

The Parent 'Hood

Where moms and dads share their expertise

Time to play ball — or not

Your 5-year-old is begging to play soccer, but you're not sure he's ready for a team sport. Are there signs to watch for?

Parent advice

You're never too young to start competitive sports. But keep in mind, some kids like to compete and others join teams for other benefits, like making friends.

Don't be disappointed if your kid doesn't have a competitive spirit. And know that competitive sports essentially undo all the good manners you are trying to instill (don't grab, share, wait your turn).

—Janet Oak

I always kept my kids active in sports beginning at 3 years old. When their interest grew in a particular sport, we moved up to team sports. I teach them to have fun and use it as an opportunity to exercise while learning to be a team player. They have learned that losing is not as much fun as winning, but that winning is not as much fun if you never lose.

—Dawn DeGrazia

If your child is old enough to want this, he should be old enough to understand that the end result of the competition does not define him.

—Eva Rios

Expert advice

"If your child enjoys being with other kids, interacting with other kids and enjoys doing gross motor skills — jumping, throwing, kicking — he or she is probably ready for a structured sports

activity," says Margret Nickels, clinical psychologist and director of the Erikson Institute's Center for Children and Families.

If he still prefers to play on his own, a team sport is not the place to bring him out of his shell. "I'd focus on planning some play dates and getting him used to school first," Nickels says. "Being on a team may just overwhelm a child and make it even harder to find a comfortable way to be with his peers. At that age there is an awareness of 'How do I perform compared to other kids on the team?' A child who isn't very competitive or inter-

ested in being there might start to develop a more negative sense of himself."

If your child is begging to join a team, though, he's likely ready to join and compete with his peers. Now comes the prep work.

"At this age, typically the experience is not so much about winning or losing a game, but more about skill development, increasing coordination, being with other kids, learning to follow some structured

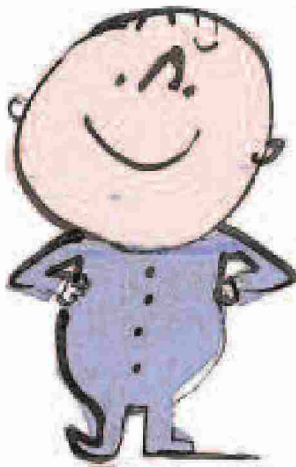
activities," Nickels says.

Still, wins and losses happen, even at 5 years old. And parents shouldn't try to shield children from either.

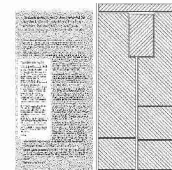
"One of the positive experiences young children can take away from sports is learning to deal with intense emotions," Nickels says.

"They may lose a game or they may score a goal against themselves, but that's a perfect way to learn about feeling frustrated with oneself and dealing with disappointment.

"Parents and good coaches will say, 'OK, we lost. But let's look at what went well and let's look at what we can learn from this,'" she continues. "You want (children) to try their best to win — there's nothing wrong with competitiveness. But it should be based on improving your skills, learning from failure, learning from your mistakes — rather than win at all costs."



SERGE BLOCH/ILLUSTRATION FOR TRIBUNE NEWSPAPERS



And don't try to sugarcoat a less-than-stellar performance.

"Fake praises do not help a child and may make your child feel like he can't really rely on the feedback you give," Nickels says. "Be honest. Say, 'Yes, you missed that ball. But I saw you do this and this really well. Is there something you'd like to work on together for next time?' Supportive, constructive feedback is important for a child if there's going to be learning and growth.

"The most dedicated and successful athletes are motivated most by a desire to improve their skills and less so by outside approval and pressure," Nickels says.

"The main experience a child can take away from sports is 'I can grow in these areas. I can improve my skills. I can collaborate with peers. I can learn from adults.'"

Got a solution?

Your preschooler's fear of "bad guys" is wreaking havoc on bedtime. How do you soothe her fears? E-mail us your thoughts at parenthood@tribune.com. (And please include your name and hometown.)