

Good Sports

Session 1: Potential and Perils

Opening Prayer

Gracious God, you know the challenges we face raising our children in this world today.

We remember that Jesus was full of compassion for all the struggling parents he met.

Guide our conversation today so that we can see ourselves and our families with the compassion that Jesus does.

May your Holy Spirit inspire us to know what is best for our children so they will have hearts full of love and goodness.

We ask this in Christ's name.

Amen.

What Does Faith Have to Do with Youth Sports?

Read the talking points throughout this process aloud. Simply have each participant read one paragraph at a time out loud, continuing around the circle.

- When should we first sign our children up for sports? If our child doesn't play on this team this season, will he be able to keep up next season? Is the money outlay for the travel team worth it? What do we do with our other children when one is playing in a weekend tournament? Are we the only ones feeling like we are at the mercy of our kids' sports schedules?
- Such are the questions many parents are asking today—sometimes out loud, but more often silently to themselves—about the world of youth sports. Parents who have a faith commitment have other questions about children's sports experiences too. Do we skip Mass for Sunday games? Even if we have the resources, are the expenses what we are meant to spend our money on? What about families who can't afford for their children to play elite sports? Where do youth sports fall in our family's values and priorities?
- Under the direction of Pope Francis, a former soccer player and big soccer fan, the Vatican released a 52-page document highlighting the church's positive view of sports. At the same time, it warns against the dangers of highly competitive children's sports. The existence of the document attests to how much athletics have become a part of daily life for a significant percentage of the population.
- As parents, we all want to do what is best for our children. We want them to be healthy, happy, and well-adjusted. We want them to fit in with their peers, navigate the challenges of healthy competition, and learn to persevere in times of adversity. And hey, if they can be a great point guard or a star shortstop and get a college scholarship, all the better, right?
- Whether we have a child who yearns to play ball but struggles because she is always the last one picked for a team, or we have a child born with strong coordination and athletic skill, our faith calls us to be thoughtful about the decisions we make. Playing with other five-year-olds in the local pee-wee hockey league may seem completely harmless, but in the current climate of youth

sports, the situation at age 8, and then 12, and then 15, changes dramatically.

- Jesus once cautioned his listeners to build their houses on solid rock, not shifting sand. It is good advice for us today as we navigate choices around our children's athletic activities. In a society that lavishes attention, praise, and money on successful athletes—even at a young age—we are challenged to play “the long game” in our parenting.
- We may feel some grief if our son doesn't make the high school team because he didn't play in the year-round elite league in middle school. On the other hand, we can remind ourselves that the most important thing is raising a child who is sound in body, mind, soul, and spirit, not whether he plays for the high school soccer team.
- We want to raise children to be who God created them to be, which is not necessarily the athletic stars we would desire them to be. We may well have to swim against the tide of the competitive youth sports culture to hold fast to our faith values of loving neighbors as ourselves, caring for

the poor and vulnerable among us, and working for peace and justice for all. Indeed, Jesus' reminder that “the last shall be first and the first shall be last” is in direct contradiction to the messaging in many sports programs—amateur and professional.

- Written by someone who has wrestled—and continues to wrestle—with these questions as a coach, league board member, and mother to daughters who play both recreational sports and competitive travel ball, this series does not presume to present answers to every family's questions about their participation in sports. What is right for one family will not be right for another. Only you, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, can decide what is best for your particular children at your particular time in life.
- Although this series will focus on the world of youth sports, the material is relevant to discussions on the role of any extracurricular youth activities that our children might participate in (music, theater, art, etc.).

Gifts and Benefits of Youth Sports

- Participating in organized sports can provide a wealth of benefits for children and youth. There is the obvious physical benefit of better health that comes with moving their bodies, breathing the fresh air, and getting out into the sunshine, all advantages that playing sports have over spending time bent over a screen in this digital age.
- Then there is the benefit of the socialization that comes from being in another environment outside of the classroom. As a softball coach, I can attest to how beautiful it was to watch my team of nine- and ten-year-olds learn to respect and care for an autistic teammate, Allison, whose behavior was sometimes challenging or inappropriate. (At school, the girls didn't usually have the chance to mix since Allison was in the special education wing of the school.) Yes, Allison “cost” the team a win in the playoffs by her inattention in the game, but the biggest victory of the season was that not a single girl blamed her afterward, and despite the

defeat, all of the players still thoroughly enjoyed themselves at the closing pizza party.

- Sports can provide rich experiences for young athletes to learn about themselves. The early readers or the math whizzes have to learn how to carry themselves when they don't shine on the field, while the naturally coordinated child who struggles in school finds a place to feel competent and skilled. My younger daughter, for whom most sports have come naturally, had to learn to deal with surprising discouragement when she struggled to learn to swim. She had to learn to persevere in her lessons when we wouldn't let her quit just because it was hard for her. She developed some humility when younger kids sprinted to the far side of the pool ahead of her.
- Athletic participation has the potential to help kids view their bodies positively too. Although many youth (particularly girls) will struggle with a negative body image at some point, playing

sports with and against other youth of all different shapes and sizes can help them to appreciate our human bodies not just for the diverse, beautiful ways they look, but also for the amazing things they can do.

- As parents, we can point out to our kids that God gave us bodies made for movement and relation-

ship. We can help them to notice and celebrate the wonders of what their bodies can do—or learn to do. We can reinforce our Christian belief in the inherent goodness our physical bodies and the call to respect and care for these “temples of the Holy Spirit.”

Reflection Questions

- ① If you played sports as a child, what were some of the benefits of your experience?
- ② What benefits do you hope your child will gain from playing organized athletics?
- ③ If your child is already participating in youth sports, what are some of the gifts he or she has already experienced?

Perils of Youth Sports

- Our family was shocked to learn that there were competitive travel softball teams for eight-year-old girls before my daughter Rachel was invited to join one. At the end of her first season, on the night before the last game, I was sitting on the side of a swimming pool where she and her teammates were playing in the water, splashing, laughing, and screeching with delight. I had felt conflicted all summer about the effects on both for her and our family, and I was pondering whether my husband and I would let her repeat it the following summer. Just then, I overheard Rachel’s coach say to another parent nearby, “Wow, watching them play in the pool reminds me that they’re just little kids. I forget that when they are on the field.”
- Her comment perfectly summarized one of my main concerns about the travel ball experience. These seven- and eight-year-old girls were expected to act years older than they were developmentally. With three hour practices, three times a week, and four to six games at weekend tournaments they were playing about as many hours a week as my college team had!
- Not surprisingly, about half the girls on Rachel’s team would break down crying at some point before or during the third Saturday game, despite their coach’s lecture before the game to “keep your energy up.” How many typical eight-year-olds do you know who can hold it together for three games over a ten hour period in the hot sun with a crowd of parents yelling at them from the bleachers? Even if a second grader can handle that, should he or she have to?
- Unfortunately, the more I have talked with other parents or read about youth sports, the more I’ve learned it this not unusual. The social pressure to play, and to then move “up” into the world of year-round competitive athletics (as opposed to strictly seasonal, local, recreational teams) has intensified in the past few decades. The results are concerning.
- Pediatricians now diagnose children with overuse injuries previously only seen in adults. Kids are burning out at younger ages. Families cough up a lot of cash to pay for private coaching, fancy equipment, and team expenses. Children miss out on opportunities for classic childhood experiences like spontaneous play dates, sleepovers, or good old-fashioned “downtime” because of strict practice and game schedules. Family time is fractured even more when one parent goes to a tournament

with one child while the other parent cares for the other children—if there are two involved parents in the picture to begin with.

- Sadly, the pressure to participate in competitive youth sports leads many of us parents to make choices out of fear, not love. As a parent and coach, I've either thought to myself or heard out loud all of the following fears voiced by parents. If he doesn't start soccer by kindergarten, he won't be able to catch up to his peers who started in preschool. If we don't pay for a private pitching coach, she won't be the #1 pitcher on her team next year. If we let him play three sports a year, he'll fall behind in his favorite sport, so he needs to focus on that one. Other parents might think I'm a slacker if I don't attend all the games. The coach may bench Junior next week if we skip a

tournament for a family event. If we don't let him play on the travel team when he's eight, he won't make the team when he is 10, or 12, and then he won't be able to play in high school. If he doesn't make the high school team, he won't get a scholarship to college... and on and on.

- The truth is, as Christians we are called to make our decisions out of a place of love, not fear. Sometimes those choices will be different from the ones those around us are making because we are trying to live by the guidance of the Holy Spirit—who always wants what is best for us, even though our culture sometimes doesn't. We may have to swim against the tide of competitive youth sports, but in the long run we can trust that holding fast to our family's values will ultimately be life-giving.

Reflection Questions

- ① Significant social pressures exist in youth sports (messages include: specialize early, play year-round, find the right travel team). As a parent, what pressures do you experience, whether your child has begun participating in organized sports or is approaching that time? Where, or from whom, do those pressures originate?
- ② Think of a time when you, or someone you know, was motivated by fear with regard to decisions about youth sports. What was at the center of the fear? How can you begin to make decisions out of love rather than fear when it comes to your child's participation in youth sports?
- ③ Do you have any concerns about the culture of youth sports today? What are they?

Closing Prayer

God, we thank you for the chance
to gather together with other parents
as we all strive to be the best parents we can be.

May what we have heard and discussed today
inspire us to be thoughtful and wise

as we discern the promises and dangers
of our children's participation in sports.

We ask this in Jesus' name.

Amen.

Growing Up Catholic Parent Conversations: Good Sports. Copyright © 2019 Ann Naffziger. All rights reserved. Reprinted with permission. Published by The Pastoral Center / PastoralCenter.com.

The Scripture passages contained herein are from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1989, by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches in the U.S.A. All rights reserved.

Good Sports

Session 2: It's All About Balance

Opening Prayer

Pray the following words aloud together:

Gracious God, be with us now
as we explore how to find balance
in the midst of our very busy family lives.

Help us to keep all of our commitments
in perspective so that we make time
for what is most important.

Give us patience and compassion for ourselves
and all other parents on this journey
so that we can be supportive
and encouraging of each other.

We ask this in Christ's name.

Amen.

Balance for the Child Athlete

Read the talking points throughout this process aloud. Simply have each participant read one paragraph at a time to the whole group, continuing around the circle.

- Let's help our children enjoy playing sports just for the joy of playing. It's a cliché, but it's still true: "It's just a game." Unfortunately, as parents, we often inadvertently communicate that youth sports are *more than a game*.
- We re-hash the game on the car ride home even when the kids don't care as much as we do who won or lost. They might just want to tell us about Billy's mismatched socks, what Suzy said happened at school today, or what the post-game snack was.
- We quiz them about their practices and ask for a breakdown of what drills they did. Sometimes subtly, and sometimes not-so-subtly, we question or blame their teammates, coaches, or the referees. Or after a game we might go straight to analyzing what went wrong and how to fix it. That can sound to a child like all that matters is performing or winning.
- We don't shout encouragement when our children are eating spaghetti, or perch a few feet away to watch them read a book, or comment on their performance when they are playing video games, so why should we do so at every athletic performance? It used to be that parents dropped off their kids at practice or games and then left them to have their own experience.
- As parents, we don't have to believe the lie that good parents attend every game. Plenty of children have grown into mature, loving, accomplished adults without their parents present at every moment of their athletic careers. In fact, some of them undoubtedly benefited from the lesson that their parents lives did not revolve around their track meets or their football games.

- Some coaches now have to mandate that parents leave after dropping off their child at practice so that they aren't analyzing every minute of their child's practices, critiquing the coaching, or advocating for their child instead of allowing the child to find their own way. As well-intentioned as we might be, we can be unaware that hovering can prevent our child from learning independence.
- Some parents *love* to hang out at the gym, pool, court, or field watching their children play. They find it enjoyable and relaxing, and they find it's something they share in common with their child. That's wonderful. Those times together can become beautiful memories they will cherish.
- On the other hand, if we stress ourselves out to attend every game, cheering them on season after season—even when there are other, more important things we could be spending our time on—we might be giving undue weight to their sports. We may even inadvertently communicate that we value them for their *performance* and that this two-hour event is more than “just a game.”
- Then there is the danger that perfectly reasonable, respectable adults turn into unreasonable, unrecognizable humans when something doesn't go their child's way between the lines. No matter how much we preach about good sportsmanship or the value of effort over success, if our kids hear critiques, complaints, and arguments coming from us on the sidelines they will be confused.
- I remember the puzzlement in my daughter's eyes when the coach who was so friendly off the field and around town turned into a raging tyrant when girls made errors in the field. I could see her struggle to make sense of such strong reactions to something others were telling her was “just a game.”
- As parents, have we developed tunnel vision when it comes to our kids' sports involvement? Do we ask them as much about their day at school as we do about their swim meets? Do we inquire as much about their interactions with the children in the classroom, in the cafeteria, or on the playground as we do their teammates? Do we discuss volunteer or service opportunities with them as much as we do a hockey tournament? Do we put as much time and energy into communicating the value of loving our neighbor as ourselves as we do in explaining the finer points of their (or our) preferred sport? Do we analyze with our kids their reactions to the daily news like we analyze what happened in the fourth quarter?
- There is nothing wrong with talking about the practice or game your child just participated in—but our invitation is to help the child keep it in perspective with the rest of life. Chances are, younger kids have a better sense of perspective than we do—it's us grownups who often forget that and get overly invested. The danger is that our children start forgetting that “it's just a game” if we are communicating—verbally or non-verbally—that it is more than that.

Reflection Questions

- ① Do you think your child(ren) still experience their involvement in sports as “just a game”? Why or why not?
- ② What is a typical car ride home like in your family after a child's game or meet? Who wants to talk about the game more—you or your child?
- ③ Do you ever communicate to your child that you are more invested in his/her sports performance than he or she is?

Balance for the Whole Family

- When I was coaching my daughter's ten-and-under travel softball team last summer, I offered to drive other players to tournaments to save some parents a long drive and from spending a long Saturday or Sunday in the bleachers. I thought some might appreciate not having to go as early as the players had to be there for warm-ups. I also thought it would free some of them to come for just a game or two rather than having to be at the field for all of them. Heck, I would have been happy to know they felt okay attending to other children or other matters for the day rather than being at the field.
- Not a single parent took me up on the offer all season. One mom drove her daughter each time—and after dropping her off for warm-ups, she slept in her car until game time. A single mom dragged along her 5-year-old to every tournament where the poor kid sat zoned out in front of an electronic screen and ate concession stand food for 15 hours each weekend. One tournament, a father left his wife, three-year-old daughter, and *three-day-old* son at home so he wouldn't miss his older daughter's five games (never mind that he had already seen the previous 17 games of the summer).
- Is this kind of imbalance healthy for anyone involved? What do such decisions communicate to our children? We should beware when a child's sports commitments regularly trump other family activities or commitments to school, church, and broader community.
- A Catholic school principal told me one of the greatest disappointments in her tenure was the number of families who allowed their children to skip the eighth-grade capstone retreat on a Monday (scheduled nine months in advance!) because they didn't want to rush back from a weekend, out-of-state volleyball tournament. Sadly, the girls will probably not remember anything from those particular volleyball games, and they'll never have the memories of a powerful retreat at a turning point in their young lives.
- It is possible to have children involved in sports and maintain some balance in the household (although yes, things will be busy). Margot Starbuck, mother of three athletes and co-author of the book *Overplayed: A Parent's Guide to Sanity in the World of Youth Sports*, writes that for her and her husband, the trick has been to be "lazy, cheap, and sensible." By not aggressively signing their kids up for travel clubs and by giving up the expectation that they will attend all of their games, they have discovered they can still usually have family dinners together and give the kids downtime on the weekends.
- Might that be possible for our families too? The key is to keep asking ourselves "Is this team/sport/commitment worth the trade-off in terms of our family's sanity and mental, emotional, and spiritual health in the long term?"

Reflection Questions

- ① Do you experience a sense of imbalance in your family's commitment to youth sports? What might you consider doing differently to help bring life back into greater balance with other priorities you value?
- ② Do you or other parents you know feel pressured to attend every game? Does that cause a sense of stress or imbalance for you and your family?
- ③ Have you ever set limits, or considered setting limits, on your children's sports activities to maintain a more sustainable pace of life for everyone involved? Why or why not?

Closing Prayer

Pray the following words aloud together:

Jesus, your time was always in great demand,
and you were often pulled in many directions.

Help us to discern what is most important
for our children and our families
when it comes to their involvement in sports.

Remind us to enjoy their sports as "just a game."

Help us to have the courage and wisdom
to make the decisions
that will best support their physical, mental,
emotional, and spiritual health
in the long run.

We pray this in your name,

Amen.

Growing Up Catholic Parent Conversations: Good Sports. Copyright © 2019 Ann Naffziger. All rights reserved. Reprinted with permission. Published by The Pastoral Center / PastoralCenter.com.



Growing Up Catholic

A ministry of The Pastoral Center

PARENT CONVERSATIONS

Leader Guide

Thank you for your willingness to help lead your group(s) in this time of learning and sharing about the privileged journey of Catholic parenting!

Scheduling Your Sessions

This resource can be used in a number of ways:

- ◆ gather parents into small group discussions as their children participate in the parish faith formation sessions
- ◆ schedule “Parents’ Nights” or other regular gatherings of parents (perhaps after Sunday liturgy, providing child care)
- ◆ arrange for online discussion groups

Preparing the Materials

The participant materials are provided in both separate files for each session and in a single file. The handouts are four pages long for each session. We recommend that you distribute the handouts at each session, rather than giving them out all at once at the beginning. This will help your people remain focused on the current week and keep them from forgetting to bring their handouts each week.

Facilitating the Sessions

The simple format of the sessions allows them to be led without the help of a staff person. However, it would be helpful to have one or more volunteer facilitators (or lead parents) who welcome participants, track the time, and help ensure that everyone has a chance to share. If you have a large group, we recommend breaking up into smaller groups of 5-8 for discussion.

Here are some tips for leading the group:

- ① **Be welcoming and hospitable.** Members of your group may be new to a small group experience or new to participating in your parish/faith formation events. Facilitate introductions and be sure everyone feels welcome.
- ② **Review the group conversation guidelines** (see below) at the beginning of the series, and quickly review them at the start of each session. Parents have strong feelings about parenting. Make sure everyone feels comfortable in the group.
- ③ **Gauge the dynamic of your group.** If necessary, you (or another designated facilitator) may need to gently facilitate to keep the group on schedule, remain on-topic, and/or allow all voices a chance to enter the circle. You may feel timid interrupting someone, but this can be a very important role that helps the whole group.
- ④ **Facilitate answering reflection questions.** Sometimes sharing times can be a little awkward waiting for people to begin the discussion. You can rotate around the circle, but we recommend that you try something called the “popcorn” method. One person starts, and when they are done sharing they choose the next person (who is always allowed to pass and pick another person). We have found that in practice this works very well, sometimes adding a little levity. Don’t ever put people on the spot by compelling them to share. Let people know that, at times, it’s absolutely fine to listen attentively and not feel they need to respond.
- ⑤ **Listen to feedback** from the group along the way. Pace the time for the different sections based on the total time available and what works for your group.
- ⑥ **Encourage the group to read the content aloud** rather than silently. An excellent way to get everyone’s voices heard early on is to use the “round table” format. Simply go around the circle having each participant read one paragraph. This paves the way for sharing: often once people have broken the ice and spoken in the circle, it’s easier for them to further participate.

Group Conversation Guidelines

Here are some guidelines for your gatherings. Your group leader will help facilitate.

- ① **Our goal** is to connect our faith with the way we parent and live our lives. Keeping this goal in mind will guide our conversations and what we do afterwards!
- ② **Confidentiality.** What's said in the group stays in group, unless you have the permission of the person who spoke it.
- ③ **Start on time—and end on time.** Your group leader will try to pace the sessions, but everyone can help by arriving promptly and being attentive to time.
- ④ **Conversation involves everyone.** Make it possible for everyone – even those who are naturally more quiet – to take part. If you have many ideas, hold back from sharing a second time until everyone has had an opportunity to share the first time. At the same time, don't pressure anyone to share. There may be times when people just need to listen.
- ⑤ **Respect each other.** All perspectives are worthwhile. Avoid dismissing, making fun of, or judging anyone's thoughts and experiences.
- ⑥ **Share from your own experience and speak for yourself.** Don't problem-solve for another person or tell them what to do. Certainly share what you have found helpful in your life, but without the assumption that everyone has to follow your approach.
- ⑦ **It's OK to agree to disagree.** It's human nature to have different opinions. There's no requirement that everyone agree. Respect everyone's opinions and experiences. Even though we share a common destination as the People of God, each person is on a unique journey.
- ⑧ **Turn off mobile phones** before the group begins. Put your electronic lives on hold for this short time so you can be fully present to others.