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Understanding and Teaching Sportsmanship to Today's Youth

Amy Lawyer, Equine Extension

Sportsmanship is something that we can usually recognize, but it can be hard to define, which can make it difficult to teach to others. Some people seem to innately possess the mentality for sportsmanship and making the correct decisions, but others must be taught.

How does one go about imparting such knowledge to youth who are growing up in such a “me”-centric, instant-gratification world? To successfully teach others, you must have an understanding of what sportsmanship is, hold high expectations for youth to live up to, and act as a positive example.

The concept of ethics is important to the understanding of sportsmanship. Ethics are the rules of moral conduct that we live by. Ethical behavior is characterized by following established rules and acting in compliance with the social norms of a given culture. Sportsmanship is fair play, respect for opponents, and gracious behavior in winning and losing. Sportsmanship takes ethics into a competitive realm. We can remain ethical yet fail to be a good sport; however it is impossible to exhibit good sportsmanship without also being ethical. In essence, sportsmanship takes ethics to a new level.

Competition can bring about a myriad of issues. It can provide motivation, give people goals to work toward, expose areas that need improvement, and reward hard work. However, when winning becomes the most important part of competition, it no longer serves as a positive educational tool. The emphasis of competition should be on learning and growing rather than on winning. When

opponents belittle each other or attempt to gain some sort of illegal advantage, the good that may come from competition is lost as ethics and sportsmanship are forgotten. The value of competition lies in the integrity of its participants. If someone decides that winning is more important than anything else and cheats, the entire competition becomes useless because it is no longer a tool that can be used to accurately assess the participants.

Understanding sportsmanship is essential to modeling sportsmanlike behavior. At the most basic level, sportsmanship consists of following the rules and holding high expectations, not for success but for ethics. Forget congratulatory handshakes and being a gracious loser; if a participant lacks ethical decision making, all other acts of sportsmanship become irrelevant.

Sportsmanship involves attitude. Attitude is one thing that—no matter the results of the competition, the judges' decision, or the behavior of our competitors—we have ultimate control over. However, attitude can be contagious. Having a positive attitude around people with a negative outlook is difficult. But when one person exhibits a poor attitude amongst teammates, coaches, family, and friends who are positive, upbeat, and encouraging, they find it difficult to maintain that attitude. As an adult youth leader or a peer youth leader, the attitude that you choose to display can have an enormous effect on the rest of your group.

The final component of sportsmanship is attainable for those who possess a level of maturity. It is the ability to see past one's own needs to help others. It is honesty

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regardless of outcome. It is admitting fault, even when it might have otherwise gone unnoticed. It is sacrificing the possibility of personal success for the enrichment of others. This approach is not easy. It requires a person whose value system is so deeply rooted in the overall benefit of competition that winning becomes a luxury, and the true opportunity is realized through the preparation and the work put into the process. These people reap their rewards in the satisfaction that they did their best during the parts that they could control and let the rest take care of itself. If a leader can display this type of sportsmanship, the overall result is usually greater than any prize that could be won. This attitude must not only be exemplified through the leader's actions but must also be communicated among the group members. Don't assume that people will inherently know the benefits of hard work and honesty; spell it out so that group members realize the bigger picture and do not adopt the philosophy that winning is the most important aspect of the activity.

When teaching sportsmanship, don't let the idea of putting other's needs above your own be interpreted as not wanting to win, allowing yourself to be treated poorly, or not being disappointed when you lose. Winning can be one of your goals, but do not let the focus be solely on the ribbon, trophy, or recognition. Instead, focus on the hard work, achievement, and value gained. Leaders can help their groups learn these lessons by communicating the main objectives of the activity such as improving skills and learning leadership, responsibility, and teamwork.

To maintain the notion that sportsmanship is important, the leader must set high expectations for the group and refuse to tolerate unsportsmanlike behavior. Above all else, the leader must set an example of what sportsmanship should look like. Leaders of youth groups must shoulder a great deal of responsibility when teaching young people; however there is also great reward in knowing that your actions will have lasting impact on the lives of others. Make sure that impact is positive!