

Sporting parents and incentive rewards for their children – children play sport to have fun

Heard this before?

“If you score a goal I’ll buy you a treat”.

This sort of incentive is becoming more and more common and increasingly heard along the sidelines at children’s sport.

It raises the question, why do parents feel the need to offer a reward and what are the implications for the child, parent, coach and team?

Some of the reasons for parents offering incentives could be:

- that we want to ensure that our child tries their hardest
- that the child will be perceived to be having more **fun** if they score a goal
- to get them to be more involved in the game for future talent identification
- a perception that the best players score goals
- Child success is an indicator of “good parenting” for the parents and meeting their responsibilities.

From the team perspective what effect does this individualised extrinsic reward have on the team?

Coaching children is about creating an inclusive environment where all members of the team are given an equal opportunity to play and develop the **fundamental** skills of the game i.e. passing and receiving. It is important that parents are aware of what the coach is trying to achieve within the team. By observing a practice it will become obvious to the parent that the motivation of a reward associated to scoring a goal could be contradictory to what the coach is encouraging the children to do i.e. playing together and having **fun**.

From the child’s perspective the pressure of having to score a goal could have a detrimental effect on their enjoyment of the game, their self esteem and ultimately lead to quitting the sport. The child perceives that his or her abilities were not good enough to score so they quit. This perceived lack of ability creates low intrinsic motivation within the child.

It is important for parents to understand what motivates children to play sport when offering rewards. Knowledge of this will go along way in ensuring that their child enjoys their sport and your support of them.

Why do children play sport?

- To have **fun**
- To improve their skills
- To be with friends
- To do something they're good at
- For the excitement of competition
- To become physically fit
- To be part of a team
- For the challenge of competition
- To learn new skills
- To succeed or win

The number one reason children play youth sports is because they enjoy playing games that are **fun**.

Parents and coaches should ask themselves, "Why are children involved in sports and are they having **fun**."

Increasingly today we are asking kids to compete to win. Why not ask them to compete to have **fun**?"

The primary goal of youth sports should not be to form a winning team. It should be to create an atmosphere that is fun, child-centred, and develops the skills of all the participants. Developing new skills motivates children or enhances previously learned ones. Furthermore, a child experiencing a positive performance or receiving constructive feedback will also lead to continued participation. If the child perceives the event to be positive, they will be motivated to try harder. Greater effort leads to advancements in skills.

Everyone enjoys winning but most children focus more on performing the activity instead of who won or lost. Success should be measured in terms of personal growth and development not by who won the contest. The majority of children would rather play in a bad team than sit the bench for a good one. Winning and receiving awards are of secondary importance to children and should not be heavily emphasized. Children love to play and have **fun** and that is what youth sports should focus on.

Why do children quit sport?

- Overemphasis on winning
- Lost Interest
- Not having **fun**
- Time consuming
- Coach was a poor teacher
- Too much pressure
- Tired of playing
- Need more study time
- Coaches play favourites
- The Sport was boring

Over 35% of the millions of children who play youth sports quit after the first year of competition. 85% of the children who continue to play dropped out of organized sports all together between the ages of 10 and 17. Why are children quitting youth sports?

The primary reason is that children are not having **fun**. Additional causes for children to quit sports include an overemphasis on winning by the parents and/or the coaches. The coach or parent yelled at the child for making a mistake. The verbal abuse associated with winning at all costs caused feelings of self-doubt. The child perceived that his or her abilities were not good enough to play so they quit. This perceived lack of ability creates low intrinsic motivation within the child. Their competitive flame was extinguished and consequently the child began to use excuses for not wanting to play like: I lost interest, it's not **fun** anymore, it's too time consuming, or I'm tired of playing. Coaches and parents compound these problems by singling out players for excellent play with extrinsic rewards: most valuable player, elite teams, etc. This degrades the average and below average players, plus adds competitive stress to the athlete who received the award.

Children quit sports because winning is not everything to them, having **fun** is, and when the game is not **fun**, they lose interest. Getting children interested again after they quit can be very difficult.

What do children want from participation?

- To have **fun**
- To learn new skills
- To be with friends and make new ones
- Excitement
- To succeed or win
- To exercise and become physically fit

Parents and families are the single biggest influencing factor on children's participation in sport. Praise qualities like effort, trying hard, attempting new skills, the execution of a new skill in a game and if you feel the need, reward them for their success and effort but make the rewards small and personal things.

But best of all, reward them with what they really love your time, your attention and the opportunity to just hang out with you!

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