

How to Win at Being a Sports Parent

Avoid a losing streak with these tips from **KAREN STILLER**

I HAVE NEVER RUN A RACE I DIDN'T LOSE.

This is true, from grade school 100-metre sprints to current-day Sunday School sack races. Close my eyes and I am back in the heat and humiliation of the annual elementary school track meet at Beazley Fields in Dartmouth, N.S.—we didn't have a choice back then it seems—where I would still lose, just in front of more kids from more schools.

This lifelong losing streak may be why my eldest son's house league goalie career was such an excruciating experience—for me. I think he was having fun, but every goal that flew past his butterfly was as a knife to my heart. When he won, I won! When he lost, I lost.

This, fellow sports parents, is a problem.

Sara Dimmerman is a psychologist, author and parenting expert. She offers guidance for confused sports parents like me.

MOST LIKELY, YOU HAVE THE PROBLEM

"If you're upset about your child not being a superstar," says Dimmerman, "you have to own the problem." Reflection is

the key. "If it's about you feeling they aren't good enough, and they seem to be fine where they are, it's your problem and you need to work on it."

Dimmerman says there are two common extremes. "Parents may be living vicariously through their kids," she says. "Or, they were heavily involved [in sports] and want to pass the baton to their children, whether they want it or not."

Christian tradition includes a spiritual practice called the examen. Basically, it's uncomfortable. You take deliberate time—daily!—to examine your heart, attitude, actions and motivations and invite God to run his redeeming vacuum over your inner mess. Sports parents and their kids would be well served by Mom and Dad conducting regular exams of their motivation behind their kids' lives in sports.

STOP YELLING AND SCREAMING—EVEN GOOD STUFF

When my youngest son played softball last summer, there was a crowd of very loving moms yelling things like "Way to hold the bat!" and "Way to try!" as the player slouched back to the bench after striking out. It struck me as over the top.

"There is a difference between encouragement and praise," says Dimmerman. She suggests we ask our kids if they find parents yelling at them from the stands a motivating force. "You can go a little overboard," she says. "And it becomes sickening for the kids." Be moderate in encouragement, coaches Dimmerman. Ask your kids: "How do you think you did?" And make your praise, offered at the end of the game, as specific as possible.

EMBRACE FAILURE AS A WAY TO LEARN, EVEN THOUGH IT STINKS.

My daughter flopped on our bed, full of dread about a swim meet the next day. She had concocted extremely creative reasons why she should not go. She can swim. But her dives are more Mr. Bean than Alexandre Despatie, the former world champion from Quebec. My inner sports failure completely resonated and wanted to let her drop out. Instead, I drove her to the pool at 6:30 the next morning to squeeze in an extra practice. She went to the swim meet. She came in last. And felt good about trying. These moments are "life lessons" and not to be avoided, says Dimmerman. "Support them. Be there afterwards to handle the disappointment. Acknowledge the feelings. Talk about what positive has come out of it."

The bottom line? Win or lose, it's not about you. "Let your child be in the spotlight," says Dimmerman. But being willing to turn the spotlight every now and then on your role, responses and reactions to your child's sporting life can make for a more winning experience for everyone. ■

