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Intramural Soccer: Setting Our Goals and Understanding Our Roles

The following article was written by Dr. Steve Piltch, Head of School at the Shipley School. He is passionate about the positive role that athletics can play in the development of children and has coached intercollegiate level sports. He and his wife have three children, and he currently coaches in our intramural program. In this piece he shares many of the lessons he has learned during his many years as soccer parent and coach with the hope of helping other soccer parents make positive contributions to their children's experience and LMSC.

As parents we are constantly faced with selecting the activities that provide our children with the best opportunities to grow and learn. While we want to help them become multidimensional individuals, we should be careful not to over-schedule them. In selecting an activity, we must decide what our goals are for our children and what we want out of that particular opportunity. As we select the opportunities, we need to understand the role we have in making them a successful part of our children's lives.

In the case of athletics, specifically intramural soccer, we should remember that it may be our children's first experience in organized competition. Understanding that the kids will come from a range of backgrounds and will have different levels of ability, we should do everything we can to prepare our children for the situation and to understand their relative places on the team. Usually there is a large continuum on the team represented by three or four groups of players: those who are more talented and may aspire to playing travel soccer, those who enjoy intramural play and are either without the ability or the desire to pursue travel soccer, and those for whom there is little interest or ability and who may decide to give it up. (My wife and I have three children who have played intramural soccer and they represent all three of the groups.) Regardless of which groups your children are in at the moment, it is impossible to tell where they will fall in the long run because it can change. We must be comfortable with their level of play and be careful not to judge them.

Regardless of their natural ability, we want all of the players to develop a better understanding of the game and to develop the skills they need to play it. In addition, we want them to develop a sense of teamwork and commitment. Just as with their academic skills such as reading and writing, players develop their soccer skills at different rates and times. We must be patient with them. In addition, while most, if not all, of us, like to win, we must understand that winning is secondary. What we should focus on is the process: helping our children to develop, learn, and grow — and enjoy the experience. If they enjoy it and develop a passion for it, they will stick with and invariably get better at it. Moreover, since good process leads to good results, the wins tend to take care of themselves.

To create the best opportunity possible for our kids, we should encourage them to learn to work hard, to negotiate, and to understand their roles on their teams. While we naturally notice and applaud the kids who are gifted, it is essential that we appreciate and support all of the players in their efforts. When our children are in games, we must find a way to root for them without reflecting negatively on their opponents or teammates. Whether our children are scoring the winning goal or giving it up, we must be able to be there for them and their teammates.

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As much as we all like to win, our children learn at least as much from losing. One of the most important skills that children can learn from sports is resilience. As parents, we often become anxious when our children fall down and/or make errors. In truth, learning to get back up and/or cope with the errors is one of the most important attributes children can develop. The future becomes much more perilous if a child does not get back up or does not have the opportunity to learn from the situation. If our children are to become the best adults they can, we need to allow them to deal with disappointments and frustrations in a productive way. We need to be their allies.

As often as we talk about this as adults, it is much harder to practice on a daily basis. Knowing our kids learn much more from what we do than from what we say, we need to focus our behavior to be consistent and supportive. Here are a few hints that I have learned the hard way:

- ❖ Whenever possible, get your children to their games and practices early; being late makes them anxious.
- ❖ At every game you attend, praise and support both winners and losers. Always be positive in your statements.
- ❖ When you go to a game, be sure to watch it; your children want to know that you are interested.
- ❖ Find a way to ask your children about the experience, and do what you can to support their interest. This might include kicking a ball with them during the week.
- ❖ No matter how close or competitive the game is, keep your emotions in check; if you find yourself getting angry or upset, take a step back from the action without saying anything you might regret. (Parents should never harass any player, coach, or referee.)
- ❖ Give the referee the benefit of the doubt even if he/she makes an overt error. (No spectator should say anything to a referee; if there is a question, the coach of the team should handle it.)
- ❖ Knowing that coaches are doing their best and have many players on their team, try to be patient about any concerns you have regarding such issues as your children's playing time and position.
- ❖ If you have a concern or question for your coach, be sure to voice it at an appropriate time and in a positive and productive manner. Try not to have concerns about such things as playing time.
- ❖ Try to be as involved in the game as a spectator as your child wants you to be but leave the coaching of the game to the team coaches.
- ❖ Enjoy the game.

With the role that athletics play in our society, there is the potential to lose sight of their importance from a developmental perspective. We want our children to enjoy their experience, feel reinforced by it, and develop some of the skills mentioned earlier. If they do this, their experience will be a success. With that in mind, make it a goal to help your children in the process. Let it be about them and for them; most of all, let it be fun.