

Yo, parents: Little League is for kids

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Williamsport is the focus of the baseball world this week, as fans from around the world have descended on the central Pennsylvania town for the opening of the Little League World Series.

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discipline, fair play and — most important — dealing with defeat.

They will learn these lessons if they are fortunate enough to be guided by responsible adults who make the kids — not themselves — the priority. Too often, that's not the case.

Most of the parents involved in Little League have good intentions. They sacrifice significant amounts of money and time so their children can participate. They want them to develop their bodies, make friends, and enjoy a healthy, constructive outlet. Most kids, meanwhile, say their main reason for playing is fun.

So why is the dropout rate for Little League players 70 percent by age 13? That's the rate that's been estimated by the National Alliance for Youth Sports, the country's leading advocate for positive, safe children's athletics.

The answer can be found in the attitudes of the parents who coach them.

During the six years I've coached Little League, our teams have played in several local tournaments, as well as some of the major tournaments on the East Coast. It's been quite an education.

I've learned that the best Little League coaches approach the game from an educational standpoint. While they do their best to make baseball competitive as well as fun, their primary goal is to teach the fundamentals of the game. The criticisms they offer are constructive and almost always followed by encouraging remarks.

Often, these parent-coaches are natural teachers who have played the game at a fairly high level. They understand that baseball, more than any other sport, is full of failure — that even the very best hitters fail to reach a base safely in seven out of every 10 at-bats. They acknowledge that an athlete doesn't reveal himself until after puberty — that the Little League prodigy, more often than not, isn't even playing baseball by the time he reaches high school.

Unfortunately, there are also those coaches who place winning above every other consideration. Many of them are manipulative, behaving as if the game is about them, not the kids they coach. They view maximum pitch counts, mandatory playing time, and bat regulations as obstacles to be overcome, instead of restrictions that preserve the integrity of the sport and protect the well-being of the children playing it.

Some of these coaches create year-round programs, forcing kids to choose baseball over other sports in

which they might also have an interest. During the summer, their teams take precedence over all other activities, and the pressure on players to perform well is ever-present in games that become high-stakes affairs.

My sons and I have been lucky to be part of a Little League program that values the learning process as well as the competition. Even the most competitive parent-coaches in our organization take their teaching responsibilities very seriously.

It's an inclusive program that offers various levels of competition based on age, athletic skill, and interest in the sport. In addition, each grade level, beginning with 8-year-olds and ending with 12-year-olds, fields a summer tournament team, and most grades have two tournament teams. For those who are less competitive, there's a weekly intramural program.

Our local league also takes great pride in its Challenger program for youngsters with physical and mental challenges. Challenger players range from 5 to 18 years old and wear the same uniforms, shoulder patches, and safety equipment as other Little League players. Each player gets a chance at bat, and the side is retired when the offense has batted through the roster. No score is kept during the games.

The program has allowed me to establish a closer bond with my 8-year-old son, who is autistic. It's also become an important part of his social development and a source of pride for him and his teammates.

Not all Little Leaguers have the same kind of educational experience. But those who enjoyed their formative years in baseball, and who continue to play in middle and high school,

appear to have benefited from good teacher-coaches at the Little League level.

Perhaps the best we parent-coaches can do for our kids is to listen to them and encourage their interest in the game without allowing our own egos to take control. We've had our time. Let them have theirs.

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