

WHOLE CHILD SPORTS Q&A

QUESTION: Sports Violence on Television

What can I do about the alarming things my kids see while watching sports on television?

The brutal one-on-one fights in NHL games.

The baseball brawls.

All the taunting and bad sportsmanship on display. Even if we don't "do" TV, they sometimes see it in other places.



DISCUSSION:

According to the Kaiser Foundation, **children are exposed to an average of 7.5 hours of screen media per day.** If they are sports fans, then a good amount of that is likely to be sports programming, which often broadcasts socially combative behavior. And many of the regular T.V. shows they watch convey the same messages. **If you are worried about your son trash-talking or bullying, don't just look at the symptoms, examine the root causes.** They are imitating what they see. To them, this appears to be the social norm.

We lay down the law for our kids. **We say: "In our family, we don't tolerate this kind of behavior."** But then, right in the center of our homes, we have a device of disrespect set up like an altar, in the center of the living room, with all the chairs in the room facing it like church pews. A holy sanctum of disrespect. Televisions are communicators of disrespect. They expose our children to all kinds of inappropriate behavior.

It's a serious dilemma. We all want respectful homes. And yet the televisions and computers in our homes purvey mixed content, much of which models put-downs and other types of combative communication. As parents, most of us struggle with this. **We want courteous and considerate kids, but television and media are also an integral part of our lives. So what can we do about it?**

SOLUTION:

The answer is quite simple. **Seriously consider limiting the amount of media your child consumes. The less they see, the less likely they are to mimic negative behavior.** Two issues often come up when we make this suggestion.

One is from parents who say they bond with their kids when watching sports on television. "Watching the World Series with my kids is an

important family ritual.” Or: “My son and I bond over Sunday NFL games.” **We are not suggesting you never sit down with your child and watch a ball game if that is very important to you.** What we are recommending is that you limit the amount they watch, and sit with them and be prepared to explain issues that arise in today’s adult sports culture, like fights and unsportsmanlike conduct. **Our take on this is that a young child of six or seven years of age just should not be exposed to these kinds of violent images at all.** But we will restate the obvious. Your kid will get a ton more enjoyment, benefit and affirmation if you head over to the park together to play catch for a few hours, rather than remain side-by-side on the couch, watching adults play sports.

The other issue parents often bring up is the challenges they face when trying to control their kids’ media consumption. “I’m all for limiting screen-time in our home,” one parent told us. “We’ve already taken steps. The kids are only allowed to watch one game and two movies per week. But when we go on vacation or to friends’ or relatives’ houses the tube is always on and they gravitate towards it. We’d rather they were playing sports outside.”

In such situations we parents have to distinguish between our sphere of influence and our sphere of concern. What is under your influence? Where can you directly take action and be effective? **Your sphere of influence is your home. It’s where you set the rules.** So you can limit

screen time there effectively. Out in the world it's much harder. Screens are everywhere. They are in gas stations, waiting rooms, airports, and restaurants. **You can tell friends and relatives that you don't want your children exposed to too much media, and they may respect that. But often you just can't control what goes on beyond your home.** The important thing is that you are limiting the negative sports images and behavior they are exposed to at home. And telling them why. The message they get when they are with you goes a long way. **If there is a friend whose parent doesn't seem to "hear" you and disregards your request for no or low screens during your child's visit then you may want to limit contact with that particular child to play dates at your house.** This way you are back within your sphere of control and influence.

We seldom think about the fact that almost all the games kids watch on television are played by adults. And these adults, whom they idolize and emulate, often exhibit anti-social behavior. They taunt each other, fight, and succumb to explosive temper tantrums. We take steps to keep our children from watching movies about intimate relationships between adults. We wouldn't want them to emulate such scenes in their interactions with family and friends. But they are just as susceptible to modeling the poor behavior manifested in adult sports events. If we want them to play freely and creatively with other kids instead of mimicking grown-up athletes, we have to dramatically limit their exposure to such imagery. **We have lost track, as a society, of the fact that kids are not adults.** Little kids shouldn't play adult-

oriented games, and they shouldn't watch hours and hours of adult sports either.

Among the thousands of parents we've asked, 'What is your golden memory from childhood?' one of the most common answers is "Playing with my dad [or mom] in the park." The answer always centers around connection. Connection to family, to friends, to nature and to self.

When playing sports we create and nurture these bonds. Watching somebody else play is just not the same.