**Define success appropriately for each age group**

**Main article by Dr. Richard D. Ginsburg, Ph.D., Co-Director, MGH Sports Psychology Program and Paces Institute and Paige Perriello, M.D., F.A.A.P., Pediatric Associates of Charlottesville.**

Does it ever feel like the latest sport season sneaks up on you? This is often how many parents feel about enrolling their child in a new team or sport. One season is followed quickly by another, and it’s hard to keep our schedules straight, much less our heads! This ever-growing fast pace of the youth sport culture makes it even more imperative that parents have solid expectations about what they believe is most important for their kids in sports. These expectations will change as our kids get older. The following is an overview of what we feel is most important for kids as they progress from one age to the next.

**Ages 0-6. Safety and fun.**

Dribbling, running around on the court, laughing, falling and getting up. These are the ideal actions of pre-school basketball players. If kids feel safe and are enjoying themselves, they will take more risks to learn and try new things, and they will want to continue to play. If we can prioritize this over skill development and score, we are putting our kids in the best position to be successful over time as we are establishing a positive relationship between being physically active and being with peers. If we get too caught up with teaching our kids the skills of the game, we can become frustrated and create a sense of tension around play, which will likely backfire. Fun is where the action is for kids at this age.

**Ages 7-12: Skill development and friendship**

When our kids enter elementary school, it’s now time for us to begin to teach them the fundamentals of the game. Teaching them how they catch and throw properly, where to stand on the court, and how to communicate with teammates and coaches are the building blocks of this age group. We want our kids to believe in themselves and in their capacity to perform basic tasks, which in turn become the fundamentals of self-confidence. It is also critical that they develop friendships with peers as part of moving away from the sole reliance on their parents. For this reason, it is often more important that kids play with their friends as opposed to play for the "right" team or the more advanced team. Prioritizing sport advancement at the sacrifice of friendship can be a recipe for burnout and social isolation. And even though our kids may begin to excel and become more competitive during this period, it is critical that we keep in mind that learning the skills of the game takes precedence over the game’s outcome. This is becoming an increasingly difficult message to integrate these days as competitive tryouts and travel teams are starting at younger ages. But, the same principles apply for the older, more competitive teams. This is time to learn, have fun and build solid relationships so our kids have the tools to manage their next, more competitive stages.

**Ages 13-18: Independence and identity formation**

As parents of adolescents, you already understand that no matter how much knowledge you possess about your children’s sport, class, or social life experiences, they simply may not want to hear your advice. Those of us who played or coached college basketball may see our kids listen more to their less-experienced friends or coaches than to us. This is a natural and necessary part of the process for our adolescent athletic children. While it may frustrate or even sadden us, we want them to develop their own voice, independent of ours, even if we think they are at times misdirected. Good, caring coaches are the ideal bridge to this needed independence. Finding the best coaches and programs for our kids is one way we can continue to help while stepping back to allow for their growth. Also, during this period is the growing self of self. In high school, many athletes will begin to perceive where they stand athletically when compared to their peers. For some, this marks recognition of talent and potential. For others, it is a more painful period of recognizing limitations. Realistically, most of our kids experience both recognition of talent and limitations. "I am a great shooter, but I am not as fast as some. I am really quick, but my size puts me at a disadvantage." Our kids have to struggle through these awakenings, and, at times, it is hard for us to watch from the sidelines. It is important that we remain supportive during these important challenges and opportunities while at the same time not overly protective. Our kids need to learn how to advocate for themselves and work through their limitations while embracing their strengths. Doing too much for our kids can undermine their capacity to confidently progress in the face of adversity. This is a very fine line to walk as a parent, but if you are feeling the tension, you are not alone.