

Why do kids hate the ride home?



Picture the scene. It's the weekend, the sun is shining and you are standing on the sideline at your child's sporting event, and the game is not going to plan – well maybe not to your plan. The team is getting beat on the scoreboard, there's not much time left in the game and all of a sudden your child is substituted off.

Why has your child been substituted? Is your child feeling ok? Has the coach subbed your child off because of poor performance? Is it because they just missed a pass? Should your child have done more? You now have 101 questions in your head which you need answered . . . as soon as you get in the car.

The car ride home has been highlighted by children across the globe as one the worst aspects of playing sport.

Why? Because many parents use the time to fire a barrage of questions to relive and analyse the match, as well as teach, preach, criticize and critique the players, their child, and the officials. No matter how well intentioned, the car ride home is not the time to interrogate your child. It can cause resentment, crush their confidence and result in your son or daughter questioning why they even play.

Below are some typical questions that are asked by parents on the car ride home after a game. Have you ever used any of these, or something similar, with your son or daughter?

Doubting Their Effort

"You didn't seem like you were playing 100% today? Are you ok?"

"I have seen you play so much better than you did today – what's wrong?"

Stating the Obvious

"If you didn't miss that pass."

"Too bad that you didn't get that tackle."

Highlighting Worst-Case Scenarios

"After today's performance, do you think you'll make the team next week?"

"Did the coach substitute you off because he doesn't think you're any good?"

The reality is your child has probably already started to reflect their own performance, including beating themselves up for mistakes made. So if anything, they don't need their effort questioned, or to be reminded of their mistakes or pulled into a negative hypothetical situation, when all they really need, is your positive support.

Here are our suggestions to make the journey home more enjoyable.

1. Let Your Child Initiate the Conversation

Most children are usually emotionally and physically fatigued following their game. Some may need to unwind and digest the match in their own time or not

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want to talk about anything at all. Others may be totally comfortable talking about the game – especially if it was a good one. No matter, we suggest that ideally, you let your child start and end the conversation when they are ready. If you are not sure, ask your child whether they want to talk about their game and respect their answer.

2. Limit Your Questions

That's not to say that the car ride home has to be done in complete silence.

If you do want to open up a conversation with your child, limit your question to *"How did you feel about the game?"*

Asking your child how they felt about the game is a great way for parents to open up an impartial conversation. Importantly though, this is not the time to probe further. Just listen carefully to your child's feedback and raise any important information later for when you can have a more meaningful conversation.

3. Be Their Biggest Fan

"I really like watching you play. That tackle you made on number 10 in the first half was fantastic."

Regardless of how they played, provide your child with unconditional support and genuine praise. Be their biggest fan and supporter, during the good times and especially the bad. Providing your child with feedback on how proud you are of them can make them feel like a million dollars. If things have been tough, help them see the bigger picture and let them know that the outcome of one game does not determine all their future successes.

4. Acknowledge Their Effort

"I saw you try that pass today, the one you have been practicing. Well done, it was great to see you try it."

"Hey well done today, you looked like you were trying your hardest out there."

Children love to know that you saw them try their best, even if they didn't win. They get a great sense of pride when they know that you have watched them, and you have seen them try to do something that they have been practicing, particularly when it comes off in a game. Acknowledging this and explaining to them that you saw this happen, and that all of the hard work and practicing has paid off, will be music to their ears.

Remember if you knock or doubt effort, children will often give up and not bother trying as hard next time. If you can focus on the effort they gave and acknowledge them for it, then this will go a long way to helping them build mental toughness and a never give-up attitude.

Every child is different, but we're confident they'll appreciate you taking on board our tips to make it a great ride home, by stopping the interrogation and simply letting them play and enjoy their game. Remember children primarily play sport to have fun and hang out with their mates. They are not professional

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athletes – it's a time for them to learn and develop in their sport. Even a simple hug or high-five after each game will let them know you are their biggest fan.

What is a Good "Sports" Parent?

When it comes to our kid's sports we are the taxi drivers to and from training and games, we become the kit manager, the fundraiser, sometimes even the coach. We are definitely the sponsors (apparel and equipment is not cheap you know) and of course we are by default, the #1 supporter. These are some of the responsibilities that we have in our role as a "sports" parent, but it doesn't stop here.

Why?

Because as parents we are the most influential adult figure in our child's life, we will define and shape the person that our child will become. Outstanding parents are outstanding teachers. We should never underestimate the power of your child's greatest teacher – you and the role in which you play in your child's sports experience.

So what is the role of a "sports" parent?

The job description of a good "sports" parent is to provide a safe and loving environment. An environment that will allow your child to connect with their surroundings, inspire them through learning and empower them to be the best they can be, in the sport they choose to play.

How can I achieve this?

Here are our seven tips on how parents can help shape a positive sporting environment and create favourable sporting experiences for their kids:

1. Provide Unconditional Love

Regardless of ability, outcome or performance, just be there for your child. Be there to support, be the shoulder to cry on, be the listener, be mum and dad when things go well and when they don't. Be the one to say "it's ok" or "I love watching you play".

2. Be Calm

At training and games be the "calm one". This emotion will transfer across to your child. The more relaxed you are, the more relaxed your child will feel. A calm child is a happy child and a happy child can focus on the job in hand – enjoying the game.

3. Support Your Coach

Coaches have 101 things to do and in some cases they are parents, just like us. Coaches crave assistance but rarely ask for it. Ask your coach if you can support them in any way. Can you help with setting up or organising equipment, assisting on game day or even filling up the water bottles?

4. Let Kids Play

Emphasise enjoyment over performance. Kids love playing with their mates and learning new skills, they don't necessarily worry about who is winning the

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league. "Performance", that can come later, encourage the kids to enjoy what they are doing now. Are they happy? Are they healthy? Do they have a smile on their face?

5. Accept the Loss

"We didn't win today!" That's ok, accept that your child may not win every game they play. Be comfortable with this and understand that valuable life lessons can be learnt by everyone when we don't "win" on the scoreboard.

6. Help Set Growth Goals

Many kids drop out of sport because they cannot meet expectations that are placed on them by parents. Help set simple growth goals like; "I will give 100% in everything I do", "I will prepare and do a good warm up before each game", "I will lead from the front and be a great teammate".

7. Be the Model Parent

Make your kids proud – be supportive of everyone on the team and praise the effort of everyone involved. Be the parent who doesn't instruct your child and undermine your coach, Be the parent who doesn't scream and shout at the officials, or the parent that knows everything. Don't be the embarrassing Mum/Dad. Be the supportive one.

Remember you are your child's greatest teacher. Show them the way and help them reach their full potential in sport so that they can reap the benefits in life.

Why Do Kids Play Sport?

The list of main reasons Kiwi kids play sport may well be more surprising for what it doesn't include as what it does.

There are no prizes for guessing what research has confirmed as the main driver of childhood participation in New Zealand sport; "to have fun" is the most common reason kids play sport. It almost goes without saying that sport is fun, or at least should be.

Sport has long held a special place in New Zealanders' hearts. Ninety percent of children spend three hours or more each week taking part in sport and recreation.

Looking further down the list generated by AUT's research with Kiwi kids and a clearer picture begins to form around the overall experience children are chasing when they head to the field or the court for the first time.

Kiwi kids play sport to;

- Have fun
- Play with their mates
- Learn new skills
- Be fit and healthy
- Have a sense of fair play

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This list mirrors research from around the world with “fun” consistently cited by kids as the main reason they play sport.

What about winning?

Kids do like competition but what may be surprising for many parents and junior coaches is that winning does not feature highly on the list – or similar lists around the world. For kids, it's not nearly as important as having fun, and in fact an overriding focus on winning can, and often does, make playing junior sport less fun which leads to reduced participation.

Dr. Simon Walters, a senior lecturer at the School of Sport and Recreation at AUT University and a member of the Good Sports project to improve the sporting experiences of Kiwi kids, conducted a study in 2011 entitled [Whose Game are we Playing? A Study of the Effects of Adult Involvement on Children Participating in Organised Team Sports](#).

Responses such as this from a ten-year-old boy were typical and highlight a potential gap between the expectations of children playing sport and some adults in charge.

"It's not if you win or lose," he said. "My coach thinks it's if you win or lose, but it's if you have fun."

Why does it matter?

The benefits of participation in sport range from enhancing long-term mental and physical health, learning social skills, improving motor skills to those things children themselves already recognise like enjoying themselves and making friends.

There are many flow-on effects for the family and community; from the experience mums and dads share with their children to the overall value of a healthier population.

This only happens if kids continue to play sport, so focusing on creating positive fun sporting environments is crucial to delivering what kids want, keeping them active for longer and ensuring better long-term results for them and the community.

And yes, centering the junior sport experience around a fun and positive experience even has long-term benefits for the small percentage of kids who eventually transition into elite sport.

What can we do?

So what can we do to make sure that we can provide a positive sporting experience for every Kiwi kid?

If you are a coach, a teacher, a parent or a sport leader involved in children's sport make providing the best positive sporting experience for those kids the central focus – and not necessarily a winning-first approach.

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Drawing upon the most recent sports research, the [Good Sports](#) project can help parents and coaches get a greater understanding of how to create an environment that motivates young people to stay with their sport and to be successful. It will also provide them with the tools they need to make this happen.

The Good Sports project is targeting eight Auckland locations over two years and will roll out a trial series of workshops, printed and digital resources and ongoing training for parents and key adults who deliver sport. As it is a pilot project, findings will be shared and made available for anyone interested in making kids sport the best it can be