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**HEADLINE: 7 ways to be a good team parent**

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Parents generally are supportive of their children in youth sports leagues. It seems so easy. Stress the importance of participation, teamwork and having fun, and the job is complete, right? Not so fast, said leaders of local youth leagues.

Being supportive is only one aspect of pitching in to your child's athletic experience. While league directors and presidents know time demands vary from parent to parent, they say participation, no matter how small, can play a key role in the overall success of the team.

Here are seven ways to become a better team parent:

**1. GIVE FEEDBACK**

"I think parents think their kids already know that they're proud of them for trying a particular sport," said Michael Adams, president of the Vineland Soccer Association. "But kids know what is explicit. Kids are all about what someone says to them, or what they see physically, like if they get a hug after the game.

"I would suggest parents make a point of saying, 'I watched your practice or your game, and I was really proud of the way you worked with your teammates,' or 'what great sportsmanship you exhibited with the other team,' afterwards.

"Those things can really be overlooked," he said, "because in the child's world they don't interpret all these unseen and unsaid gestures."

**2. PLAY BUS DRIVER**

Driving kids to and from their events does more than get them to the field. In addition to the benefits already mentioned, there are always a few spare moments for conversation when it's just the parent, the player and the road.

"I take advantage of that," said Lisa Lucena, whose daughters, Jessica and Sabrina, play in the Vineland Pigtail Softball League.

"How was your day girls?"

"Any tests going on?"

"How's school?"

"That just starts a whole conversation (about) what they have to study, any birthdays coming up with their friends. As a parent, we have to make time for our children. That's one way of doing it."

### 3. GO TO GAMES, PRACTICE

Attending practice is good for your children and it lets coaches know you are supporting their hard work.

"Everybody is in different places with regards to time, but parents are always welcome," Adams said. "A ton of parents never make themselves known to the coach. They're not on a first-name basis. It says a lot when you come and drop Johnny or Mary off, reach out to the coach, ask how he or she might be better supported by the parent. Creating that line of conversation is a great way to start."

### 4. LEARN AND PLAY ALONG

If a child is interested in soccer, lacrosse or a sport you may not have played when you were young, don't be ashamed if you don't know all the ins and outs of the game.

Study the rules. Take your athlete and some friends to a college or professional game of the sport you're learning. Thumb through a catalogue with your little player or take a trip to a sporting goods store and learn about the best, most affordable equipment on the market.

### 5. HELP BUILD CAMARADERIE AND TEAM SPIRIT

If you have the means, host a team party. Parents with access to swimming pools are summertime heroes.

Leagues provide jerseys, but a unified team may want to design their own warmup T-shirts to remember their teammates. T-shirt painting and signs with team slogans are time-honored traditions.

Or, invite the kids and parents over and put on a huge pot of spaghetti. Just keep the red sauce away from those T-shirts you just painted.

### 6. IF YOU HAVE THE TIME, FILL IN FOR A PARENT WHO DOESN'T

Harvey Hovis, president of Millville youth basketball, has seen extremely involved parents and some who are completely indifferent.

One memorable mother registered and paid the fee for her son's friend, whose mother and father were all but absent from his life. For a whole season, she drove her son and his friend to games and practices.

### 7. ADDRESS PROBLEMS IN PRIVATE

You're not the coach and probably won't agree with every lineup or substitution. If you have concerns, address them in private.

"Don't try embarrassing a kid or parent in front of a group, such as at a game," Hovis said. "I've had a couple of situations where a parent or a few had complaints. The coach and I went one-on-one. I presented him with the complaints and he gave me his point of view."