

# Parents Keep Out!



Why don't the kids seem to be having fun in Little League? The deterrent is the adults.

BY JAY FELDMAN

**R**ecently my wife and I were watching our 9-year-old son's Little League game when she turned to me and said, "There's something missing here, but I'm not sure what it is." I knew what she meant, but I couldn't put my finger on it.

That weekend, my son accompanied me to my over-30 baseball team's practice. There were a few other kids there, and we gave them a bat and ball and sent them to the other end of the park. Very soon, the exuberant sounds from their game caught my ear; I looked over, and at the sight of them leaping and frisking unself-consciously about, I knew at once what had been missing from that Little League game: joy—the spontaneous, unrestrained exhilaration of kids having fun.

Why don't the kids seem to be having fun in Little League? The deterrent, I believe, is the adults—and not just the overly aggressive, winning-is-everything types who are living out their unfulfilled sports dreams through their children. The problem is the whole pervasive adult structure that dominates the Little League program.

To begin with, the volunteer system upon which Little League is based is no longer effective. In the late 1930s, when Little League was first instituted, adults with real baseball knowledge and experience were drawn to the coaching ranks. Today, because Little League has grown so large (7,000 leagues and 2.5 million youngsters worldwide), any adult with good intentions can be a coach, so you often have people in charge who know little about the game.

Case in point: last season, my son showed up at practice with a wooden bat, but the coaches told him it was prohibited. Imagine, disallowing a wooden bat? A couple of weeks later, though, during a game, my son noticed a player on the opposing team using one. He told his coach, who pointed it out to the umpire. "So what?" was the arbiter's response. "There's nothing in the rules against wooden bats." Now, how can I tell my kid to listen to his coaches if they don't even know the rules?

Little League has become a glorified baby-sitting service. The players not on the field are expected to sit on the bench and "behave" themselves. This not only goes against the nature of young children, who need to be running around and blowing off steam; it goes against the grain of the game. Baseball is not a genteel activity where you "behave" yourself; it's an intense competition where you let it

all hang out, and if your actions are inappropriate or offensive, you suffer the consequences.

Little League is too darned organized. T-ball, preminors, minors, majors—for pity's sake, give the kids some room to breathe. They're started way too young, at 6 years old, when most kids don't have the attention span necessary to carry out an activity that takes more than a few minutes. Watch them in the field; they're turning circles, chewing their gloves, picking their noses—everything but concentrating on the ball game. You have to ask yourself, "Do these kids really want to be here?"

When I was a kid, we organized our games ourselves. You grabbed your glove, bat and ball (if you had those things), headed down to the park or schoolyard, and found a game—anywhere from two on a side to full teams. Nobody had to tell us what to do. We played many variations of baseball—the kind of game depended on the number of kids, type of playing field, equipment available, etc.—and if the situation called for it, we'd invent the rules to fit what we had.

You don't see that today. When a San Francisco friend of mine told his 11-year old to go out and find a ball game one day, the boy said, "Kids don't do that anymore, Dad. We only play if it's scheduled."

Not only are the kids not organizing their own games, which brings with it the feeling of belonging; they're also not using their imaginations to create the rules that are needed for improvised play. Moreover—and this is truly unfortunate—they aren't getting the chance to resolve the conflicts that arise in the course of competition because the adults arbitrate everything for them. The ball field should be a place for kids to learn the skills necessary for settling differences. Instead, they sit by while the adults go at it, often displaying behavior that would be admonished were it manifested by the kids.

Case in point: a couple of weeks ago, I saw my son's game delayed for 15 minutes while the coaches and the umpire hotly argued a situation. The parents on the sidelines shouted rude remarks. Finally, one kid yelled, "Hey, you guys, quit wasting our time!" Poor sportsmanship all around.

**Popular democracy:** We would never have let an argument go on that long when we were kids. If a conflict was not resolvable in a reasonable amount of time, we invoked the ubiquitous "do-over." Even in the case where one side was clearly right but the other wouldn't give in, someone yelled, "Do-over," i.e., repeat the play, and the game went on. The injured party compromised for the sake of keeping the game going. We were learning popular democracy, practicing to be citizens.

Lastly, due to the constant adult presence in Little League, the kids don't have to take any initiative. The adults do it all. The parents pay the money, and the child gets a uniform. When we wanted uniforms, we had to figure out a way to raise the money, and when we got it together, we went to the sporting-goods store and ordered the uniforms ourselves. It was a big deal for us, and those uniforms were *ours*.

Today the kids own none of it. No wonder there's no joy. All ideas and institutions have their time and place. In 1939 Little League was a fresh concept; 50 years later it's become an archaic ritual that has lost its original vitality. We're beating a dead horse; we'd do better to just give it a decent burial. Do-over. Give the game back to the kids; if they want to play baseball, they'll work it out for themselves.

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