

10 Tips for Sports Parents from a National Team Athlete

by Claire Collins - 07.19.2021

Parents are an integral part to a child's growth, success, and enjoyment of sports. From summer swim league to the US National Rowing Team, my parents have been instrumental in helping me set and achieve my goals. They also have been critically supportive during the failures and injuries. I am most grateful for the independence they have given me in my athletics journey and the support they give to my decisions. Taking ownership for my experiences and goals has enabled me to learn many valuable lessons through sport.

Below are 10 Tips I want to share with you to help you and your kids really gain the most from sports.

1) Have your kids write down their goals and put them in a place where they can see them

When I was younger, I used to write down my goals on a chart using lots of colors. The chart included short and long-term goals and I hung it in my bathroom. I saw it while I was brushing my teeth early in the morning or after getting out of the shower. As I would approach a big competition, I would write my goals in the fog of the mirror. Make this process fun and encourage your kids to write down and display their goals however they want.

2) Encourage your kids to continue multi-sport participation: Part 1

Multi-sport participation is beneficial physically and mentally for athletes, even through high school. Playing many sports allows you to physically use different muscle groups and keep your body more versatile, which helps with an injury. Mentally, it is healthy to mix it up and have kids focus on different activities. They can groove in new motor skills and practice how to approach competition in different sports, for example, a race vs a game. Playing multiple sports helps relieve pressure if they have a “main” sport.

3) Encourage your kids to continue multi-sport participation: Part 2

I believe sports are one of the greatest tools for education. One of the great lessons we can learn is humility. While there are some superstars out there, it is unlikely that a kid is going to be the absolute best at every sport they do. When kids continue to play multiple sports, they are humbled by being put in different positions and by playing a different role on the team in one sport compared to another.

4) Encourage your kids to continue multi-sport participation: Part 3 (Final)

Who knows what sport they will enjoy! When kids continue to play multiple sports, they may end up finding the ones they like best or finding teammates that become new friends. Even though I was serious about swimming in middle school, I continued to play soccer, basketball and lacrosse. If I had chosen to specialize in swimming in high school, I would have not met my two

best friends who were on the volleyball team and I would have not tried rowing, which led me to the opportunity to try out for the Olympic Team.

5) When push comes to shove or failure arrives, let them know they can only control what they can control

I clearly remember the car ride home from a horrible swim meet when I was 13 years old. I did not race well and was crying in frustration when my dad pulled the car over on the side of the road. He said, “Claire, you can only control what you can control.” This lesson has carried me through good days and bad days. Putting my best effort in each day is all I can ask from myself. This lesson is always an especially good reminder when your kid has had a tough game or might be frustrated with how their team is performing. Remind them of that what they can control: their attitude and their effort.

6) Reward your kids for their commitment and hard work every once in a while

While your kids may love the sport they play, they still spend many early mornings or late evenings putting in a lot of hard work. If you can and however you deem appropriate, reward them for their hard work and commitment every once in a while. It could be a donut after practice or a new piece of equipment. When I first started swimming seriously at age 10, I noticed lots of kids had fancy “racing” suits at the meets. My mom explained she wasn’t just going to give me a \$100 suit, I had to earn it. She asked what one of my goals was and said if I achieved it she would buy me the suit. These offers were rare occurrences, which made them special.

7) Give your kids independence...

This means not sitting at every competition and practice. While your presence as a parent is a way to show your support, one of the biggest lessons in sport is building independence and learning how to achieve your goals. Being over-present can create unspoken expectations and pressures for your child, whether they realize it or not. Giving them more independence and freedom will help them learn to take ownership of their athletic experience and the steps they need to take towards their goals.

8) Encourage your kids to start communicating with coaches

It is important that you are supporting your child by communicating with their coaches and checking in about their progress. However, let the kids do the talking sometimes. Encourage your kids to start getting comfortable asking questions and advocating for themselves.

9) Let them be kids!

Make sure to build in time to let your kids be kids. Shuffling them off to tournaments every weekend may not be the most fun way for them to grow up. Let them enjoy weekends off or vacation or time with their friends. Rest is so beneficial and it will keep them fresh and excited about sports!

10) Remind them of the most important thing: TO HAVE FUN!

This is the most important tip of them all. It cannot be emphasized enough. Ask this question to your kid a lot, “Are you having fun?” It will remind them and you regularly what sports is all about. Yes, there will be tough days, but you can gauge whether your kid is enjoying what they are doing or just going through the motions. Have them vocalize what was fun about the day and remind them that having fun is the most important goal.