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HEADLINE: Top 10 reasons kids play sports

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In the past 30 years, I have had the privilege of working with thousands of kids at various levels and sports, ranging from 5-year-olds up to the college level. I've coached elite athletes as well as struggling beginners. I would like to share what I have discovered about why kids want to play sports; here is my Top 10 list: (in random order)

1. Friends. This is a great way to integrate kids into their community. Humans are instinctively drawn to each other, and friendships are crucial in healthy child development.
2. Skill improvement. When they can sense, or say, "I'm getting better," there is a deep-rooted sense of self motivation. Kids love to feel that they are improving, which in turn gives them more desire for more improvement.
3. Affirmation. Nothing encourages better than affirmation. Kids cherish the moments of being affirmed. So, as a youth coach, make sure that affirming the kids is a high priority. Being valued for who they are and what they uniquely bring is a huge need that coaches can meet in these young people.
4. Play together. It always is fun for me to hear kids ask their parents if they can spend the night at a teammate's house or invite another player over to play. You see, there is more to this "friendship thing" than just what happens on the team. It is more than just practice and games; it's having a fun relationship that is super-important. Just hanging out and skateboarding, or playing Wii, or watching a movie or getting some ice cream is important.
5. Winning team. I know it's hard to admit, but it's true: Kids love to be on a good team and win lots of games. Winning is fun and they love it.
6. Playing time. This part goes along with winning: Kids want to play and not sit on the bench. It has been said many times that most kids would rather be on a team where they get lots of playing time even if it is a losing season than to be on a winning team if they only get to sit the bench.
7. Sense of belonging. Kids have a huge need to feel like they are a significant part of a group. To be accepted and honored for who they are in their "community" is really important. To feel needed and wanted: For a kid, that is priceless.
8. Scrimmage time. OK coaches, hear this; kids love to scrimmage and not do drills. We all know that drills and skill development is our job and it is important, but don't let this part of your attitude and practice schedule overtake the time that the kids get to play games.

9. Parental approval. They want to know that you think they are awesome for trying and having a great attitude and that your acceptance and approval is not based on their performance.

10. Not be embarrassed. This means stop being that overinvolved, out-of-control, screaming parent. Remember that this is their "gig" not yours. Don't ruin it for them.

Needless to say and it doesn't need to take a number, but the No. 1 priority is fun. Mix these top 10 with fun and you have created the ideal environment for youth sports.