How to help your child play well, have fun and get the most out of sports


When my child is 21 years old, what kind of person do I want him or her to be—and how will sports help us, as parents, to get our child there?

Think of organized sports as a serious form of play. Sports structure play. There are rules to obey, skills and positions to learn, plays to follow.

The demands required to become good at any sport, combined with the intensity of competition, can introduce our children to the pursuit of excellence.

The hunger for mastery, the willingness to accept one’s own strength and limitations, as well as the recognition of the needs and rights of others are all crucial aspects of responsible, mature adulthood.

Sports can help develop these areas of competence, but it does not happen without guidance, direction and strength from caring parents and coaches.

The challenge for all adults involved in youth, high school or even collegiate sports is to preserve the enjoyment of playing while introducing the structure and discipline of teamwork, skill and technique. Because children are vulnerable and still growing, they need our ongoing help in mastering this challenge.

Today’s youth sports culture

What makes it so hard these days to teach our kids how to play well, have fun and be good people?

To begin with, there’s so much “outcome pressure” now, even on young children. Many start to specialize in one sport at a young age—and both girls and boys are beginning to play on organized teams as early as five.

Choosing the right teams and programs is more difficult because the sports culture has changed since many of us were kids. Non-school sports programs have expanded. There are more travel teams, tryouts and cuts necessary to build these squads—not to mention the parental effort required for taking children to games “on the road.”

The big emphasis now is on winning. As one parent lamented, “This league used to focus on developing good
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Kids who were good athletes. Now we’re all about winning. If you can’t help them win, they don’t care too much about you.”

Contending with our own emotions
Another challenge to teaching children how to play well, have fun and also build character is our own emotional baggage. Some of us are eager to see our child achieve what we ourselves could not or did not accomplish. Others find it troubling to observe their kids perform in a public arena where they are on display at vulnerable moments.

Our anxieties get played out in many ways, most notably during the “post-game quiz and lecture,” in which parents relentlessly question and critique a child. “How come you didn’t shoot more?” “You guys played like you didn’t want to win.” And so forth. This is one of the most corrosive ways in which we, as parents, can suck the joy out of sports for our children.

We must do a better job at being role models for young athletes. Let’s slow down and review what we really want children to experience when they play sports.

For example, try to replace, “Did you win?” with questions that reveal other values such as “How was it?” “Did you have fun?” “Did you give your best effort?” “Did you play as a team?” These emphases give more than lip service to character-building.

A three-step approach to navigating youth sports
The basic steps in this approach are to know your child, know yourself and know your child’s sports environment.

Know your child
Understanding the unique needs and abilities of each child is essential. What particulars of temperament and talent, risk factors and extenuating circumstances exist for this child? One 10-year-old girl may thrive on a soccer team while her 12-year-old sister may worry more about how her hair looks as a cheerleader.

Don’t make assumptions or set expectations based on a child’s initial encounters with a sport. Keep in mind that kids’ interests often change as time passes. A baseball player from ages 8 to 12 might drop the sport completely at 13 or 14. Be aware too that talent often develops into the late teens.

Here are some key questions to ask when you contemplate your child’s involvement in sports.

How does she or he approach new experiences and new people?

How is my child doing in areas of confidence, emotional control, relationships, judgment and sports-related skills?

How well does my child accept limits and take instruction?

Can he or she ask for help if it’s needed?

How balanced is my child’s range of activities including school, work, time with friends, sports and other interests?

Know yourself
Many of us have had unhappy personal experiences with athletics that cloud our ability to respond to what’s going on with our kids and sports. We need to be aware of our emotional history in relation to issues of competition and athletic achievement. If we can manage our own disappointments, fears and frustrations, we’re in a much better position to be helpful to our children.

As parents, we need to have a firm grasp of what our kids can handle physically, emotionally and mentally at any given age. And we need a clear head to identify our values, to see what our child is learning at any particular moment and to ask ourselves the question: Whose game is this, mine or my child’s?

Here are some questions parents should ask themselves when reviewing and assessing their child’s involvement in sports.

Have my spouse or partner and I agreed on an overall philosophy of sports participation for our child? In other words, do we have a family sports mission statement?

Have we defined 3–5 virtues that are essential to a positive sports experience for our child?

What sports-related event or behavior (crying, unfair outcomes, unfair playing time, errors, defeat) seems to set me off emotionally?

Can I link anything in my own past to my child’s behavior that sets off these feelings?

What was my best experience in sports? What factors made it rewarding and positive? What good parts of my experience can I hand down to my children?

Know your child’s sports environment
Our society emphasizes immediate gratification, speed, convenience and outcomes more for the individual than for the group. Sports are deeply affected by this trend. Even in youth and high school sports, cheating, rage at umpires and referees and out-of-control fans can overwhelm the positive aspects of athletic competition. We must know the community we live in and its approach to sports. Inquire about sports programs as you would about schools or churches. It’s easier to support your family’s values when other parents and coaches are like-minded, and it’s well worth the effort to find programs, coaches, administrators and fellow parents whose goals are similar to yours.

Here are some key questions to ask about a sports program when reviewing and assessing your child’s involvement.

Does the program have a mission statement? Does it include the promotion of virtue or values? How specific is it?

What do parents (past and current) say about their children’s involvement in the program?

Does the program regularly screen coaches by implementing background checks?

How much emphasis is placed on championship banners, trophies and travel-team awards? Is most of the formal recognition given for winning? Performance? Achievement?

Observe a game or practice unannounced. How much fun do the players seem to be having?

—Adapted from the authors’ book “Whose Game Is It, Anyway?” (see We Recommend on page 8).

Next month on our Parenting page, we will talk about sports challenges for children at different ages.
Middle-age brain does the ‘big stuff’ best

A reader writes:

Have you heard about Barbara Strauch’s new book *The Secret Life of the Grown Up Brain*. In it, she argues that on a range of cognitive skills, the middle-aged brain (roughly 40 to 68) outperforms all other age groups.

As she explains, the grown-up brain has developed “powerful systems that cut through the intricacies of complex problems to find concrete answers. It more calmly manages emotions and information. It is more nimble, more flexible, even cheerful.”

On four of six mental abilities, the peak comes in mid-life. The middle-aged brain does a better job of sizing up situations, making connections and seeing the wider context. And all of these skills give us better judgment.

As people get older, we’re more appreciative of subtlety, nuance and ambivalence. Some studies have found that wisdom peaks in our later years—after a sustained accumulation through mid-life.

I was a little surprised to learn that the middle-aged brain is also more cheerful, but it makes sense. On a range of tests, older people became less anxious about negative stimuli and responded very strongly to positive stimuli.

We’ve heard all the talk about the “sandwich generation” that’s struggling to both raise kids and care for aging parents. But it looks to me like they’re doing a very good job. The middle-aged have become remarkably competent jugglers of their responsibilities.

In 1900, life expectancy was 47, which makes old age a modern phenomenon—and, as Margaret Gullett has written, we’ve accepted a false “ideology of decline.”

I’m just happy that science is exposing these myths. And I’m going to stop beating myself up for occasionally losing my keys, repeating myself, or forgetting a name. On the big stuff, I’ve learned, I’m brilliant! ◆

—E.B.H., New Rochelle, NY

New discoveries for health and long life

The secret to a long life has been studied endlessly, and many answers have been suggested. Education. A positive attitude. Happiness. A good marriage. The ability to handle stress. Biology is also assumed to be a factor: if your parents lived to 85, you probably will too.

For their new book *The Longevity Project* (Hudson Street Press), Howard S. Friedman and Leslie R. Martin, Ph.D.s, pored over the results of a study that was launched in 1921 with a group of 1,528 San Francisco 11-year-olds. And they’ve concluded that the best childhood personality predictor of longevity is actually conscientiousness. They cite the qualities of a prudent, persistent, well-organized person—one who’s mildly obsessive and not at all carefree. Researchers offer three explanations:

Conscientious people are more likely to live healthy lives, to not smoke or drink to excess, to wear seat belts, to follow doctors’ orders and to take medication as prescribed.

Conscientious people tend to find themselves in healthier situations and relationships: happier marriages, better friendships, healthier work situations.

Conscientious people are also less prone to a whole host of other diseases that are unrelated to smoking or drinking. This may have something to do with levels of chemicals like serotonin in the brain.

Surprisingly, perhaps, the authors found that optimism actually has a downside as a lifespan factor. If you are very cheerful and optimistic, especially in the face of illness and recovery—and you don’t consider the possibility that you may have setbacks—then those setbacks are harder to deal with, says Dr. Martin. In other words, if you always think “everything’s fine,” you may be setting yourself up for a fall.

And as important as exercise is, it too has its drawbacks—if you push yourself to extremes and don’t really enjoy it.

Eighty years into the longevity project, it’s still far from over. Dr. Martin is looking into other variables such as sleep patterns, and Dr. Friedman is looking at retirement issues. “We know it’s not good to retire and go to the beach,” he said, “but it’s also not good to stay in a stressful boring job.” And there’s a misconception about the role of stress.

“A hard job that is also stressful can be associated with longevity,” Dr. Friedman continued. People who were involved, working hard, were responsible—no matter what field they were in—were more likely to live longer. ◆

What to make of the research on mercury in fish

After hearing about studies that have found traces of mercury in fish and shellfish, you have to wonder: Is it safe to eat—especially by women who are or may become pregnant and young children?

Both the FDA and EPA emphasize that fish is an important part of a healthy diet. But pregnant women, nursing moms and young children should avoid certain types. Here’s what we all need to be aware of:

• Five commonly eaten fish that are low in mercury are salmon, shrimp, pollock, catfish and canned light tuna. Shark, swordfish, king mackerel and tilefish contain high levels of mercury.

• Albacore “white” tuna contains more mercury than canned light tuna. Pregnant women and young children should not eat more than 6 ounces of albacore and 12 ounces of light tuna in a week.

• Check local advisories about the safety of fish caught in your area. The Seafood Selector at www.edf.org is another helpful guide. ◆
Coping with confusion and memory loss

By Susan C. Walker

If your mom remembers going to a movie but forgets the title, that’s probably just a lapse of normal aging. If she doesn’t remember going to the movie at all, it’s a more serious concern. Because of brain changes, some older people are no longer capable of learning significant new information—and they have a hard time understanding even the familiar.

If confusion and forgetfulness have become a problem, your parent may turn to you for help with daily activities. Simplifying the home environment and adjusting your own expectations will help both you and your older relative move through the day more smoothly.

Learn as much as you can

It helps to know why someone has become forgetful, because some kinds of confusion can be reversed—if it’s caused by depression or by medications, for example. On the other hand, Alzheimer’s disease and multi-infarct or small stroke dementia are irreversible.

Specialists in diagnosing people with memory loss and confusion include geriatricians, neurologists and psychiatrists. For a holistic assessment, seek out a physician who works with a team in a senior health care setting.

Once the reversible causes of a problem are eliminated, you’ll need to take action. Just remember that your parent’s life is not over because he or she is confused, but you will need to become more helpful to your older relative. Here are some approaches that work:

Make directions one at a time and to the point. Instead of “Hurry up and get ready. We have to go to the store,” say “Come with me. Here’s your coat.”

Ask questions that can be answered with a yes or no. Instead of saying “Tell me about your day,” ask “Did you have a good day?” Your parent may not be able to retrieve words needed for a full-sentence response, but the ability to respond to a simple question allows him or her to share in the joy of conversation.

Limit choices to areas your parent truly understands and where a wrong choice will not cause a problem. So while you may not be able to let someone choose whether to see a doctor, he or she can decide what time to eat dinner.

Remove background noise. Playing the television or radio while you are giving instructions increases the likelihood that you will not be understood. Use radio and TV when these are the main activities the two of you are doing.

Avoid negatives. Minimize your chances of getting into situations where inappropriate behavior is likely to occur. Protect your relative from events or circumstances that might cause him or her to become agitated.

Preserve the person’s dignity. Is it really necessary to move your mother if she’s sitting in your seat at the dinner table, for example? Let her stay where she is, and you sit somewhere else.

Validate your relative’s feelings when he or she says things that are not based in reality. If your father suddenly asks about your mother, you don’t have to remind him that she died five years ago. Reassure him that she’s okay and go on to reminisce together about her. What he’s really looking for may simply be the warm feelings he associates with your mother.

Pay attention to body language. Don’t force your mother to sit down when she appears to need to move around. Assume that her body language (walking, pacing or other anxious behavior) is a sign that she may be cold, hungry or may need to go to the bathroom.

Recognize word substitutions. Rather than correcting your dad who is referring to you as his mother, give reassurance that you are someone who cares about him. Your smile and touch will tell him that you and he have a special relationship, even though he may not be able to totally sort out what that relationship is anymore.

Adjusting the environment

It will likely be necessary to simplify your parent’s home environment for maximum safety and activity. Here are some suggestions:

- Lock drawers that hold important papers, knives, scissors and other items that your parent might lose or use in an unsafe manner.
- Leave out some paper and writing materials. Your parent may enjoy the feeling of being “back at work,” opening mail and writing memos. Official-looking mail and ads may do the trick.
- Remove unnecessary furniture and knickknacks from living areas. Leave a favorite chair, couch or footstool, but be sure there’s a clear path to each piece of furniture. Provide color contrast between furniture and floor so your parent can clearly see where one ends and the other begins.
- Keep a set of traveling items in a place where only you have access. Your relative may hide things where neither of you can find them. Putting shoes, hat, jacket and other necessary items away will save you time and frustration when you’re ready to leave for an important appointment.

For more information

Even though your older relative may be suffering from another form of dementia, the Alzheimer’s Association can still be of assistance. Contact www.alz.org or (800) 272-3900 and ask to be sent the “basic information” packet. Request specifically the booklet “Steps to Selecting Activities for the Person with Alzheimer’s Disease.”

Easing the transition to a new school year

As working parents, many of us look forward to the beginning of school. If nothing else, it’s a relief not to have to deal with those “down times” before and after vacations—when we have to go to work and still keep our children busy, happy and safe at home.

Many kids look forward to the new school year too and, like us, their anticipation is tinged with apprehension. Transitions are exciting but can be scary. Will my teacher be nice? Will the older kids tease me on the bus? Will I still be in a class with my friends? Will I be able to find my way in the new building? How much homework will I have to do this year?

Time to plan ahead

As parents, we want to help our children make a smooth adjustment to their new situation, whether it’s child care, first grade, junior high school or college. We are concerned about how to be supportive but at the same time encourage a child’s independence. Can we “let go” and still make sure that our child is having positive experiences in school and with her or his friends.

Here are some things parents can do in the summer to prepare for the school year.

- Give children of any age a chance to tell you what’s on their minds. Listen and don’t minimize what your children is feeling. Their fears and anxieties may seem foolish to you, but they are real to your kids. With a young child, you might “play act” a scary situation. With an older child, you might try out different scenarios: If Johnny starts teasing you on the bus again, what will you say?
- If a child is moving to a new building and there’s no plan for a formal orientation, arrange to visit the school one day, even though there may only be a partial staff there.

Check out the bathrooms, cafeteria, school office and playground as well as classrooms.

- Try to locate another student who will be in your child’s class this year or who already goes to that school. Take the time to call and arrange to meet, or at least talk, before school starts. Establishing this connection is worth the effort and can make a big difference to a child starting a new school.

Getting there and back

Whether your child will get to school by bus, car or on foot, it will help to make a few dry runs before the big day. If it’s a new school, drive the route together so you can learn the way and see how long it takes. Or locate the bus stop and see if you can find a few other children who will be riding on the same bus.

- If you plan to walk your child to school, a good project this summer would be to make a map of the route. Include stores, buildings, parks and other landmarks. You can do it with crayons and magic markers or with blocks or pasted cutouts from magazines.

On the home front

- Spend some time during the summer thinking about what will be different this school year. Will you have to pack one or more lunches to send to school? Will you need to arrange for someone to pick up your child after soccer practice? Make a plan for who will do what, at least for the early fall.

- Start to ease back into your fall routines a couple of weeks before the first day of school. If your kids have been sleeping late in the morning and eating at odd hours, for example, they will need to get back into a more regular schedule so they can get up on time and be ready to leave for school early in the morning.

Transitions for older children

Some children who will be attending a new school this year see it as an adventure and look forward to the challenges they will meet. Others are concerned about how they will fare both academically and socially.

Children may worry about safety in the new school neighborhood as well as finding their way in the building. They’re also concerned about being accepted by their peers. Dr. Sidney Simon has said that kids worry: “Will I be enough—smart enough, pretty enough, tall enough, have enough of the right clothes?”

Even a child who is looking forward to attending a new school may feel some extra stress at this time. Try to keep your calendar as clear as possible during the first month of school, so you can spend a little more time being cozy with your child, talking, reading, taking walks or playing games—whatever you have fun doing together.

Keeping in touch with school and teachers

Here are a few tips to help keep the lines of communication open with your child’s school and teachers.

- Be specific early in the school year about how you can be reached on the job. Can you be called directly? Will someone give you a message? Is there another way to reach you if your voice mail is on? Do you keep your mobile phone on and check phone and text messages?
- Find out how to contact the school and/or your child’s teacher(s). Can you call during the day? In the evening? What about email?
- Email is used by many schools these days for getting assignments, accessing grades and for communications between parents and teachers. It can also be used creatively. For example, on Fridays a high school French teacher in Indiana emails her students a story using the new vocabulary they learned during the week. Students can get extra credit for translating the story or retelling it to their parents. Ask whether and how email is used in your child’s school.

Dr. Sidney Simon, a professor emeritus of psychology at Indiana University, has written many books, including “Breakfast with Dr. Simon.”
What we can learn from ‘idea people’

T he fast pace of our society demands divergent thinking that takes us into the new and unknown. Some people call this “thinking outside the box,” but it’s really just another way of saying that we have to be more creative in our thinking.

Creativity has always been helpful to the problem-solving process. But with the downturn of the economy and so much job uncertainty, some people may feel hesitant to suggest a bold new idea that may or may not work. Relying on more familiar approaches and solutions probably feels “safest.”

We can all be creative

There’s nothing magical about creativity. It’s something we’ve all practiced in our own lives, though we may call it by other names. Just take a look at the everyday problems you handle in a given week. Chances are, you’ll see a lot of creativity in your solutions, especially the temporary ones.

“If you want to enhance your own creativity, increase your knowledge of the world around you,” says blogger D.P. Noe on the website helium.com. “Learn about new ideas and trends in your field. Pay attention to how things affect your organization or the industry you are working in.”

Always ask why, where, what, who and when. The answers to these basic questions, Noe suggests, will increase your understanding of the challenges you face—and of potentially different ways to handle problems in the workplace.”

Here are some more suggestions for ways to become a more creative thinker.

Be a problem-finder as well as a problem-solver. Be curious when you hit some of the same snags more than once. Ask yourself, “What’s going on here? Is something new happening?”

Challenge your assumptions. Think of a problem as a machine with lots of moving parts. Turn it upside down. Think backward, forward and sideways. Don’t automatically shoot down a “crazy idea.” Remember, the Fed Ex idea to fly packages to one location, sort them and fly them out again to points around the country was once judged “impractical.” Be aware that a “crazy” idea today may be sane and doable tomorrow—given new circumstances such as a new technology.

Tinker around the edges. If you can’t see the entire picture, don’t give up trying. After all, even in situations when we thought we knew everything we needed to know, it turned out that we didn’t.

Once you venture into the unknown, even with a small step, chances are you’ll learn something that will lead you to the next step. Of course, it may take a concrete action plan and strategies to make a new idea happen. Try a pilot project. You’ll learn a lot from the experience.

Be collaborative. Bounce your ideas off other people. It’s hard to be objective about the work that we do in isolation. We all benefit by sharing ideas and getting feedback from our colleagues.

Look for simplicity. Great ideas often seem so obvious that you have to ask, “Why didn’t someone think of that before?” Even the most brilliant theoretical scientists search for simplicity. They use words like “elegant” for ideas that explain their observations clearly and with an economy of language.

Change your perspective. Be flexible. For example, if you’re looking at a problem from your vantage as an employee, try taking the customer’s point of view. If your vantage is Human Resources, try to see it from IT’s perspective. This approach works well at home too with the people you live with.

Have fun. On a personal level, “idea people” seem to have more fun on their jobs. They get pumped up and feel happy about themselves and their work—be cause they’re exercising an important part of themselves.

In fact, laughter does have the power to unfreeze old habits and enhance our ability to forge new relationships—which is often what it takes to find a creative solution. One study found that even laughing at a joke can give people a feeling of elation that helps them move toward an innovative solution.

A brainstorming session is a great way to generate new ideas.
What’s all the fuss about green tea?

It’s everywhere—hot, cold, brewed, bottled. You can drink it straight or added to juices, coffee and even ice cream.

The new bottled products especially cite green tea’s “natural goodness” and research that suggests major health benefits.

But solid evidence is hard to come by and is, at best, very “iffy,” says Purdue University researcher Mario Ferruzzi. In other words, what you drink—and how much of it—really matters.

To get maximum benefits from green tea polyphenols, here’s what’s recommended:

- Drink a cup of brewed tea, not an instant or bottled ready-to-drink product.
- Steep the tea leaves or tea bag for at least three minutes to allow the polyphenols to dissolve in water.
- Squeeze in a little lemon. It provides vitamin C that protects polyphenols from being lost.
- Drink a cup of tea every day. Better yet, drink three!

If you drink a bottled product

Look for one that’s made primarily from brewed green tea, not tea extracts or concentrate, though the labeling on these products is confusing. Be aware also that you’d have to drink a lot more to get the same amount of polyphenols as in a cup of brewed tea. And that’s a bad idea, because most of the bottled products are heavily sweetened with sugar, high fructose corn syrup or honey.

Studies find choice is clear...sit or get fit

The important message from new research is that physical activity is key to living healthier longer. Anything you do that gets you up and moving around is better than doing nothing—and getting fit will protect everything from your waistline to your brain. Here’s what the studies have found:

- **People who spent at least two hours a day** sitting in front of the computer or TV for entertainment were more than twice as likely to suffer a cardiovascular event than those with less than two hours of average daily screen time, according to a University College London study published in the *Journal of the American College of Cardiology*. The heavy “recreational sitters” were at the greatest risk.

- **Adults who were “completely sedentary” for more than eight hours a day** had bigger waistlines and less-healthy measures of HDL cholesterol and insulin, among other measures. This finding from a University of Queensland (Australia) study was reported in the *European Heart Journal*.

- **Seniors who walk faster tend to live longer**, according to a University of Pittsburgh study that measured the gait speed of nearly 35,000 seniors. The findings were published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*.

- **Over the course of a 20-year study at Northwestern University, the most active men** gained six pounds less than the least-active men, and the most active men added 1.2 inches less to their waistlines. The most active women in the study did even better: they put on 13.4 fewer pounds and stayed 1.5 inches slimmer around the waist. These findings were also published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*.

- **Aerobic walking is good for your brain.** In a study reported in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science*, a group of men and women in their 60s gained an average of two percent in volume in the hippocampus, the part of the brain that is key to memory—and which typically shrinks with age.

What if your job involves extended sitting time?

Researchers have found that simply getting up and moving around for as little as one minute was linked to improvements in waist circumference and C-reactive protein scores.

—Adapted from Tufts University Health & Nutrition Letter

Plan ahead for your trip...and take enough medicine

If you run out of medicine on a trip abroad, you may have trouble filling your U.S. prescription. Policies vary not only from country to country but from pharmacist to pharmacist, says Myriah Lesko of the International Pharmaceutical Federation.

For example, be aware that in Japan, travelers may not have any amount of a stimulant (such as Ritalin), even for personal medical use. And heartburn medication is more tightly regulated in Europe than in the U.S.

Here’s what health professionals advise:

- **Carry a surplus** of your medicines in their original containers, along with a copy of the paper prescription.

- **Because brand names vary so widely**, it’s important to know the generic names of any drug that you’re taking. Buying a generic drug will probably also be much cheaper.

In a worst-case scenario (say you lost your meds or they were confiscated when you crossed a border), you might try the nearest U.S. Consulate or Embassy and ask for a list of local doctors.

Another option is to go to the Web site of the International Association for Medical Assistance to Travellers, iamat.org, a nonprofit organization. Membership is free and the group has lists of English-speaking doctors all over the world.
Finding a balanced approach to children’s sports

Most parents see participation in sports as an important learning experience that enhances children’s social skills, physical health and happiness.

The authors of Whose Game Is It Anyway? agree with this point of view. Organized sports give kids opportunities to face challenges that will help them learn about themselves and the world.

At the same time, they’re realistic about the ways our culture puts pressure on both children and parents: for example, demands for immediate gains, instant gratification and a focus on winning. As a result, at all levels of sports, incidents from the embarrassing to the horrific take place every day.

Richard D. Ginsburg, Ph.D., and fellow authors Stephen Durant, Ed.D., and Amy Baltzell, Ed.D., say we need perspective: “Though sports can involve serious play, especially as children get older, it is play nonetheless. It isn’t war. It isn’t a life or death matter, and it shouldn’t be made into that.”

They challenge assumptions such as the relationship between sports and character building. “Sports don’t build character—people do,” they write. “Good character in a child is built through ongoing relationships. No one activity or sport magically confers the reward.”

Their three-step approach to navigating youth sports is helpful (see front page), and they provide practical advice on issues such as: what to expect of a child at each age and stage; should we push kids and, if so, how much; how to help kids practice emotional control; recognizing the best team experiences; does the coach know best; and body image issues.

For those who may be discouraged about the role of sports in kids’ lives, the authors of this important book have an upbeat message: “Ultimately, our sports culture will take its direction from the decisions of families like our own. If we…clearly demand a balanced approach to organized youth sports, equally supporting skill development and fun, others will follow.”

Whose Game Is It, Anyway? ($15, paperback, Houghton Mifflin) is available in bookstores and online. •

Work & Family Life provides information and practical solutions to a wide range of family, job, and health issues. Our purpose is to help our readers reduce their stress and find pleasure and satisfaction in their many roles at work, at home, and in their communities.