

Teaching Your Child to Not Be a Sore Loser

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Okay, picture this---your twelve-year-old son has been running his heart out at the soccer game, trying his best to make a goal and contribute to his team's winning record. But, as the final seconds tick by, you have that awful feeling that a win is not in the cards today, and that a major meltdown is just waiting in the wings to occur. Yep, sounds like you've got a kid who is a sore loser, one who just can't stand defeat and is about to let everyone in earshot have a piece of his mind. There will probably be some accusations of others not trying their best, how the referee was unfair and the line judge being "as blind as a bat". And, to top it off, your kid just may come out with some commercial grade cursing to boot. This behavior is humiliating for you to endure, and embarrassing to your son as soon as he cools down and realizes what he's done!

Other kids take losing in a more private, passive manner, obsessing about how the other children are thinking of them, or how unfair the umpire, referee or coach was. Even in the classroom children have difficulty when their grades are less than perfect or what they expected and can quickly develop an attitude of defensiveness—that the teacher has it in for them or that they just aren't smart enough to keep up with the others. If it makes you feel any better, you should realize that most kids have difficulty accepting defeat, but it's your job to help them to understand the loss in a more rational manner.

What's a parent to do when their kid's heart is breaking or pride is being challenged? Especially after the age of three (when children become more aware of embarrassment and performance in front of others) it's important for parents to help kids face adversity in a more positive fashion.

- **Start when your children are young to let them lose at times, even though it's more pleasant when they win.** Sure, it's easier just to let your little one always triumph at the board game, block building, or race to the front door. But learning to accept that not always being first, best, smartest or fastest is still okay is a life lesson that will pave the way for controlled emotions when the child is frustrated in a challenging situation. Consider "losing" as practice in developing patience—a skill that will definitely pay off in the future.
- **Stop yourself from using the old standby phrase "It's only a game—what difference does it make?"** Well, to your son the outcome of the game (at the moment) makes a heck of a lot of difference—everyone is watching and he's sure that the *entire school* will be talking about it on Monday. As his Mom or Dad you know that by Tuesday the entire affair will be forgotten, but your child hasn't developed the disciplined thinking to even begin to consider this, especially when he's so hot under the collar. Rather than lecturing about decorum, it's best to get the kid off the field and into the security of your car so that he can sound off in private without embarrassing himself in front of the coach or peers. This will also enable you to focus entirely upon him and to listen thoroughly before you respond to his irrational anger.

- **Understand and praise your child’s desire to win, your advice can always follow.** If you acknowledge your son or daughter’s motivation (to make the winning goal, to get the coveted “A” in Spanish or to have the teacher select their crayon picture to be placed on the bulletin board for the week) and focus your verbalization upon this, it’s a start. In other words, after the child has cooled down from the angry outburst or the crying fit, let them know that their emotion is reasonable—to be hurt by losing, not being selected or even downright rejected is normal. Now that your child is more open to listening, rather than fussing, he or she just may consider the suggestions that follow.
- **Keep your advice short and to the point.** Children quickly tune out when they feel a lecture coming, and the fewer words that you use the better.
- **When you take something away, give something back.** In your attempt to have your child see the loss from a different perspective (“it’s just the first game of the season, there will be many more; everyone cannot be the fastest runner, block-builder or crayon-drawer—we all have strengths and weaknesses”) you are trying to take something away from the kid—his or her perspective on the defeat. In doing so, a gap is created and it’s imperative that you help the child to fill it. Not only can you begin this process by presenting a different perspective (“you may not be the fastest runner or a whiz at Chutes & Ladders, but you sure can jump rope and make friends easily”), you need to give your child something to do with the anger, hurt or sadness. Saying, “when you lose at a board game, instead of slamming the pieces to the floor, it’s okay to say that you’re mad and to take a break by going to your room for a little time to yourself. In the privacy of your bedroom you can pound the pillow with your fist, draw a picture of how you feel, or write me a note about how unfair it was that I won the game and let you lose.”
- **If your sore loser becomes aggressive or nasty, set definite limits.** Saying, “You’re allowed to punch pillows, run laps around the field, jump up and down...but it’s not okay to punch others or to slam doors in anger.” If your child is a bit older and tends toward cursing, be sure to review the words that are allowed, even in anger, and the ones that are not. Brainstorm about acceptable behaviors, language used and even visualization. Yes, visualization—picturing something funny that gets your child laughing will conflict with the hurt or angry emotions of the moment.
- **Finally, look at your own ability to handle disappointments.** Check out your behavior and attitude when it comes to your own frustration tolerance when not succeeding (do you curse, slam your fists on the table, break out in tears...or are you introspective, taking responsibility if you did not do your best or gracefully accepting that not everything will be fair?). How’s your sideline sportsmanship when the coach pulls your kid out of the game or the ref makes a bad call? Remember, you are your child’s number one teacher and he or she is watching, learning, and probably mimicking your words and actions. If you are not proud of the way that you handle yourself in frustrating situations begin with some soul-searching introspection and decide on a path of more acceptable behavior and attitude, both in front of your kids at home and also while you’re at work and away from the family. Could be a life lesson in this for you too, Mom and Dad!

