



In his mind he's A-Rod. In reality he's Jack.

Winning at Losing

Jack hates to fail at anything—from Candy Land to T-ball. BY PETE NELSON

My 4-year-old, Jack, is full of boundless joy and enthusiasm for everything he does—except when he fails to measure up to his own expectations. I first saw this on a warm April afternoon. I was pitching baseballs to him—spring training, we called it—lobbing them in as softly as I could, saying whenever he missed, “Good swing. Almost. One more.” Suddenly,

after one miss too many, he dropped his bat and went to sulk at the foot of a tree, chin in hands. “I can’t do it,” he said. “I’m no good at baseball.”

Jack doesn’t like to lose, or fail, at anything. Who does? At his age, it seems particularly hard. He’s yet to grasp the limitations of his body, and he overestimates his abilities. “I’m the best in the whole wide

world,” he’ll say. “I know everything about [fill in the blank].”

It was easy enough, when he was younger, to let him win, surreptitiously stacking the deck to make sure he got Queen Frostine in Candy Land or feigning defeat as he “pinned” me each night when we wrestled before bedtime, congratulating and praising him afterward, “You won!”



You're so strong!" (Little wonder he likes winning.) I figured that for a kid, survival requires attaining a progressive sense of mastery over each new task, and I wanted to build his confidence. At the same time, I knew I was postponing the inevitable and perhaps setting him up for disappointment.

Jack's collapse of self-esteem that day at the park was the first of many such occasions. His mother and I next watched him smash Lego-block projects out of frustration, and tear up good drawings just because they didn't look like he wanted them to. He wanted to be not just good but great—at everything.

After that meltdown in the park, I explained that even the best baseball

players in the world still make an out two-thirds of the time. Eventually I got him to practice again under the maple tree in our side yard. His hitting improved, and so did his confidence. It still made me nervous, though, when Jack wanted to sign up for T-ball.

T-ball, for 4-year-olds, is *The Show*, even though it's noncompetitive and involves simple drills: Pick up a ball rolling right at you; throw the ball within 10 or 15 feet of the person you're aiming at; hit a ball off a rubber tee. Peer pressure is minimal. No one keeps score. Players are apt to pause on their way to first base to examine a rock, and most of the coaching involves saying things like, "Chase the

ducks *after* the game” or “I’m sorry sweetheart—when I said ‘Go home’ I meant run to home plate, not to your house.”

Jack, however, was not having as good a time as we’d hoped. He liked the part where you sit on the bench and stick your fingers in your teammates’ ears, but oddly, Jack wasn’t hitting the ball off the tee nearly as well as he’d hit my pitching at home; he was thwacking the rubber tee or missing altogether. No one lost, but no one won either, and I think he wasn’t quite the superstar he thought he was going to be. After the third week he said he wanted to quit, until we bought him a pair of special baseball pants at Dick’s Sporting Goods.

He spent the rest of the day testing how “superfast” the new pants were.

Then the inevitable happened, on the final day of the season. Jack was at first base, drawing in the dirt with his toe. The ball was hit.

“Watch it, Jack!” I shouted. “Here it comes—catch it!”

Against all odds, one of the short-stops (I think there were six or seven kids at the position) had thrown the ball right to him, but Jack wasn’t paying attention. The soft rubber ball caromed off his cheekbone. He dropped his mitt, fell to the grass, and sobbed. It soon became evident that his pride hurt more than his cheek. I got down in the grass, put my face next to his, and tried to ^{ooz}

How to Teach Graceful Losing

All parents in the first years allow their children to win simple games—we know that losing takes some getting used to. As one astute 5-year-old boy explained, “Losing is hard for me because I haven’t done it very much.”

“The larger question,” says cultural anthropologist Mary Catherine Bateson, “is how focused on competition do we want our kids to be? There are ways to succeed that don’t require defining others as losers. Would you rather raise a ‘winner,’ or a child who is creative, cooperative, and flexible?”

Veteran parents suggest the following methods for helping your children become more comfortable with losing:

- Play games of chance, such as War, and explain that winning sometimes depends on luck, not on skill.
- Play games that last forever, like Monopoly, in which your child (and you) will run out of steam before anybody wins or loses.
- If your child fails at something, emphasize those aspects of the endeavor in which the child is getting better—keep track of improvement and personal bests such as farthest throw or most hits in a row, not final scores.
- Once in a while, before you play a game, agree on a prize for the loser—say, picking the dessert that evening.
- If your child loses the game, quickly offer to play again and remind him or her that the winner has to say “Good game” to the loser.
- Choose an activity that requires cooperation as well as competition, such as freeze tag, red rover, or duck duck goose.

—P.N.

Most of the coaching involves saying things like, “I’m sorry sweetheart—when I said ‘Go home’ I meant run to home plate, not to your house.”

talk to him, but he was inconsolable: His fantasy had popped like a soap bubble. He wouldn’t go back on the field, and spent the next 15 minutes sulking behind a bush.

All kids go through it, I realized, this preschool of hard knocks, but how do you help them learn to accept the idea that they won’t prevail every time and that that’s okay? For Jack, three things helped.

First, we rebuilt the fantasy. A few good swats under the maple tree and soon he was picturing every hit as a home run. It was fun again.

Second, we worked on the idea that setbacks are only temporary. We played a series of board games in rapid succession, and I beat him often enough that he came to see losing as a brief interruption between victories. He also had enough victories to offset the pain. Learning to lose takes time and repetition.

Finally, we put the fantasy in context by watching baseball on TV. Each time a pro struck out, I mentioned how common it is to fail, even for grown-ups. I also showed him a sports blooper tape that includes the famous clip of former all-star outfielder Jose Canseco running to catch a fly ball. He loses sight of the ball; it bounces off the top of his head and into the stands for a home run.

Jack howled with laughter and asked, “Is he not supposed to do that?”

No, I assured him.

“Everybody makes mistakes,” former Dodgers manager Tommy Lasorda says on the tape. “That’s why they put erasers on pencils.”

You know that and I know that, but Jack, right now, likes to think he’s infallible, invincible, bulletproof. I don’t want to be the one to tell him he’s not, but then, I don’t have to. I just have to be there when he falls. ▮

Novelist Pete Nelson claims he had a tryout with the Red Sox but was beaten out by some guy named Carl Yastrzemski.



WHY KIDS DO THIS

Losing, experts say, typically becomes an issue with kids around the age of 4 and can take years to resolve itself. Toddlers might fight with each other for toys or attention, but most of their play happens “in parallel.” By around age 4, kids have many more skills than they did when they were younger, and they know it—and therein lies the rub. They’re developing a sense of what they can do and often expect a lot of themselves.

When reality clashes with that sense of their ability, they can take it hard.

“They’re in constant motion, seeking out adventure,” says Cheryl Roberts, at the Gesell Institute of Human Development. “Especially around ages 3 and 4, kids are very imaginative in their play, and want to believe they’re capable of much more than they really are. Rather than facing the harsh reality of their own limitations, they ‘pretend.’”

In a game where a boy has convinced himself that he’s the greatest slugger of all time, striking out midfantasy can bring on a collapse of his exaggerated sense of self, leaving him confused and uncertain. Losing, then, at anything from T-ball to Go Fish, may have less to do with the game itself and more to do with the sudden unpleasant reversal of expectations and emotions, which are on a bit of a hair trigger anyway. —P.N.