses, then get into some other role – sell the popcorn or raise the money. Those vicarious needs for success that many of us have in sports as we follow a particular team are better kept with our favorite pro team. If we’re unhappy with Johnny Bench or Tom Seaver, it isn’t going to bother them too much, but if we’re unhappy with a player on our team or our child, there’s dangerous pressure.

The key to the psychological impact of the Little League experience is set by the manager. Place the emphasis on the effort made and not the result. You can praise a player for his faithful attendance at practices, for his attitude and not just his batting and fielding percentage. This approach helps build children who keep trying, who don’t coast when they are ahead, who won’t give up when they are behind or defeated, who won’t feel pressure to go beyond the bounds of the rules and good sportsmanship to win.

MAKE IT A GOOD EXPERIENCE

One of my favorite coaches is John Wooden, UCLA basketball coach. He expresses the kind of philosophy I'd recommend for all coaches. He asks that his players go out and do their best, then win or lose; he wants them to walk off the court with their heads up. They ought to feel good about the job they have done out there regardless of the score.

I remember, as some of you may, the interview that he gave after a loss to Houston that ended a long victory string. I'd seen him in many interviews after winning. Here was a chance to see him after losing a big one. He was the same. I thought if this is what he does with his players in the locker room, then the players on his team are going to have a good experience regardless of how far they go in basketball.

The old, "It isn't whether you've won or lost, it's how you played the game" is really true. Rudyard Kipling, in his poem "IF" had these lines that to me have always meant a great deal in terms of dealing with wins and losses. There's a part that goes, "if you can meet with triumph and disaster and treat those two imposters just the same..." That's what they are – imposters and the manager who understands that gives a child the best possible kind of Little League experience.

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