

Summer is on the wane. Soccer games begin on September 6. If you have just returned from far away places and discover that you have not registered your child, check the RCYSL website for advice. Some divisions are closed but others may be able to add players. Check at www.rcysl.com for more details.

Before the season begins, take some time to think about what you can do to support your child in soccer (or any activity, for that matter). Parents make a huge difference in their child's experience at any age.

The U6 "Swarm Soccer" player, new to the game and just getting comfortable with sharing and taking turns, will need your encouragement to take this big step into team sports and try a new experience. Encouraging them to accomplish these skills is extremely important. The kicking, running and scoring all fall into place naturally as kids play the game.

This fall, these youngest players will be receiving a more structured experience. Coaches and players (and parents) will begin the weekly session with instruction from Brian Pitts or other coaches and then get a chance to try out what they learn in game situations. Learn and play. Each week will build on the previous week.

As parents learn more about the game, they understand more about how to encourage and support their child. An Ann Arbor parent, Dan Saferstein, Ph.D., has written a terrific little book, "Win or Lose; A Guide to Sports Parenting" (www.dansafertein.com). He suggests that we wouldn't think to yell at our child to "round to the highest decimal" or "carry the zero" as the child figures out math. We believe they will figure it out. However, with sports, we somehow believe our children need our constant, vocal direction.

Saferstein encourages us to "be the sports parent you wish you had" in order to end some of the unhappy legacies of our own childhoods. "Children don't benefit in any way from having parents who are too hard on them. They don't become tougher. They don't become more successful. They just become more afraid."

Kids, Saferstein observes, learn that unconditional love is not part of youth sports but they should not have the same environment at home. If you love your child unconditionally that means that despite what he does, you still love him. When you place your child in organized sports, you need to "rise above your frustration and insecurity and show your love no matter what the outcome of the game, no matter how your child happens to perform." When you respect your child's best efforts, she learns to respect herself as well as the team, coaches, opponents and officials, Saferstein points out.

If every game is an opportunity to learn something about the sport and about herself, he explains, your child will feel less pressure by not having to prove herself. "This isn't to say that your child shouldn't be competitive, but rather that your zeal for winning as a parent shouldn't override hers as an athlete."

Kids leave a sport when it is no longer fun to keep learning. Your job as a parent of an athlete is to be certain you are not adding to the pressure on him. Keeping your "sports relationship with your child a fun one, so that it feels that your family is winning no matter what ends up happening on the field" is an important priority for all of us.

Dan Saferstein has many more excellent suggestions for your role as a sports parent. For instance, he suggests trying the sport yourself, getting to know the coaches so you can relax and stop sideline coaching, and recognizing when your child needs a break or a change in activity. Focus on raising an "active adult". Practice acceptance and good humor until it becomes second nature. Excellent advice for all of us at any age.