

WINNING PHILOSOPHY FOR YOUTH SPORTS

Taken from USA Swimming's Successful Sport Parenting

1. Winning isn't everything, nor is it the only thing. Young athletes can't possibly learn from winning and losing if they think the only objective is to beat their opponents. Does this mean that children should not try to win? Definitely not! As a form of competition, sports involve a contest between opposing individuals or teams. It would be naive and unrealistic to believe that winning is not an important goal in sports. But it is not the most important objective. To play sports without striving to win is to be a dishonest competitor. But despite this fact, it is important that we not define success only as winning. Not every child can play on a championship team or become a star athlete. Yet every child can experience the true success that comes from trying his or her best to win. The opportunity to strive for success is the right of every young athlete.

2. Failure is not the same thing as losing. Athletes should not view losing as a sign of failure or as a threat to their personal value. They should be taught that losing a game is not a reflection of their own self-worth. In other words, when an individual or team loses a contest, it does not mean that they are worth less than if they had won. In fact, some valuable lessons can be learned from losing. Children can learn to persist in the face of obstacles and to support each other even when they do not achieve victory. They can also learn that mistakes are not totally negative but are important stepping stones to achievement. Mistakes provide valuable information that is necessary for improving performance. Thomas Edison was once asked whether he was discouraged by the failure of more than three thousand experiments leading to the development of the light bulb. Edison replied that he did not consider the experiments failures, for they had taught him three thousand ways not to create a light bulb, and each experiment had brought him closer to his goal.

3. Success is not equivalent to winning. Thus, neither success nor failure need depend on the outcome of a contest or on a won-lost record. Winning and losing apply to the outcome of a contest, whereas success and failure do not. How, then, can we define success in sports?

4. Children should be taught that success is found in striving for victory. The important idea is that success is related to effort! The only thing that athletes have complete control over is the amount of effort they give. They have only limited control over the outcome that is achieved. If we can impress on our children that they are never "losers" if they give maximum effort, we are giving them a priceless gift that will assist them in many of life's tasks. A youth soccer coach had the right idea when he told his team, "You kids are always winners when you try your best! But sometimes the other team will score more goals."

A major cause of athletic stress is fear of failure. When young athletes know that making mistakes or losing a contest while giving maximum effort is acceptable, a potent source of pressure is removed. Moreover, if adults apply this same standard of success to themselves, they will be less likely to define their own adequacy in terms of a won-lost record and will more likely focus on the important children's goals of participation, skill development, and fun. Parents and coaches will also be less likely to experience stress of their own when their athletes are not winning. When winning is kept in perspective, the child comes first and winning is second. In this case, the most important sport product is not a won-lost record, it is the quality of the experience provided for the athletes.