This is the home of the

S.A.G.E.

Sportsmanship Program

Our mission

To remind us that the game is for the kids, that respect is a lesson we can help teach, and that setting a good example is more important than winning.

Key words: fun, respect, and self-esteem

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The **SAGE** Sportsmanship Program

The Mission:
To remind us that the game is for the kids, that respect for others is a lesson we can help teach, and that setting a good example is more important than winning.

1. Parents, coaches, and players sign a Sportsmanship Pledge form spelling out appropriate conduct and the reasons why good sportsmanship is so important.

2. Coaches attend mandatory preseason meetings that are used in part to reinforce SAGE. Referees attend recertification meetings where SAGE is included in the discussion.

3. Preseason team meetings are held to show parents our *Kids Come First* video, in which players, psychologists, coaches and others explain how to make youth sports a positive experience which helps kids’ self-esteem and promotes respect by and for everyone. (To find out more about the video, go to www.kindness-counts.org)

4. Parent representatives are chosen from each team (team SAGE representatives) who become visual reminders of the program at matches. They attend a league seminar on sportsmanship and then are given colorful SAGE t-shirts and buttons. We ask that they wear a t-shirt weather permitting or a button to games.

   The team SAGE representatives are not enforcers of the program. There should be no confrontations. We are encouraging all adults who hear negative comments to NOT react quickly and/or emotionally. After a pause, no reaction or a pleasant “Relax and enjoy the game” is often best. We thank all parents and coaches who are helping us help the kids by reporting disrespectful behavior to their clubs for followup by the clubs and/or the league.

   Clubs take whatever action on poor sportsmanship they believe is necessary and in compliance with league rules. The consequences of inappropriate behavior by spectators, players or coaches may include a conversation with those involved and/or suggesting or mandating that they attend a sportsmanship seminar. They also may include, but are not limited to, suspension from attending matches or the last thing any of us wants, mandating that a child will not be permitted to play. The league deals with (but clubs can also act) coach and player discipline and poor spectator behavior noted by referees and also holds SAGE seminars for parents and coaches when conduct is inappropriate.

5. Brochures with reminders about the do's and don'ts of good sportsmanship (currently provided by the league) are distributed periodically to spectators at matches. In addition, signs provided by the league are used as reminders at the fields.

6. Twice per season at a team’s home games, just before matches begin, brief one or two-minute meetings are held at the fields. They are conducted by one or more people designated by the home club to remind everyone about sportsmanship. A page of the brochure may be used.

7. To prevent discouragement and teach good sportsmanship, we ask coaches who get a four-goal lead in a match to take steps to keep the final score within a six-goal margin. While losing by a significant margin can help teach that this is a normal part of sports just as setbacks are part of life, we believe a six-goal differential is enough. Teaching that kicking someone when they’re down is inappropriate is an important life lesson. How to hold down the score must be taught at practice, not during a game. Ways to hold down the score are on the SAGE page titled, “Avoiding lopsided scores.”

[Click for SAGE home page]
The Sportsmanship Pledge

Kindly sign this pledge after you have seen our video, Kids Come First or another video. This Pledge summarizes important elements of the youth sports experience and sets out your commitment to Sportsmanship and Fair Play. Signing it is a condition of your participation in the Mid-New Jersey Youth Soccer Association.

Important Information about Youth and Sports

Kids participate in sports primarily because it’s fun. Adults need to keep it fun. Some adults get too emotional about youth sports because they are too concerned about how their kids are doing, have the mistaken belief that winning is very important, or have a desire for glory through their kids’ success. That last one is part of the concept of living through your kids.

Kids need to know that if they’re trying their best, they are winners. Parents need to remember that their kids will not be great at everything. Recognizing that, parents can help most by relaxing and enjoying these fleeting years.

Placing too much pressure on kids to perform well creates stress that can detract from their fun and their performance and can affect their self-esteem. Instructions shouted to players are distracting, usually too late, and sometimes inaccurate or in conflict with what the coach is teaching.

My Pledge to Set A Good Example

Whether I am a player or an adult, I will not be loud or negative towards players, referees, coaches or spectators. As an adult, I should know that failing to show respect for people who are doing the best they can sets a bad example for our children and can result in expulsion from the venue and additional consequences. If someone else makes an inappropriate comment, I will not make a negative response that could lead to a confrontation. As a player, I should control my negative emotions to avoid embarrassing myself and my team, risking ejection, and hurting my team’s chances of winning. And I should realize that my behavior influences younger players.

Coaches should remember that encouragement and praise for every child, not just the best athletes, are critically important to their self-esteem and their ability to achieve the most they can.

I recognize that striving to win, rather than winning itself, is what is important in life. Striving to win means doing the best you can. Winning too much means only that your competition is weaker.

I recognize that players must get adequate playing time to improve and gain the confidence that helps them do the best they can. Participation is what makes it fun. I acknowledge that this is more important than winning games. If coaches feel that their team lost simply because a player of lesser ability received appropriate playing time, they did the right thing.

I acknowledge that making mistakes and losing are part of life. We all suffer setbacks. I pledge that I will be tolerant of the mistakes of players, coaches, referees, and others. I recognize that mistakes are opportunities for learning.

I recognize that within the parameters of competition, sportsmanship and fair play are paramount. I pledge that I will commit to promoting an atmosphere of healthy competition to ensure fun for all participants.

Signed: ____________________________  (Circle one: Player, Parent, Coach, Other)  Signed: ____________________________  (Circle one: Player, Parent, Coach, Other)
Signed: ____________________________  (Circle one: Player, Parent, Coach, Other)  Signed: ____________________________  (Circle one: Player, Parent, Coach, Other)

[Note: If a parent is also a coach, that parent should sign as a coach.]  Click for SAGE home page
Team SAGE Representatives

Thank you!! By volunteering (or allowing yourself to be volunteered), you are helping us provide a better sports experience for our children.

Kids consistently say that their main goal in playing sports is having fun. If we adults can subdue our egos, eliminate the disrespect for officials and others, and stop putting pressure on kids, their youth sports experience can be a good one, regardless of whether they are great athletes. Most adults behave well but a relative few can influence our children’s behavior.

Many of the difficulties arise because we adults sometimes overemphasize the importance of winning. We also may have unrealistic expectations about our children’s ability and their chances of playing in or after high school.

In these three pages, we will describe how you can be helpful. If at any time, you have questions about SAGE, you can email Mike Schapiro, the league’s SAGE coordinator (mikes888@comcast.net). Of course your club officials will also be able to help in many cases but you can always contact Mike.

The topics we will cover are

Field Signs

SAGE buttons

What To Do if a Problem Arises at a Field

Field Signs

Our latest conclusion on signs for fields is that it is easiest for clubs to assign one or more people (depending on how many fields your club has) to be responsible for them. We ask that if your club wishes you to, you help with this task.

The job is a little harder if signs must be taken down after each game due to school, town or county restrictions. If they can remain up for the entire season, checking to see that they are in place and in decent condition is all that is required.

We usually provide about five signs PER FIELD to each club. The idea was to put one each near each team bench and three on the spectator side. There are several different signs. For example, here are three: “Relax, have fun, respect everyone,” “If it’s not nice, please don’t say it. Thank you,” and “Kids are embarrassed when we criticize them, referees, coaches, or spectators.”
Signs should be distributed by club officials after they receive them prior to the season. Some from last season may still be usable. If there is no natural barrier to attach them to, one option is the inexpensive plant stakes you can obtain at any garden store. Mailing tape works well on the stakes. Having toddlers hold them or attaching them to dogs may be fun but probably is not a good idea.

If your club or team manager finds they are short of signs or if signs deteriorate, email Mike Schapiro at mike-s888@comcast.net and he will get them to you.

**SAGE Buttons**

We ask that you wear the buttons however since we didn’t give out buttons for new reps at our meeting for club representatives on March 4th, we’ll have to get them to you later.

The buttons indicate your support for the program and that you are helping the league provide a better experience for our kids. They obviously are another visual reminder for others present.

**What To Do if a Problem Arises at a Field**

If someone is criticizing players or referees or otherwise acting in a negative emotional manner, that may not be the best time to talk to them. Remember that there should be NO CONFRONTATIONS. We do NOT want you to be an enforcer of the program during games. Think of yourself as a gentle reminder of the program.

1) If it’s someone from your team, and you feel comfortable talking to them during the game, pleasantly suggest that he/she relax and enjoy the game. You may feel more comfortable talking to them at halftime or talking to all parents before the next game. Also when conversing away from the game, you can mention that the kids and referees are doing the best they can, that our sportsmanship pledge explains why he/she needs to be respectful and that the behavior can embarrass your club and place it in jeopardy with the league.

2) If it’s someone from the opposing team, their team SAGE rep, if present, should try in a friendly way to deal with it. If their rep or another parent from their team does not calmly try to deal with it, you can use the “Relax...” line or another if you are comfortable doing do. If not, NOT talking further to the offender is generally best to avoid an argument. **If necessary, remind your team’s parents not to respond.** If the other parents on the offender’s team do not laugh, talk in the same way, or otherwise encourage the person, that can help quiet down some of the inappropriate conduct.

**To repeat, in any of the these situations, if your attempt in a calm and positive tone does not bring a positive response immediately, do not proceed and get into an argument.**

Try to make a written or mental note of what is being said. Inform your coach in writing who should forward it to your club’s league contact, who will pursue it with officials of the other club. Be careful not to
exaggerate or overgeneralize. Send a copy of your note to Mike. If the league gets repeated reports about a team, a league official will go to a future game. This communication is kept anonymous. We do not view this as tattletaling, but rather an effort to set a better example for kids and help their self-esteem by eliminating disrespect for everyone and pressure to perform.

Too often in dealing with these situations, we get conflicting stories about what happened. Nonetheless, once informed that something occurred, the clubs, with the support of the league, usually take steps to prevent a recurrence without the league having to take further action.

3) Try to discourage folks from being negative by setting the example yourselves with positive comments, like “Good try,” “Nice pass,” “Great effort,” “You’ll get it next time,” “Don’t worry about it,” etc. Praise should be directed to opposing players as well as your own.

Let’s hope more folks than ever can relax, have fun, and RESPECT everyone. Thank you again!

Click for SAGE home page

Field Signs and Button
Field Brochure (sample cover page)

**Sportsmanship Reminders**

Every player, referee, and coach deserves

**RESPECT**

because they are trying their best,

just as we all do. By giving that respect,

we SET A GOOD EXAMPLE for our children.

Click for SAGE home page
Remind them that when they try their best, they are always winners.

And that we all make mistakes and lose sometimes.

Support the team by cheering and praising the players.

Applaud good work by those from either team.

We all get excited at times. It becomes a problem if we yell at the kids in an angry tone which can lower their confidence and self-esteem.

Please don’t yell criticism at the coaches and referees. They are trying to do their best. None of us like to be screamed at. Sometimes they make a mistake and sometimes we do too.

Yelling instructions at the players is distracting and frequently reaches them too late to be helpful. And it may confuse them if their coach has told them something else.

If we spend too much time worrying about how our children are doing, we’re wasting one of life’s wonderful experiences. If they’re not great at the game, we’ll love them anyway and know that they’ll be great at other things.

Whether their achievements on the field are big or small, we can find reasons to praise their performance.

Remember that the game is for the kids and that the fun, both theirs and ours, is more important than winning.

Click for SAGE home page
Avoiding Lopsided Scores

While no child probably will suffer any long-term harm from a season with a number of one-sided losses (especially if the coach explains that this is a normal part of sports), we believe a six-goal margin is enough. The sportsmanship lesson of not kicking someone when they’re down is important both in sports and in life in general.

Though we do not publish scores or keep standings for U10 play and younger, we will be monitoring scoring differentials and contacting clubs when there are large margins in any age division.

1. Explain during practice why blowouts should be avoided in the interests of good sportsmanship. Teach these steps in practice. Once a game is in progress, it is virtually impossible to introduce these ideas for the first time and expect the players to grasp and remember them.

2. Begin using these steps when you are ahead by a four-goal margin since there still could be additional scoring despite these steps which could push the margin to the six-goal limit.

3. Designate one or two shooters. Only those designated can take shots. Advise them that the shots should be taken from outside the 18-yard box and/or only with the other foot, and/or only after receiving a pass back from closer to the goal. All these help your players build their skills.

4. Don’t always try to pass the ball to the designated shooter(s). Instead, practice possession and in the process, let defenders get some touches. This doesn’t mean we should play keepaway for long periods of time but a couple of minutes at a time is good practice.

5. It is nice to give defenders a chance to play forward or midfield positions. Players should always play more than one position. They usually have more fun, increase their chances of getting more playing time when they reach higher levels and you may discover they are as good or better at the second position. However make the move when the goal margin is four, because defenders are often so anxious to score that moving them when the margin is six often leads to higher differentials.

6. Ball possession may involve a designated maximum number of touches by each player before passing the ball (e.g. 2,3,5), whatever is reasonable for the particular age group.

7. Try to build the attack from the back through the midfield, instead of sending long balls into the offensive third of the field.

8. These are the games when players who don’t usually start should get much more playing time.

9. The goal is to take these steps quietly, so they are not obvious to your opponent. Please don’t yell out, “Don’t score any more” or anything similar that could embarrass the opponent. That is a key reason why it is important to work on teaching these techniques during practice, not at games.

Thank you for your cooperation.

Click for SAGE home page
Articles to Help Us Support Our Kids

Keeping Kids Involved in Sports
by DOUGLAS E. ABRAMS

(Douglas E. Abrams is a University of Missouri law professor who has been a youth hockey coach since 1969)

NOW that Labor Day has passed, the autumn youth sports season will begin, and that means thousands more disillusioned teenagers nationwide. These are the boys and girls excluded from local programs or humiliated as bench-warmers.

Earlier this summer, a 14-year-old from a nearby town told me he wanted to join our ice hockey program this fall. He has given up soccer because he and his parents see the handwriting on the wall after two years of bench-warming for coaches paid to develop the top players. His town maintains sports programs open to all elementary school students, but teenagers have only "select" teams or the high school varsity or junior varsity.

Being washed up at 14 is tough. My young visitor questioned me about our hockey program's open-enrollment policy. "You mean, you let everybody play?" "Nobody gets cut?" "Nobody warms the bench?"

In the 1960s, my friends and I would have been astonished if local sports programs turned us away. Today, many kids are astonished when local programs let them play.

Programs controlled by adults have replaced the sandlot and playground choose-up games children once organized for themselves. This "adultification" of children's sports has created a youth-league pyramid. Like any pyramid, the strength is at the middle and bottom, not the top. Select teams are fine for the few top players but communities fail their youth when they deny equal opportunity for the 80 percent of players lower on the pyramid.

"Equal opportunity" means enrolling every child who wants to play. It means letting children compete against opponents of roughly the same ability level, with select teams for the more experienced players and open team for the others. It also means guaranteeing meaningful playing time because bench-warming cheats children, wl deserve fairness from the adults in their lives.

I know the nearby town whose sports programs shut out most teens like the ex-soccer player who visited me. The local newspaper regularly complains about high levels of teenage drug and alcohol use. The connection is no coincidence. Teens need to "belong," and they seek out peer groups. Nobody should be surprised when many teens shut out of team sports begin running with the wrong crowd. Or when teens denied the chance to "turn on" to sports turn on to something else, often drugs and alcohol.

Until adults stop taking children's sports away from children, we will all be the losers.

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“Tips for parents; Is my child a star?”
by MARK COOMES of the Louisville Courier-Journal

Every peewee team has a few tiny stars who outshine their adorably clueless and clumsy peers. They score all the goals, make all the baskets and clout all the home runs. They also raise the hopes and expectation of their parents, some of whom suffer from delusions of athletic grandeur.

For the remainder of the article, click below to get to the web site of The Courier-Journal of Louisville, Ky.

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“Kids’ ball, the parent equalizer”
by C. W. NEVIUS of the San Francisco Chronicle

When former Warriors’ coach Eric Musselman heard I was writing about a minor meltdown he had at his son's Little League game a few weeks ago in the East Bay, he was on fire to set the record straight.

He called me Thursday, the day after it was announced that he was fired as Warriors coach.

My cell phone rang while I was in the intensive care unit at Lucile Packard Children's Hospital, interviewing the father of 3-year-old heart transplant recipient Drew Wessels. I asked Musselman if he could call back because it was kind of a bad time to talk.

For the remainder of the article, click below to get to the web site of the San Francisco Chronicle.
http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/chronicle/archive/2004/05/22/BAGFB6Q2PL1.DTL

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“Winning: how important it has become”
By RICK BURNS

(quoted from portions of an article by Rick Burns, head women’s soccer coach at Gordon College in Wenham, Massachusetts. The article appeared in The NCAA News. More on Rick Burns following the article)

A quote from Missouri basketball coach Norm Stewart in a newspaper after winning his 600th game:

“The only thing that matters in sport is winning #601.”

As I have moved from NCAA Division III to Division II and now to the ambivalent challenge of Division 1, I’m gradually feeling the increased pressure to get results. I’ve found that most of my coaching brethren, like tributaries flowing smoothly into the same channel, are buying into the “win at all costs” mentality.

Many need to, to keep their jobs. Even coaches in minor, nonrevenue, and Olympic sports are being
fired for not producing winners. Many of my colleagues look to their seasons with anxiety rather than anticipation. Self-worth and their jobs are tied totally into results. Egos soar or plummet after each win or loss.

Winning is euphoria, losing tragedy. The space allotted to other measures of the job (like our students’ academic success and what kind of human beings we are helping develop) is shrinking.

There is so much more going on in the college atmosphere for our student-athletes. Beyond academics and athletics, the third part of the student athlete’s experience is the personal/social bounty offered them during this exciting time in their lives. It’s important for them to simply enjoy the college experience before the crush of life’s responsibilities envelops them.

Our players, via the athletics experience, can have wonderful fuller experiences that they carry with them the rest of their lives. Experiences like learning to win and lose without excuse, but rather with grace and dignity, and handling pressure and conflict.

In actuality, for 99 percent of athletes, college athletics is just a temporary, wonderful phase to pass through on the way to something significant.

Pressure to win has also led to coaches compromising values. Emphasizing results has also led to an increase in poor sportsmanship. I have observed a gradual crumbling of the principles of fair play and a decline in cheerfulness and congeniality.

It is with a growing sense of clarity that I see what is important. The emphasis on winning fades, now that I have a better look from further down the road. More important is teaching your players the value and peace that come from doing the best they can with what they have, the critical importance of the attempt to conduct yourself well in the heat of competition, representing your school with class & integrity, and giving the players time to simply savor the sweet rewards youth offers while joining each other’s lives for a while.

Gordon College in Wenham, Massachusetts, where Rick Burns is head women’s soccer coach, is a Division III school. He was head coach for women’s soccer at Division I Drury College in Springfield, Missouri when he wrote this article for the NCAA News. He moved to Gordon College in 1999. Says Coach Burns,

"I've found Division I athletics to be excessive in the demands on both the student and healthy premise about what athletics should be. Work with athletes and the coaching staff. Division III offers a basic hard and play hard during the season and then go on and enjoy other activities the school has to offer."

His philosophy is built upon a commitment to developing the athlete as a whole person who can glean valuable life lessons from the experience of competition.

In about 20 years of coaching at the college level in both men’s and women’s programs, he has amassed a record of 200-127-19. But if you read the above article, you will understand why his primary goals in athletics have little to do with winning.

Rick Burns has published more than 30 articles and won the National Soccer Coaches Association Writing Award in 1996.

Also read “Post-loss honesty comes with silver lining” by Rick Burns.
“Post-loss honesty comes with silver lining”
by RICK BURNS

(Rick Burns is head women’s soccer coach, Gordon College, Wenham, Massachusetts)

"All the breaks went against us today." "We just didn't play our game." "The referee stole it from us!" "Three starters were out -- injuries did us in." "We hit the post twice or we would have won."

To paraphrase the prophet Isaiah, "Woe are we who have to listen to those who thunder forth."

In the sports world, post-loss honesty from coaches often is trumped by empty clichés and defensive whining. These poor souls pressured to take their programs to the proverbial next level by their administration: fans and boosters resort to Dick-and-Jane-level prose to explain their defeats. One rival, his eggplant-shaped body quivering with righteousness, gave me a 10-minute explanation of how the referee stole the match from him and then after the match apologized for blowing the call.

Further, the coach said, the referee told him his sideline bellowing was justifiable.

These post-loss emotional spiels always lack credibility because all coaches view contests with keen biased eyes. And it's not just the post-loss rant -- how about the postseason rant? It goes something like this: "We were 10-9, but we should have been 13-6. We lost two games in overtime and one on a terrible penalty call." Does anyone ever say the opposite? Well, I'm saying it now --we were 14-5 last year and should have been 11-8. We beat three teams that I thought were better than us -- two in overtime due to some luck and grit and one because of a questionable call in our favor.

Who, like a shaft of sunlight piercing the gloom, has the integrity to say, "We won, but we were lucky - they were the better team today," or "the score was an accurate indication of our opponent's superiority"? Displaying the courage to be vulnerable is a wonderful lesson for our student-athletes. I have tremendous respect for those coaches who are confident enough not to have to convince anyone of anything.

I believe that winning is overrated anyway. Three pant sizes and four hairstyles ago, winning obsessed me, ruled me. Now, the urgency has faded. The singular quest for it can only lead to compromised values and the end, unhappiness. It's more important to teach our student-athletes to prepare with diligence, struggle well match day and accept the result knowing that they gave their all.

You can't completely control winning or even playing well. The one thing you can control is effort. Effort comes in cycles, and our job is to move players through the low patches quickly. I tell my players that they are successful if they can walk off the field at the end of the match and honestly say they gave everything they had.

There are life lessons that can be taught in defeat: the value of resilience, the opportunity to display cla and dignity under disappointing circumstances, and the fact that vigorous preparation, hard work and passion - while important -- do not guarantee victory. Sometimes losing can be a gift that will make your players stronger more unified and lead them closer to their potential.

In the past, I have received plaques and certificates for milestone wins, which I have appreciated. Recently, I lost my 100th match as a college soccer coach. To show a bit of perspective, with a piano-key smil and tongue firmly imbedded in cheek, I announced this to my colleagues.

Their responses included raised brows and blank stares. A small muscle on the side one of my coaching colleague's mouth began to twitch. No one has a sense of humor when it comes to winning and losing. I'm proud that I've been around long enough to lose 100 matches.

Some heavy doses of humbleness would do all of us coaches some good. We need to reach beyond the
low-hanging fruit of the singular-pursuit victory and teach with broader purpose. Experience has shown me that if you run a program holistically, results will come.

The coaches I know who are most at peace with themselves have learned that a caring, serving spirit is the conduit of inspiration for their athletes. These coaches display a purity of purpose that enables them to touch their kids athletically, educationally, personally and spiritually.

They know they are the decisive element in their players' college experience and treasure this influence. They will find their reward in time, but often (like parenting) the payload is delivered later. Down the road, perspective will kick in and players will realize that being 11-8 or 8-11 is not nearly as important as the values and ideals their coaches taught them.

Our greatest reward as coaches is the joy and satisfaction of impacting young lives. Conversely, the sweet touch our student-athletes have on our lives is our golden prize.

Click for SAGE home page

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**Shouldn’t we all be having fun?**

Here are a few thoughts to consider:

1. Youth sports can and should be mainly about fun and building our kids’ self-esteem.
2. We adults sometimes spend too much time worrying about who will win and whether our kids are playing well, which can lead to inappropriate behavior.
   a. One reason for this is our egos: wanting to share the glory of our children’s success. Normal, unless it goes too far which is often called living through our kids.
   b. Another is overidentifying with our kids: worrying about them making mistakes, although we know we all make mistakes and that we should tell them mistakes and setbacks are normal.
   c. Another is frustrations from other parts of our lives.
   d. And there’s too much emphasis on winning. Winning is the only the focus of play. It is not the measure of success. Success is about children feeling better about themselves. In no time, game scores are forgotten.
      i. Winning or losing is mostly about the strength of the competition. Seasons with a 9-1 record mean we’re playing mostly weaker teams.
      ii. Seasons with 4-6, 5-5, or 6-4 records, for example, mean more closer games. These force kids to play harder and perform their skills faster and that carries over to future games.
         That’s what helps them get better and more confident.
3. These adult concerns can lead to too much pressure on kids and a lack of respect for children, officials, coaches, and other spectators. Referees do the best they can as we all do. Abusing them sets a bad example for kids, embarrasses them, and causes refs to quit.
4. As parents and coaches, we can find reasons to give our kids positive feedback in a friendly tone (not an angry and frustrated tone) along with enough playing time. If we do that with all of them, not just the best athletes, they’ll gain confidence and achieve the most they can. Remember that #1 with children is having fun.
and they have fun by participating.

5. They grow up quickly. Relax and enjoy these fleeting years along with your kids. They’ll be gone before you know it.

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It's a gift just to be playing
By DOUGLAS E. ABRAMS

At a Clifton Park (N.Y.) hockey tournament for 9 and 10-year-olds last weekend, State Police broke up a fight between parents from two New Jersey teams. With children crying, eight brawling parents were arrested and one was hospitalized with a separated shoulder.

Hardly a week passes without newspaper accounts of verbal or physical violence by parents coping with the pressures that plague kids' games these days. These parents might calm down if they appreciated how fortunate their children are just to be playing.

Most children who romp on playing fields are blessed with a healthy body and a family that can pay for sports. Money and health frequently determine which children get to play and which do not.

In towns with scarce facilities, affordable sports programs are being squeezed by "select" teams for children as young as 6 whose families can spend a few thousand dollars yearly for equipment, pro-style uniforms, interstate gas mileage and weekly hotel bills. Youth sports are booming, but families with tight budgets have fewer sports options for their children today than in the past.

Good health is a gift denied to many children. One afternoon three years ago, my high school hockey team visited the local children's hospital to distribute stuffed animals our fans had donated. The players spent a few hours with children suffering from cancer, paralysis, organ failure and other illnesses. Most of these children will never have the chance to play sports. "Many of these kids," one player whispered after visiting the intensive-care unit, "won't leave that room alive."

At a local hockey game a few hours after my team left the children's hospital, I saw a father screaming at the volunteer coach who, he said, had deprived his 10-year-old son of one turn on the ice -- about a minute of playing time. Too bad this healthy boy's father had not visited the hospital with us to see the anxious faces of parents and children suffering real deprivation.

Parents consumed with their kids' games could also learn something from "The State of the World's Children 2004," the new UNICEF report that describes millions of children suffering from hunger, poverty and disease throughout the world. These children will never experience the organized play Americans take for granted. Their days bring lost meals and medicine, not lost games.

Youth sports would be much better off if more parents felt thankful that their children can participate while millions of others cannot. Thankful parents might ease up and just let the kids play, free from adult disruption that often leaves their children in tears.

(Douglas E. Abrams, a University of Missouri law professor, has been a youth hockey coach for 36 years)

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A Brief History of SAGE

We all know that youth sports can be a wonderful experience for kids. But sometimes we adults get off the track in how to help our children get all the benefits that athletics can offer. It sometimes results in inappropriate parent and coach behavior. The need for a sportsmanship program grew out of these issues.

Adam Mangino, a former state and national referee official, made the first proposal for SAGE in 1998. It took two years of planning before the Mid-New Jersey Youth Soccer Association made it a reality prior to the fall season of 2000. The MNJYSA is a league with almost 900 teams and more than 12,000 players. The league board felt we could contribute to a more productive soccer environment by introducing this program.

Since its introduction, many other clubs and leagues have adopted SAGE. Whether organizations decide to adopt SAGE or some other program is not important. What IS critical is that we adults gain an awareness of the issues that contribute to kids’ enjoyment of the experience. Clearly, two of the top goals are that kids have fun and feel good about themselves, regardless of their ability. And we believe that can be accomplished if we realize that positive feedback in a pleasant tone, not angry feedback in a frustrated tone, can make all the difference in helping our kids gain self-esteem. Parents and coaches can always find something to compliment their kids about even if they are not among the best players. And the message that it is okay to make mistakes, because we all make mistakes, is an extremely important one for our children.

The only constant about SAGE has been change. It will continue to evolve as we get feedback from our clubs and from outside our league. Please feel free to offer your thoughts on how we might improve the program. Contact the current coordinator, Mike Schapiro (mike-s888@comcast.net).

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Starting a SAGE Program

The SAGE program is available to any organization for use in whole or in part at no cost. There are no copyrights or other limitations on its use. We do ask that you let us know what you are doing. That is partly so we can ensure that it is consistent with our efforts but also because you may have some good ideas that we haven’t thought of.
We have provided the SAGE logo to many organizations with their name instead of the Mid-New Jersey Youth Soccer Association. Time allowing, our graphics genius, Ken Schinkel, will be happy to do this for your group.

Rest assured that if you are a large league, it will take time to get measurable results. Human emotions erupt quickly, especially in matters concerning our children, so there will be some bumps in the road to progress. But if we continue on the path and share our experiences, progress will come.

If you check the page titled Contact us and links, you will get to the site of The Kindness Counts Foundation, from where you can find links to other sportsmanship resources besides SAGE. Check them out.

Let us know if we can be of further help.

To ask us questions or offer comments or suggestions, contact Mike Schapiro, SAGE coordinator, at mike-s888@comcast.net.

Click on the following link to The Kindness Counts Foundation, which in turn has links to other sportsmanship resources you can consider.

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