



How to Pick the Right Basketball Program, Coach, or Camp for Your Young Player

This week we are going to address a problem that many parents face when it comes to their young player's participation in basketball. How do you choose the right program, coach, or camp to get involved with? What are the characteristics of a coach that you should be looking for so that your child's participation will be a positive experience for them? Is the program/coach/camp you are considering the right fit for your young player's long term development as both an athlete and a person?

Let's start with what kids want from participating in sports.

All of the survey results cited in this post were obtained from "Visek, Amanda J. et al., *"Fun Integration Theory: Towards Sustaining Children and Adolescents Sport Participation," Journal of Physical Activity & Health, 2014.*

Here is what kids say is the most fun about participating in sports.

1. Trying your best
2. When the coach treats player with respect
3. Getting playing time
4. Playing well together as a team
5. Getting along with your teammates
6. Exercising and being active

48. Winning

67. Earning medals and trophies

73. Traveling to new places to play

You'll notice that kids want to be part of the action and they want the social connections that sports provide. Winning is WAY down the list. Do these goals align with yours as a parent? Do they align with the organization or coach you have chosen? In most cases today, the answer is probably no. As adults we get caught up in winning and losing. We REALLY want to win that 5th grade basketball tournament! We want our young player to be part of a winning travel team that goes on long road trips to play in elite tournaments so they can get "exposure". Winning, getting a trophy, and traveling might be what we think kids like, but they lag far behind the desire to participate, play their best, have teammates they like, and most importantly have fun. Refocus yourself on what is important to your young player. How do you find out? Ask them about their goals and preferences



when it comes to sports. Make sure your child's participation is based on their needs and not your own.

I struggle with this myself as a parent. Basketball has helped me have so many great experiences and opportunities to impact others. I want to share that with my own kids. I have to consciously dial back my expectations for them so I don't try to make my dream theirs. I have to let them experience the game as part of their own journey. It is doubly difficult because I also serve as the coach for the youth teams they play on. I have to hold them accountable as a coach and still provide the love and support they need from me as a parent. It is not the easiest line to navigate as many of you who coach your kids can probably attest.

Now let's talk coaches. What do kids want in a coach?

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What kids want in a coach.

1. Respect and encouragement
2. Positive role model
3. Clear, consistent communication
4. Knowledge of sport
5. Someone who listens

Take a look at the list. 4 out of the 5 have NOTHING to do with the sport they are coaching. As an adult, I would want that exact same list from a boss at my job. Kids need that kind of emotional support to create a "safe" environment where they can learn the game and improve their sport specific skills. Coaches have the ability to create athletes that will participate in sports for a lifetime or be turned off to the point that they quit before even reaching adolescence. That is a lot of power placed in a coach's hands.

In a nationally representative espnW/Aspen Institute Project Play survey, more than 60 percent of parents of children ages 18 and under identified the "quality or behavior" of coaches as a "big concern." That is a huge number! I see coaches yelling at officials, using bad language, berating kids, encouraging poor sportsmanship, and the list unfortunately goes on and on. No wonder parents are concerned. More training for coaches is necessary as is the need for more oversight from those organizations that employ coaches either as paid employees or volunteers.



How can you as a parent make sure you are choosing the right basketball program/coach/camp for your young player?

Here are some simple guidelines to follow.

1. Find a program/coach/camp that emphasizes fun, skill development, and character over winning and encourage other parents to do the same. If everyone flocks to organizations that put winning first, we'll turn off a ton of kids before they even get to middle school.
2. Ask the coach or program director about their coaching/program philosophy. It should be related to having fun, developing players' skills, and character development through the sport. If the talk turns to how much they are going to win, walk away. (That doesn't mean I don't want win. I want to win badly, but winning is a by-product of running a program the right way. I don't judge my success on wins and losses and neither should you.)
3. If possible, watch the coach or other coaches in the organization to see how they interact with kids, parents, officials, and other coaches. Sit in on a day of camp. You'll get an excellent view into the type of role model your young player will be exposed to as a member of the team or organization. Are coaches respectful and encouraging? Do they listen and communicate well, both with players and parents.
4. Does the coach have a growth mindset for him or herself and the players? Are players encouraged to make mistakes and learn from them or is every mistake a reason for the buzzer to sound and that player to be replaced in the lineup.
5. Where are the games being played? Kids don't care about traveling to another state to play. They don't want to sightsee. They want to play. The younger the child the more local the games should be!
6. The coach should be teaching man to man defense. This is how kids learn the game best and develop good habits that will stick with them as they get older.
7. Look for a program or coach that will give your young player playing time. This is a key ingredient to the happiness of your child. They can't get better sitting on the bench for an "elite" team and they won't have fun in that scenario either.
8. A team, league, or camp that is comprised mostly of competitive games, but little practice time, will not provide the opportunities for a coach to teach and develop his or her players.
9. You don't have to spend thousands of dollars to travel the country to find the right coach/program/ or camp. They are out there, you just have to look.
10. It may not be easy to do everything on this list prior to joining a team, playing for a particular coach, or registering for a camp, but it's worth it to do as



much homework as you can prior to getting involved. If you have a bad experience, don't go back! There are programs, coaches, and camps out there running their organizations the right way. Find people that make youth basketball fun and enjoyable for your young player so they'll develop a love for the game!

As I have written before, if your child doesn't love the game, they will never practice or play enough to be great. Exposing them to poor role models and coaches at a young age will just drive them away from the game.

Here is the list again of what kids say is the most fun about participating in sports. Does it match the values of the program/coach/camp that you are considering???

1. Trying your best
2. When the coach treats player with respect
3. Getting playing time
4. Playing well together as a team
5. Getting along with your teammates
6. Exercising and being active

HEAD START

BASKETBALL
