

# WHOLE CHILD SPORTS Q&A

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An excerpt from *Beyond Winning: Parenting in a Toxic Sports Environment* by Kim John Payne, Luis Fernando Llosa, and Scott Lancaster

**QUESTION:** *What if My Kid Is Too Passive?*

*My kid holds back too much. He's just not aggressive enough and is more of a spectator than a participant. This causes him to perform poorly. How can I get him to step it up?*

**DISCUSSION:**

We get it. You don't want your kid to be passive. You want him right in there participating fully. But let's be clear: This is not a question of aggression, but of engagement.



Aggressiveness is not a positive—assertiveness is. Every kid has his own doorway into engagement. The last thing you want to do is push your child to become “aggressive” right now, if he’s prone to be cautious. In the long run, you might well push him straight toward quitting. That’s a real concern, and we’ve seen it happen again and again: Kids quit sports in droves.

It’s helpful to take a step back and consider how your child learns things in general, not just in sports. When it comes to math or the language arts, does he need to have a sense of the big picture before he can grapple with the details? What about new social situations? When your son steps into the room at a

party, what does he do? Does he hang back a bit and take in the room? Is he a hesitant kid?

If so, that's perfectly fine. That's who he is, and that's his temperament. He may be a bit catlike, standing back and watching things unfold while he figures it all out. Then, in his own way and in his own time, he'll enter into the mix. If he's already participating on a team, that's great. It's not as if he's checked out or doesn't want to take part at all. But if he's an introverted type and you push him—"Come on, Joey! You've gotta get in there and tackle harder. Don't just stand there! Go for it. What are you waiting for?"—he may react either by becoming stubborn or withdrawn.

**SOLUTION:** For kids, sports are more about the relationships they have with the children they play with than performance. Left alone, they are not likely to obsess about making a hard tackle or winning games. So if you want a kid to become more involved, practically, in the sports he plays, focus on developing your child's level of engagement and confidence. Our strategy is to create activities for the child that can socially orient him within the team, away from the field or court. Throw a pizza party or invite teammates over for play dates. If your child is a bit shy, don't invite a large group of kids, just one or two. This will help him find that doorway into taking part in a more wholehearted way.

The fact that your child is not assertive is not at all unusual. Again and again, on teams we coach we encounter kids who are naturally assertive—who rush in there and engage fearlessly in every play or tackle—and kids who are hesitant and seem to stop and give up too easily. Parents get frustrated, but patience is pivotal.

We've found that it can take two or three years for a child to develop positive assertiveness. One nine-year-old whom Luis coached in soccer was unable to engage with his opponents. He'd tackle tentatively and seemingly halfheartedly. Once beaten—which happened pretty much every time—he'd just turn and watch the player who got by him dribble down-

field. His parents were clearly frustrated by his lack of tenacity. "He's just not a go-getter," they'd say. "That's the way he is with everything." They seemed resigned.

But the kid did love to play. He never missed a practice, and he stuck with the team for three years. Toward the end of the second year, three things changed: His bond with his teammates strengthened, he became physically stronger, and his skills and coordination improved steadily. As his confidence grew, so did his level of engagement. By the end of the third year he was a completely different player: He won tackles, stole the ball often, and when beaten during one game, immediately reengaged three times with the player who'd dribbled past him.

What forms a foundation here is the dynamic we call "inhabiting your space." A kid does not need to get "into someone's face" or play hard to the point of borderline recklessness in order to be assertive. In fact, this can often be a sign that a player has "lost it" or is "getting out of it." What they are "getting out" of is ownership of their own space.

Instead they are trying to insert themselves into someone else's space. The impression may be that they are being strong and assertive, but we have seen that this often leads to a drop in performance for the aggressor, who becomes "uncentered."

Instead what we hope to cultivate in a young athlete is the ability to hold, or inhabit, his own space, first by standing strong when challenged, and second by learning to challenge and chase his opponent. Some kids feel this is not okay; it feels like aggression to them. In a way they are right. Try to help your son differentiate between appropriate tackling and defending, and over-the-top aggressiveness. Help him understand that holding and inhabiting his space when challenged or challenging others is part of the game. It's a little like "spatial fencing," in which there will be interplay between two fencers. Each searches for a gap in the other's defense.

A finely tuned athlete is both centered and aware of the activity around him. He has a wonderful sense of timing, of when to go for it and when to

hold back. That marks the difference between aggressiveness and assertiveness.

A final thing to bear in mind: Kids often lack assertiveness because they have an underlying fear of failure. That can be at the root of what prompts them to hold back. A parent or coach steeped in the Whole Child Sports ethos, which redefines the way winning and success are measured, realizes that a young player who lacks assertiveness needs time and coaxing. Time and again we have watched children we've trained develop appropriate assertiveness and enjoy the spatial interplay that it involves. All they needed was the time and space to "inhabit their own space."