

# Do We Really Need the Trophies?

Written by Mike Sissel

*Dear Mike,*

*We will be collecting \$10 from each family in order to purchase a participation trophy for each child on the team.*

*Thanks,*

*Coach*

My daughter was 5 years old when I received the above email from her soccer coach. I'd heard a myriad of stories from other parents about the *trophy culture* of youth athletics, but could never quite understand it until this moment.

As we drove home following her last game, Emerson's eyes remained fixated on the trophy. While she quietly pondered where she would display it in our house, I found myself struggling with a tremendous amount of emotional discomfort. At the time, I was completely unaware of the source of my uneasy feelings. I remember thinking to myself, "Come on, it's just a cute little trophy. What harm could it cause?"

It wasn't until the other day, after a conversation with a well-respected youth golf instructor, that I realized the true root of my apprehension regarding participation trophies.

**While my daughter continued to celebrate her trophy, I longed for her to celebrate the numerous intrinsic gifts she received by simply playing the game.**

Over the next several months, the trophy would continue to touch her hands, but it's the aforementioned gifts that would forever touch her heart. I decided to leave the trophy on our shelf, but set out on a mission to make her aware of the unseen gifts she received from playing soccer.

## **The gift of mental maturity.**

While there are obvious physical benefits of participating in sports, the not so obvious amount of mental maturity that takes place is truly remarkable. Scientists have provided extensive research on the effects of play on the brain. Some of these benefits include increased problem solving skills, greater capacity for creativity, and actual strengthening of brain cells.

I know what some of you are thinking, "This sounds great, but how am I supposed to convey this gift to my child?"

Here's an example of what you might say. "Did you know that playing soccer (or any other active sport), actually helps your brain grow stronger? Isn't it cool to know that you can play soccer and grow your brain at the same time?"

## **The gift of failure.**

One of the biggest mistakes we make as parents, especially as parents of young athletes, is to expect perfection from our children. I have worked with countless students who are deathly afraid of failing, not because of the failure itself, but rather the reprimand they will receive from their parents. The fact is that failures (or mistakes) can serve as tremendous learning opportunities. Within every failure is a powerful lesson to be learned. Our job as parents (or coaches) is to help our children discern the lesson, not punish them for the mistake. You show me a successful person and I'll show you someone who has experienced countless failures.

Let's imagine that you are riding home after a game and your child is clearly frustrated about a costly mistake they made during the game. Here is an example of what you might say to them. "Every mistake has a lesson to teach us. So, rather than giving all of our power to the mistake, let's spend some time talking about the lesson that can help you prepare for the next game. What do you think this mistake is trying to teach us?"

**The gift of communication.** In a day and age when kids as young as 7 or 8 are using cell phones as their default means of communication, face to face communication skills are absolutely vital. While you can certainly sneak a phone into a classroom or a family dinner in order to avoid authentic communication, it's kind of hard to take your phone with you on the playing field. Quite frankly, sports are one of the most effective ways to foster communication skills. In addition to verbal communication skills, young athletes also learn the importance of their non-verbal language. In other words, they begin to understand that their body language and posture can greatly influence the entire team.

Now let's imagine that you are riding home from a game and your child seems frustrated about a lack of playing time. Rather than using it as an opportunity to throw the coach under the bus, use it as a teachable moment to convey the gift of communication. Here's what you might say. "I noticed that you were very encouraging of your teammates throughout the game. You may not realize this, but your encouraging words likely made a tremendous difference in the outcome of the game. You were a spark for your teammates."

If your child is currently participating in a sport, I invite you to share some of these gifts with them.