

When Your Child Doesn't Make the Team What Parents Can Do To Help Their Child Cope With
Getting Cut From A Team
By Sue Marquette Poremba

My son's first tryout came in seventh grade for the middle-school basketball team. Until then, he played regularly in either the rec league or the church league. His specialty was blocking shots, because he was tall with long arms. He was also the only kid on his team who could shoot and dribble with either hand. Even with 30 kids trying out for 10 spots, he felt his chances were good. In the end, my son didn't make it. A lot of good kids didn't make it. Still, he questioned himself. He thought he was good at basketball, but apparently he wasn't good enough. Would he also fail in other things? Rec leagues ended in sixth grade. There were no sports for him to do. He fell into a funk that affected everything else in his life. Facing the Hard Facts Not every child will be affected so deeply when not making the team, but all young athletes will eventually face the reality that sports are selective. Around the age of 11, children enter the period of select or elite teams. Little League picks "all-star" teams to compete in the World Series tournament. Soccer and basketball teams choose travel squads. By middle school, nearly all sports teams require tryouts (football being an exception). "At the younger ages, effort and ability aren't separated," says Gregg Heinzmann, director of the Youth Sports Research Council. "When they hit adolescence, however, the kids begin to discover their athletic abilities are finite, just when they are entering stages with other age-related challenges and anxieties." "Adolescence is the period of time where young peoples' physical development and psychological development are becoming formulated," says Charles Maher, professor of psychology at Rutgers University. "Developmentally, this is the time for the more talented youth to be allowed to compete with others at the same level." Maher, who is also the team psychologist for the Cleveland Indians and the Cleveland Cavaliers, points out that adolescents, whatever their natural talent levels may be, also tend to vary a great deal in their emotions and self-esteem. "If making the elite and travel teams signifies external rewards and recognitions, and the unabashed showcasing of young players and their coaches, this narcissistic attitude and self-centeredness will reinforce to those who do not make the teams that they are not 'good' people," he says. The most obvious external reward is being able to be a part of a team and with that, the knowledge that, for now, the child's athletic ability is considered best among his or her peers. On the flip side, the children who don't get picked suffer a severe blow to their ego, and it is up to the parents to apply the salve. "There is no way being cut won't hurt," says Maureen Busch of Stow, Mass., who has three children participating in sports. Although her children have made select teams, they have also been cut from teams before. "The worst time came when my second son was cut from a team he had been on for multiple seasons," Busch says. "Everyone assumed he would make it again. That was a time he needed a lot more moral support. He felt a true sense of having lost something." Helping Them Cope What can parents do to help their child survive being passed over for a select team? *1. Explain that everyone gets a turn to shine.* "Sometimes it is someone else's turn, and next time it could be yours," says Debbie Mandel, the author of Turn on Your Inner Light: Fitness for Body, Mind and Soul (Busy Bee Group, 2003). *2. Ask in advance what coaches will be looking for in a player* and the commitment you and your child need to make if she makes the team, explains Stacy DeBroff, author of Sign Me Up! The Parents' Complete Guide to Sports, Activities, Music Classes, Dance Lessons and

Extracurriculars (Free Press, 2003). Knowing what the coach expects ahead of time can alert the parents to whether or not this sport in this situation would be a good fit for the child. *3. Prepare your child for the possibility of not making the team before tryouts begin.* "The parents should convey to their sons and daughters to prepare to make the team, to work hard to do so and most importantly, feel good about themselves no matter the outcome," Maher says. *4. If your child truly enjoys the sport, do everything possible to keep them interested and involved.* "If a child doesn't make a team, he is often discouraged and drops the sport," DeBroff says. "Stories abound of middle-of-the-road athletes who went on to excel." Michael Jordan is an excellent example of a young athlete who was cut by his school team, but who didn't give up and tried out the next year. Look for alternative leagues, or sign them up for sports camps to improve their skills. *5. Allow them to feel the hurt of not making the team. *Busch says that she and her husband let her children take the lead on how they want to deal with the disappointment. "If they needed to go off to their rooms for a while to deal with it, that was fine," she says. "If they wanted to talk about it, we were there to listen and help put it in perspective." *6. Keep it in perspective. *Oftentimes children are upset because they feel they let down their parents. "It is flattering to a parent when a coach wants your child to try out for a select team," Heinzmann says. Children pick up on parents' excitement, so reinforce to your child that you aren't disappointed in him, but disappointed for him. Keeping It in Perspective It is difficult enough for a child who hasn't made a select team, but doubly hard when his friends do get picked. "I see the kids on the team forming a group, and not being in that group leads to exclusion," says Steve Albert, a father and youth coach from Cranford, NJ. There could be a temporary break in the friendship, or it could end up in a permanent break. Parents should do whatever they can to encourage strengthening other friendships during this time. In the long run, it is important that parents keep reality in perspective for their young athletes. All children will eventually suffer rejection; no one is immune to it. Some children bloom early, and some will have late growth spurts and puberty to improve their athletic ability. "There are very few athletes who make it to the professional level and also very few who obtain college scholarships," Maher says. "Parents of young athletes would do well to keep these realities in mind. Parents need to emphasize the dictum of keeping everything, including sports, in perspective."