

Good Sports

Create a
field of dreams
for your
young athlete.

By Anastacia Grenda



Kyle Sumarsono of the East Fullerton Little League cheers on his fellow Yankees as they play the Dodgers in the EFLL Rookie Division.

If your child participates in youth sports, you play as active a role as she does, even though you don't wear a uniform or take the field. Whether you're a coach, a team mom or a parent cheering from the sidelines, you can make the experience a winning one for your budding athlete.

It's our responsibility as adults, said Lenny Wiersma, co-director of the Center for the Advancement of Responsible Youth Sports at Cal State Fullerton. The center offers resources for youth sports leagues, such as training coaches, providing educational materials and conducting research. So Wiersma knows what he's talking about when he said, "Parents should be an anchor for their child—and not just in sports." Here are his tips on how you can be your kid's No. 1 fan:

JOCK OF ALL TRADES

Grooming your child for a tennis scholarship—and she's only 6? It's better to expose her to multiple sports for a variety of experiences, Wiersma said, so she can find out what she likes and is good at. Plus, there's less pressure: If softball doesn't pan out, there's always swimming.

FIT LIKE A (BASEBALL) GLOVE

Choosing a sport (or sports) takes some homework. Some competitive programs aren't good for beginners. If your child wants something less intense, check out a community-based league that focuses on building skills, Wiersma said. You'll also want a league that gives all team members a chance to play. On the flip side, kids with experience or natural ability may get bored if they're not challenged enough. Whatever the skill level, make sure your child can progress at her own pace. Wiersma believes teens tend to drop out of sports because they were told early on that it wasn't for them. And think about yourself when choosing a program — make sure the practices and games fit your schedule.

Sometimes, even after doing your homework, your child may

want to quit. Whether you let them depends on the circumstances, Wiersma said. "If it's for legitimate reasons—say, your kid never gets to play—and you've tried to remedy it, then I'd say you need to re-analyze [the commitment]. If the program is well run and your kid is not interested in it, then they should play through the rest of the season." You should never keep your child in if a coach is abusive or overly negative, he added.

KNOW THE SCORE

When you sign up for a league, think about what you want your child to get out of it — and make sure you model those values, Wiersma said. "A lot of times, parents say they want their kid to learn how to deal with losing, and then the parents are yelling at officials during a game," he said. You should also control the "I want what's best for my child" instinct; if not, it could lead to an ugly scene when the ump calls your child's home run a foul ball. "In an ideal world, everyone would be trained to have the mantra, 'It's only a game.' If they try to be more cognizant of the bottom line, they're less inclined to yell."

WINNING ISN'T EVERYTHING

It may be trite, but it's also true. And it's up to you to set that focus. When you talk with your child about her sport, focus less on outcomes and more on having fun and being physically active and social, Wiersma said. If you don't know what to say to your child when she's discouraged with not playing well, "just hug your child and say 'I understand.' Listen to them — be a sounding board."

The most important thing: Love your kids for who they are, not how they play. "I think some parents treat their kids differently after they win than after they lose. They take them out for pizza after a win, and the conversation is much more pleasant," Wiersma said. So go out for ice cream after a loss — celebrate your child, not her performance. It lets her know your love her, win or lose. And that's the definition of a true fan. ■