

Maximizing the Sport Experience for our Children

Dina Bell-Laroche

Parents are often left wondering if their child is getting the most out of their sport experience. A national grassroots movement to ensure sport offers a quality experience is sweeping the nation and with it carries the hopes and dreams of children and youth who, above all else, want to enjoy the time they spend playing the sports they love. The True Sport Movement is based on values that thousands of Canadians have reported they care about the most - excellence, inclusion, fairness and fun. It is a movement that has aligned itself with one of Canada's most significant advances to date, Long-Term Athlete Development (LTAD). Put simply, LTAD offers the building blocks upon which all sports should be founded. It is based on a 7 stage program that is athlete centred, coach driven and administration, sport science and sponsor supported.

This article looks at the questions parents should be asking coaches, clubs, and themselves to ensure their child is not only being taught age appropriate technical skills, but also learning and gaining positive values in the process. It describes the stages of athlete development using the LTAD model and focuses on the values we want children to be taught throughout the sport continuum. For more information on LTAD please visit www.ltad.ca.

The True Sport Movement is based upon principles that reinforce positive behaviors to help build character and set standards that all True Sport supporters share. As a parent, use these principles to help guide your decisions about which sport or activity your child should participate in; which club you volunteer your time with; which coach you believe will best mentor your child; and most important of all, how you can be the best possible sport parent. To learn more about the True Sport Movement and how you can champion fair and ethical sport, please visit www.truesport.ca.

It is our hope, by incorporating these principles into the LTAD framework, we will enable parents to make educated decisions regarding their child's sport experience.

True Sport is built on the four core values of fairness, fun, excellence and inclusion and is brought to life by the following six principles of sport:

- 1. Go for It** means digging deep, never quitting, rising to the challenge, and discovering one's full potential.
- 2. Play Fair** means playing honestly while honoring the rules of the sport and the participants involved.
- 3. Respect Others** means respecting teammates, competitors, officials and coaches while acting with integrity. It means winning with dignity and losing with grace.
- 4. Keep it Fun** means having a good time while maintaining a positive attitude. Although this sounds simple, ensuring this philosophy is shared by parents, coaches and other teams will undoubtedly be a challenge.
- 5. Stay Healthy** means respecting your body by avoiding unsafe activities such as drug use, over training or attempting new skills before your body is ready. It means staying in shape, eating well and maintaining a healthy, balanced lifestyle. Parents can be role models for their children by keeping fit and making healthy choices.
- 6. Give Back** means connecting back to your community by doing something meaningful. From cleaning up a local park, to rallying your entire community around True Sport, there are many activities athletes can do to show they care about the community they live in.



1. Active Start

From ages 0-6 years, children need to be introduced to relatively unstructured play that incorporates a variety of body movements. An early active start enhances development of brain function, coordination, social skills, gross motor skills, emotions, leadership, and imagination. It also helps children build confidence, develop posture and balance, build strong bones and muscles, promote healthy weight, reduce stress, improve sleep, learn to move skillfully, and learn to enjoy being active.

2. FUNDamentals

From ages 6-9 in boys and 6-8 in girls, children need to participate in a variety of well-structured activities that develop basic skills. However, activities and programs need to maintain a focus on fun, and formal competition should only be minimally introduced.

GO FOR IT

Fostering a sense of joy and encouraging young athletes to explore a variety of activities is critical to building a solid foundation for life-long improvement. It is essential children at these stages feel safe and are permitted to make mistakes. Parents should be actively involved in choosing a club and a coach who support the True Sport and LTAD philosophies and who will look to first and foremost, develop the child's natural desire to excel through age appropriate skills and drills. Furthermore, parents need to model the kind of behavior they expect from their children and reward the process, not the outcome.

PLAY FAIR

Children at these stages already have a sense of what is fair and what isn't and they quickly learn what is expected from them by their peers and coaches. The rules of the sport can be simplified to ensure they are understood by all. Coaches can use a "guided discovery" approach to assist children in making decisions while using "teachable moments" as they arise to illustrate examples of fair play. Similarly, parents can help make fair play a priority by questioning their child and using real life scenarios to stimulate discussion. For example, ask "Why do you think the referee put that player in the penalty box?". Children can learn the value of fairness by sharing equipment and coaches can foster an environment where everyone has an opportunity to play.

RESPECT OTHERS

Parents can help to ensure their child maximizes their sport experience by focusing on the life skills their child is gaining rather than on the number of goals scored. Young athletes can be taught to respect others by shaking their opponent's hands, thanking their coach, helping to put away equipment and listening when others speak. During these stages, it is very important that coaches are able to maintain the young athletes' attention so that they can impart important lessons both on and off the field of play. Children model what they observe and come to value what their mentors value.

KEEP IT FUN

These initial stages are based on fun; if the activity isn't fun, it isn't worth doing. Even though young athletes can't fully describe how they feel, parents can tell if they are enjoying themselves. Is the coach attentive to their needs and using age appropriate drills to stimulate their senses and inquisitive natures? Is the coach ensuring they are learning new skills in a safe environment? Are their minds and hearts being nurtured along with their bodies? During these stages it is important that skills are learned through a variety of movements by allowing the child to participate in different sports and activities. It is critical for children to have fun and parents play a central role in helping to make sure this happens.





STAY HEALTHY

These stages provide young children with an opportunity to build a solid foundation to ensure they maximize their full athletic potential in the future. You can ensure your child is exposed to the three fundamental movement sports of gymnastics, swimming and athletics during their early years. Young athletes will benefit from playing a number of different sports focused on skill development, rather than outcome. Offer your child a healthy diet by selecting a variety of food groups from Canada's Food Guide and ensure they are properly hydrated before and after their activities. Above all else, play with your child daily to demonstrate the importance of an active lifestyle.

GIVE BACK

These stages are the ideal time for children to learn how to give back. For example, they can learn littering is harmful to the environment and can help by cleaning up before and after practices; they can learn that many people throughout the world have less than we do and that it is possible to make a difference; they can come together to host a fundraiser for those in need; or they can commit to cleaning up a park as a team. Check out www.silkensactivekids.com for information on how you can make your community a friendly and inviting place for kids to play.



3. Learning to Train

From ages 8-11 in girls and 9-12 in boys, to the onset of the growth spurt (usually around the ages of 11-12), children are ready to begin training according to more formalized methods, but the emphasis should still be on general sports skills suitable to a number of activities. While it is often tempting to over-develop "talent" at this age through excessive single sport training and competition (as well as early positioning in team sports), this can be very detrimental to later stages of development if the child is playing a late specialization sport: it promotes one-sided physical, technical, and tactical development and increases the likelihood of injury and burnout.

GO FOR IT

Athletes at this stage have a deeper understanding of their identity and are beginning to make choices based on preference, friends and previous experiences. Parents need to understand that although their child is able to maintain more focus and discipline, be more responsible and honour commitments, they are not yet ready to play the adult version of the game. At this stage, athletes are learning to train and will gain tremendously by focusing on skill development, rather than trying to master the game. This means emphasis should be placed on quality training, not competition. For example, instead of focusing on how many goals were scored, parents and coaches should consider how well the child played with the ball, how the team interacted together, and whether or not they had fun. Remember that the types of questions asked and the comments made will shape a child's understanding of what matters the most.

PLAY FAIR

Young athletes now need to have a solid understanding of the rules of the game, so they can apply that understanding when playing. It is still important to keep the rules simple and specific to children, instead of having them play the adult version of the game. In some sports, increasingly competitive opportunities will present themselves and children with more skills may strive to compete at a higher level. Parents should ensure the club has a fair selection process in place, independent assessors to avoid conflict of interest situations and be prepared to volunteer their time to assist as required. Regardless of ability, the club should have a policy that welcomes and encourages everyone to play. As with the earlier stages, parents are encouraged to use real life examples when exploring what fair play means.



RESPECT OTHERS

This stage provides a rich backdrop for applying the life lessons learned up to this point. Coaches and parents should work together to ensure athletes are benefitting from consistent messaging regarding work ethic, achieving goals, respect and effort. For instance, putting into practice the club's commitment to embrace diversity can be demonstrated by working through problems as a team and learning that differences between people often contribute to a stronger, more cohesive outcome. Learning there are consequences for not showing up on time provides another "teachable moment".

KEEP IT FUN

Fun continues to dominate in this stage. Athletes are connecting with new friends and experiencing the many benefits that come from associating with a group of other individuals who share the same interests. Keeping their attention is still a challenge, so ensuring that athletes are learning new skills in a safe and fun environment will help to develop a positive attitude and strong work ethic. Programs should focus on the child's ongoing skill development through coordinated training plans, rather than be driven by competitive games. Parents should reinforce process over outcome and appreciate the importance of practicing. Ask first "Did you have fun?" rather than "Who won?"

STAY HEALTHY

This stage provides young athletes with competitive choices that require a higher level of commitment. Parents can help shape their child's attitude and assist them in making healthy choices by speaking with them about drug use in sport and why it is an unhealthy and unethical choice. A healthy diet also becomes increasingly important - check out www.bodysense.ca for important information related to proper nutrition, body image and self-esteem.

GIVE BACK

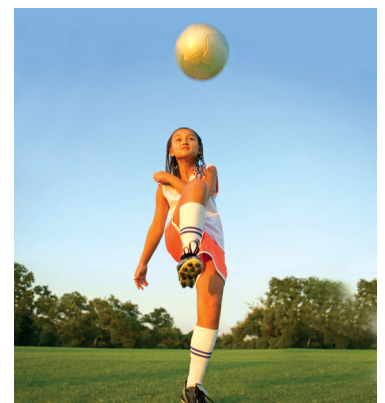
This stage provides an important opportunity for the athletes to understand and appreciate the volunteers who make sport possible. Thanking people for their contribution is one way young athletes can give back; another is by volunteering themselves. Parents are important role models and can demonstrate the importance of giving back by volunteering with the team, the club or in their community.

4. Training to Train

The ages that define this stage for boys and girls are based on the onset and end of the growth spurt, which are generally ages 11 to 15 for girls and 12 to 16 for boys. At this stage, they are ready to consolidate their basic sport-specific skills and tactics. These youths may play to win and do their best, but they still need to focus more time on skill training and physical development over competition. This approach is critical to the development of top performers and maintaining activity in the long-term, so parents should check with their national organization to ensure their child's program has the correct training-to-competition ratio.

GO FOR IT

This is a critical stage for many athletes as it determines whether or not they will continue to participate in sport. Many adolescents cite lack of fun or necessary skills as reasons for quitting. Leaders in sport are working toward changing this trend by providing children with a different kind of sport experience and parents are an important part of this equation. Parents can expect their child to continue to improve their skills and techniques and to understand the relationship between hard work and success. Excellence means striving to be the best one can be, each and every time. It is about transferring what is learned during practice and applying it during the game.





PLAY FAIR

Turning the ideal of fair play into reality is a challenge for both the athlete and the coach. Athletes will bring different perspectives based on their personal values and parents can continue to play a critical role in building a solid ethical foundation upon which fair play exists. It is imperative coaches and parents speak with their athletes about adherence to the rules of the game and the risks associated with doping in sport. Parents can often be a catalyst for change by speaking up and supporting this shared philosophy from the beginning. Signing the True Sport Declaration, assigning one parent as the team ombudsperson and ensuring that officials and coaches are treated with respect are important steps clubs can take to model a fair play philosophy.

RESPECT OTHERS

At this stage, respect can often be compromised when winning become the only measure of success. Reminding your child why they became involved in sport in the first place will help keep things into perspective. Athletes are now becoming teenagers and are capable of making choices and providing meaningful feedback. Parents can demonstrate they care by listening to their child's feelings and by providing support, guidance and options. One way to encourage respectful behavior is for the club to recognize athletes, coaches and volunteers who exemplify this quality through special recognition or awards of merit. Success stories can go a long way in encouraging respectful behavior.

KEEP IT FUN

It is essential that athletes continue to enjoy themselves as many children drop out of competitive sport during this stage. The emergence of intrinsic motivation begins to fuel an athlete's desire to continue participating at a high level and parents need to remember that. Both parents and coaches need to work together to provide a supportive and nurturing environment so that the athlete will continue to enjoy sport for life.

STAY HEALTHY

Athletes are now exposed to a variety of messages concerning their athletic performance and many will be asked to specialize in one sport. It is important that parents understand the difference between early and late specialization sports. Early specialization sports include gymnastics, diving, and figure skating and differ from late specialization sports in that complex skills are learned before maturation as they cannot be fully mastered if taught after. Moreover, specializing early in a late specialization sport contributes to one-sided, sport-specific preparation, lack of the basic movement and sports skills, overuse injuries and early burnout.

GIVE BACK

Athletes now have enough knowledge to begin giving back by helping out as an assistant coach, organizing a sport club in their school or by participating in a cause related fundraiser such as the Canadian Cancer Society's Relay For Life. Becoming active in the community can go towards a young athlete's volunteer school credits (if applicable) and can teach life-long lessons that will benefit the athlete for years to come.



5. Training to Compete

Depending on the sport, for females ages 15-21+/- and males ages 16-23+/-, this is where things get “serious.” They can either choose to specialize in one sport and pursue a competitive stream, or they can continue participating at a recreational level and thereby enter the Active for Life stage (see 7 below). In the competitive stream, high volume and high intensity training begins to occur year-round.

GO FOR IT

This stage is for the more serious competitors that are passionate about their sport and are dedicating most of their time to achieving their goals. While still focusing on the process, athletes are becoming increasingly sophisticated in their decision-making and need less external encouragement to maintain their focus. Athletes will benefit tremendously from supportive parents who continue to ensure their children are provided a safe, welcoming environment, have qualified and competent coaches who nurture and stimulate the physical and emotional skills required to compete at a higher level, and who remind athletes to enjoy the experience above all else.

PLAY FAIR

The value of fair play is one that distinguishes the competitors in this stage. When athletes come together to compete, they do so expecting there is a shared philosophy to see who can outperform the other on that given day. When rules are broken, so is the trust that brings competitors together. Parents can provide helpful reminders to their children about what attracted them to the sport in the first place. Maintaining a healthy perspective and not focusing exclusively on results will go a long way in ensuring a fair play attitude for all involved.

RESPECT OTHERS

Coaches and parents can work together by asking the athlete to consider the following questions: Can I win with grace? Can I lose with dignity? Did I honour my teammates, my coach and myself by showing up and competing to the best of my ability? Athletes who reach this stage of development will benefit greatly from the positive life lessons learned along the way.

KEEP IT FUN

Competition at this stage becomes increasingly complex. While there is nothing wrong with wanting to win and achieve one’s goals, focusing exclusively on the outcome can erode the joy that comes from

participating in the sport. Focusing on the intrinsic benefits of sport can help the athlete focus on what really matters and keep them connected to the sport they love. Parents should continue to support their child as they begin to navigate the challenges and thrills of high performance sport.

STAY HEALTHY

Athletes at this stage are focused on sport-specific training skills and parents can assist by ensuring their child is not over-training. Depending on the skill and commitment level, the athlete will start to consider a range of options - universities, career choices and personal commitments. Parents can act as a sounding board and assist the athlete in making positive decisions.

GIVE BACK

Although athletes at this stage are increasingly busy, they can still find ways to give back. Some athletes are competing at a higher level and they can use this as a platform to promote topics that matter. For example, if you want to ensure everyone has a chance to play, find out if your club has a policy on inclusion. Overall, work towards solutions when problems present themselves. Show your children that giving back matters. Visit www.cpra.ca for information related to inclusion and promoting safe environments for play.





6. Training to Win

At ages 19+ in males and 18+ in females, elite athletes with identified talent enter a stage where they may pursue the most intense training suitable for international winning performances. At this stage, both world-class athletes with a disability and able-bodied athletes require world-class training methods, equipment, and facilities that meet the demands of the sport and the athlete.

Although this stage still encompasses the six True Sport principles, parents now need to trust they have already instilled the principles in their child throughout their sport development. The athlete's primary goal at this stage is to achieve podium performances; however, the sense of personal achievement and accomplishment are not always reflected in the results. For many athletes it was the process that taught them the most about themselves. This stage is an opportunity for parents to sit back and enjoy the benefits of having worked so hard to assist their child in making positive choices. It is unique in that athletes are now in a great position to give back to the community. Clara Hughes is a perfect example of an athlete that mobilized thousands of Canadians to give back when she donated personal money to Right to Play, an international humanitarian initiative, after she won an Olympic medal in Turin, Italy.



7. Active For Life

Young athletes can enter this stage at essentially any age. According to LTAD, if children have been correctly introduced to activity and sport through Active Start, FUNDamentals and Learning to Train programs, they will have the necessary motor skills and confidence (physical literacy) to remain Active for Life in virtually any sport they like. They may decide to continue playing their sport at the recreational level, or they may become involved in the sport as a game official or coach. They might also try new sports and activities: examples could be a hockey player taking up golf or a tennis player starting to cycle.

Congratulations, if your child is participating in this stage, you successfully armed them with the True Sport principles. Whether being Active for Life to stay fit, or to connect with friends, participating in physical activity provides a number of wonderful benefits that help shape vibrant communities and strong, healthy citizens.

Credits:

The author wishes to acknowledge the significant contributions of the Canadian Centre for Ethics in Sport, the True Sport Secretariat and the following people in the development of this article:

Rachel Corbett
Joel MacDonald
Jarrod Beattie
Ivonne Shoucair
Donna Kaye
Cathy Haines

Brian Rahill
Penny Joyce
Richard Way
Charles Cardinal
Danielle Bell

ISBN Number 978-0-9783891-4-7