

Moral Development through Sports and Games

We want our kids to develop strong characters. But we don't want them to merely have strong characters; we want them to have good characters. A person with good character possesses virtue, which is a disposition to act in a particular way. But virtue is not just about action, it is also intellectual and emotional. That is, a person with good character, a virtuous person, acts from good reasons *and* strong passions.

Sports are one arena in which moral development can occur. Such development happens by way of both imitation and initiation. A child learns how to play soccer by imitating those who are good at the sport. Similarly, a child can learn how to be virtuous by imitating those who are morally good. Initiation is important as well. The experienced practitioner, whether of soccer or morality, will provide an example of what it is to excel and initiate the young into the proper habits of the practice. Children need to be encouraged to be committed to sports as moral practices, which means that they will play the sport as it ought to be played rather than in immoral ways.

Those who play well display such virtues as magnanimity, fairness, respect for the rules, and cooperation. These virtues are often embedded in the traditions of a particular sport which encourages their formation and display by those who play. For example, in soccer, imagine that a player from Arsenal is injured on the field. Their opponent, Manchester United, has the advantage and is attacking, but they intentionally kick the ball out of bounds so that play is stopped and the injured Arsenal player can receive medical attention. According to the rules of the game, the ball belongs to Arsenal because it was put out of play by Manchester United. However, according to the tradition inherent in the sport, Arsenal will throw the ball in to their opponent, and play will resume with Manchester United in possession. This is but one example of how fairness is a deep value within the sport, even if it is not always displayed by players (think of the exaggerated agony often on display).

As the young see, imitate, and are initiated into fairness in this and other ways, they can begin to develop it as a trait of character. However, this requires that they see and be committed to sports as moral practices. It also requires that coaches, parents, and fans be committed to sports in the same way. While this is idealistic, we must remember that traditions, including the traditions in sports, are ultimately under our control. Sports are what we make them: fun, competitive, demanding, and a place where strong and good character can be formed, displayed, and reinforced.