



S T R A T E G I E S

Fairplay

A Child's View of Fairplay

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Where there is activity there is conflict. In the words of Newton, "For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction." At River Heights Elementary School, where there is quite a lot of activity, teachers and students are trying to prove Newton wrong. In competitive environments, cooperation and fairplay are being stressed. "You must be a good sport." "Be fair." "Share with..." These are a sampling of the comments that we hear in the hallways and gymnasiums every day.

Nevertheless, in spite of these good intentions and efforts to promote ethical behavior, I wondered if the elementary students at River Heights had a personal understanding of good sportslike conduct. Had they merely become familiar with the words, or could they provide me with actual examples of this behavior? I asked them to tell me what they thought good sportsmanship is; and as you will see, their answers were diverse. But they fell, roughly, under four categories: respect for authority and the rules, proper responses to winning and losing, sensitivity to others, and being the best that you can be.

Respect for Authority and the Rules

"Pick up the mats after kickball."

"If you get tagged . . . you're it."

"Don't cheat."

"Don't drink at the fountain when the game is on."

"Goaltenders in soccer should say when the ball crosses the line."

"(You) shouldn't chase unless you're playing a game."

"Help your teacher."

These responses appear to indicate that students understand that sportslike conduct has to do with following the rules (of the game and/or teacher) and helping the teacher in some way. They suggest that promoting the idea of adherence to the letter and spirit of the rules would provide a base on which to build a concept of fairplay. They remind us that rules are intended to provide structure and safety in what sometimes appears to be a haphazard environment. They indicate that rules can help improve areas of

classroom management by providing students with some of the administrative responsibilities of games such as choosing teams, preparing equipment, and resolving minor conflicts.

We must remember, however, that this fragile concept can be eroded through poor coaching, mimicry, and manipulation. The coach that "bends" the rules a little; takes advantage of "loosely" officiated high school, collegiate, and professional sports; and creates rules that are designed to manipulate students into doing his or her work can all adversely affect students' respect for rules and authority.

Proper Responses to Winning and Losing

"Don't get mad after losing."

"Shake hands at the end of the game, whether you win or lose."

"When you lose, you should be happy."

"When you lose, don't yell."

Continued

Scott Kretchmar, Penn State University, is editor of the Fairplay Column.



G

uidelines for Good Sportslike Conduct

1. Don't cheat.
2. Don't start crying every time you don't win.
3. Don't make excuses when you lose.
4. Try for first place.
5. Don't hurt anybody.
6. Take turns.
7. Don't brag.
8. Don't yell at teammates when they make mistakes.
9. Don't tell people that they are no good.
10. Don't kick anyone in the stomach.

From the students of River Heights Elementary School, East Grand Forks, Minnesota.



"Don't start crying every time you don't win."

"Try for first place."

"Don't brag and say that you're better than other people when you win."

"Don't be mad if you're on a bad team."

"Don't make excuses when you lose."

"Don't say 'Boo' when you're losing or when something bad happens to your team."

"If you lose one game, don't call your bet off for the next game."

These statements would suggest that even elementary age children understand the importance our society places on winning. But it is also clear that they are familiar with the rules of conduct that are associated with the end of the game. These housekeeping rules can make life much easier for the instructor in the gymnasium by minimizing conflicts associated with victory and defeat.

These statements also indicate that young children know that losing is frequently associated with bad behavior. Losers "boo," call off bets, make excuses, and get mad. Unfortunately, efforts of some physical educators to downplay the importance of winning and losing are nullified by "more knowledgeable" significant others—the 18-year-old soccer coach who is building a "dynasty," the father who once played ball, and the heroes on cable television. Nevertheless, physical educators can create environments and objectives that allow students to compete against themselves instead of against others.

Sensitivity to Others

"Don't hurt anybody."

"Don't yell at teammates when they make mistakes."

"If someone falls and gets hurt, tell a grown-up."

"Don't kick anyone in the stomach."

"Take turns."

"Give the other people a chance."

"If someone gets hurt, get an ice bag."

"If someone is on the monkey bars, wait until they're done."

"Don't tell people that they are no good and they can't play."

Physical educators cannot control factors outside of school, but they can influence their own environments. Everybody wants attention and everyone likes to be recognized for a job well done. A conscious effort to be more supportive and positive will help to reduce the number of times the word "don't" is needed.

"Don't call (people) names."

"Don't pull hair when you're tagged."

"(You) shouldn't try to punch anyone in the mouth."

These statements indicate that elementary students have a good idea of how they should behave toward one another. But, as we all know, they do not always live up to these standards. At school and at home they probably hear,

"Don't!" but what do they see? They see their parents resolve conflicts by verbally (and sometimes physically) abusing one another. They see professional and collegiate athletes resolve conflict through fighting. And they see actors on television and at the movies resolve their differences with violence.

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Being the Best You Can Be

"To get good grades and to be your best."

"Don't be a quitter."

"You should always run as fast as you can."

These three students may perceive success as something that many of us do not entirely appreciate or understand. Their responses appear to indicate that as long as they do their best, they will be successful. But how can this be? We know that success is determined by the number of points on the scoreboard... or do we?

It could be that getting straight A's, outscoring others on achievements tests, and/or setting a new school record in the 50 meter dash are not prerequisites of success. Perhaps physical educators should help students measure success more on personal performance than competitive outcomes. This might provide a "winning season" for all students.

Conclusions

The responses recorded here indicate that the elementary students of River Heights have a good idea of what



fairplay is. However, it is interesting to note that their understanding is often conveyed through the use of such negative constructs as “don’t” and “shouldn’t.” Could it be that the only time they learn about good behavior is when an adult corrects them for displaying poor behavior? Possibly, we can do a better job of creating environments that will foster good behavior. Fairplay is promoted not only by picking up the pieces after a conflict occurs but also, and perhaps more effectively, by preventing the conflict from occurring in the first place.

Editor's Comments

Mr. Entzion reminds us that even children—and possibly, especially children—know what it means to behave well. One does not need a Ph.D. to have a good grasp of what is right and wrong, fair and unfair, loving and hateful.

This essay reminded me of Robert Fulghum's little book entitled *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*. Fulghum (1989) argued that “wisdom (is) not at the top of the graduate-school mountain, but there in the sandpile at Sunday School” (p.6). He playfully asked his readers to consider “what a better world it would be if we all—the whole world—had cookies and milk about three o'clock every afternoon and then lay down with our blankies for a nap. Or if all governments had as a basic policy to always put things back where they found them and to clean up their own mess” (pp. 7-8).

Critics have said that Fulghum is a romantic and that the world is more complicated than this. Some could say the same thing about the “do's” and “don'ts” reported by Entzion's students. They are cute, it could be claimed, perhaps even refreshingly straightforward; but they are hopelessly naive.

I am not so sure. To test out my sense that these elementary students have a grasp on more than we might suspect, I selected ten of my favorite guidelines

Thanks are due to Mr. Entzion and his elementary school children for reminding us that all we ever need to know we probably learned in youth sports and, more specifically, that we should pick up our mats after kickball and wait if someone else is on the monkey bars.

and submit them to you as a fairly comprehensive set of guidelines for good sportslike conduct (see box, page 17). Have you read many recommendations that say it any better? If all athletes lived by these norms, we would not see much of the ethically uncertain behavior that we now witness on our sandlot, college, and professional athletic fields.

I agree with Fulghum that ethics is less complicated than many make it out to be. And it is often as children that it is experienced this way.

I am not saying that youth sports are entirely innocent or pure and athletics for teenagers and adults are wholly cynical and corrupt. Far too much counter-evidence exists at both levels for this to be the case. Yet, a trend from simplicity and possibly higher ethics to complexity and lower ethics as players move up in age and competitive level can undoubtedly be observed. Consider some of the following contrasts.

As youth we know that it is wrong to break game rules.

As adults we are no longer sure. (There are some rules that are broken regularly and intentionally, and we have been

taught that it is strategically smart to do so.)

As youth we know that it is wrong to harm anyone in games.

As adults we are no longer sure. (If an opponent isn't up to the test, perhaps he or she should not be “out there.” Moreover, there are certain dangerous techniques of intimidation that are fully “part of the game.”)

As youth we know that umpires or game officials should be respected and obeyed.

As adults we are no longer sure. (While we must abide by officials' decisions, we have been taught how to manipulate these people and even trick them into making wrong calls in our favor.)

As youth we know that games are special events, set quite apart from other daily comings and goings at school and home.

As adults we are no longer sure. (What is at stake at play is very much like what is at stake in the rest of life. We often finish games more psychologically exhausted than when we started them.)

Again, it would be inappropriate to romanticize the play of children and attribute a purity to it that it does not have. Nevertheless, there is probably a degree of simplicity, care, concern, and unabashed joy present in youthful play that declines as competitors mature.

Therefore, thanks are due to Mr. Entzion and his elementary school children for reminding us that all we ever need to know we probably learned in youth sports and, more specifically, that we should pick up our mats after kickball and wait if someone else is on the monkey bars.

Reference

Fulghum, Robert. (1989). *All I really need to know I learned in kindergarten: Uncommon thoughts on common things*. New York: Villard Books.