

Ten Signs of a Good Youth Sports Program

By Brooke de Lench

1. **Has implemented comprehensive risk-management and child protection programs.** A good youth sports program recognizes that it owes every child who participates a duty of care, has identified best practices, and implemented a child protection program (including background checks of all adults working with children) to reduce the number of out-of-control parents, abusive coaches, team bullies, spectators and volunteers and to reduce the number of catastrophic injury and deaths.
2. **Is child-centered.** The emphasis on winning in today's youth sports is because adults want to win. Studies repeatedly show that the vast majority of boys and girls, when asked what they would like to see changed about youth sports, say they would like to see less emphasis on winning. A good youth sports program is listening to what our children tell us they want; it emphasizes having fun, skill development and fair play and keeps winning, losing and competition in proper perspective.
3. **Does not exclude (i.e. cut) children before Eighth grade.** The goal in childhood should be to prepare children for adulthood by giving them a chance to develop coping skills and the self-confidence to succeed in the adult world in a safe and nurturing environment. Many say cutting children from athletic programs foster an environment that hurts, rather than fosters, self-esteem. A survey in one New York City suburb found that eight out of ten parents overall and three out of four parents involved in tryout-based programs believed that there should be no tryouts and cutting before fifth grade.
4. **Before Eighth grade its teams are comprised of kids of same age, from same neighborhoods, and of mixed abilities.** There is no proof that forcing "better" players to play with those who appear at an early age to be less skilled somehow keeps them from developing their "talent" or that they somehow deserve to play with similarly "gifted" players. Every child deserves a chance to play, receive the best coaching, and play on the best fields.
5. **Uses independent evaluators, not parent coaches, to select its teams.** Parents in one New York City suburb who responded to a youth sports survey were nearly unanimous that tryouts run by parent coaches are unacceptable because of concerns about the fairness, politics and behavior associated with such a selection process.
6. **Has implemented equal playing time (before sixth grade) and significant playing time (sixth grade and above) rules, which are strictly enforced.** Following an equal playing time/significant playing time rule creates a win-win situation for the players (who play together more as a team, are less selfish, and feel less pressure to excel in order to earn more playing time), parents (who, knowing that their child will be getting the same or significant playing time as every other player, are likely to put less pressure on their child to perform), and the coach (the rule eliminates two of a coach's major headaches: complaints from players and their parents about playing time).
7. **Is accountable to parents and solicits their input.** A good youth sports program provides for input from parents, makes its mission statement, bylaws, and names, phone numbers and e-mail addresses of board members and other administrators publicly available, provides for term limits for directors, holds open board meetings, and engages in benchmarking.
8. **Requires that coaches receive training and be evaluated after every season.** Coaches receive training not only in the sport they are coaching but in child development; evaluations are used to identify those who should no longer be coaching because they are abusive, violate equal playing time rules or overemphasize winning at the expense of fun and skill development.
9. **Makes parent training mandatory.** Parents who have been trained are better able to handle the stress of watching their child compete without losing their cool.
10. **Sets sensible limits on the number of practices and games per week.** The program understands that nearly half of the injuries children suffer each year playing sports are overuse injuries and sets age-appropriate participation limits.