



A PARENT'S GUIDE TO FENCING
2007 EDITION

Your Kids, Their Swords, and Surviving it all with your Sanity Intact



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Fencing: A Comprehensive Parent's Guide

/Fencing/, noun

1: the art or practice of attack and defense with the foil, épée, or sabre

2: deriving from the expression, "The Art of Defense," meaning the art of defending one's self in combat.

In the broadest possible sense, fencing is the art of armed combat involving weapons directly manipulated by hand, rather than shot or thrown.

Why Fencing?

If you're reading this guide, you obviously have some interest in this unique activity. Maybe it's the cool weapons that initially sparked your curiosity, or the distinctive clothes, or the intricate strategy involved. No matter your initial ingress into the world of fencing, the more you learn about it, the more you will want to participate.

Coordination, speed, agility and self-assurance are just a few of the qualities this sport requires of its participants. A fencer needs not only to be quick of body but of mind as well. The intensity of fencing, and the extreme demands it places on one are a natural result of fencing's violent history. And while fencing has morphed from combat to sport, and possessing these skills no longer carries a life or death consequence, they are, however, in large part what make fencing such an exhilarating endeavor.

A successful fencer must be capable of mounting powerful driving attacks or conversely, of making subtle and crafty defenses, all within the space of a few seconds. Brawn only, however, will only take you so far in fencing: intellect is paramount. A good fencer must be clever and with unwavering concentration able to conceive and execute calculated moves quickly.

The spirit of fair play and honor is an integral part of fencing. A maximum of politeness and consideration is always observed while competing with others. Fencing is as much an attitude as it is a sport and those who participate in fencing find that it can profoundly affect their lives.

Physically demanding, mentally challenging, character developing and cool weapons, what more could one ask for?!

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How Will Fencing Benefit My Child?

The main benefits of fencing align nicely with the benefits of any sports activity.

- First, they are active and doing something, not being passive receptacles for programming beamed out from the TV.
- Fencing helps children get fit – you can't "swordfight" without a good bit of movement!
- Fencing helps children learn to pay attention and to develop their decision-making abilities.
- Because fencing is an individual sport, the fencer is responsible for their success or failure, which becomes a great lesson in responsibility.
- It provides an outlet for getting out aggression in a safe and controlled environment.
- Finally, many great colleges have fencing teams and are always looking for experienced fencers. While scholarships are few and limited to top-level competitors, having fencing on your college resume provides you with another way for your child to market themselves.

Editor's note: *Personally, fencing provided me with a great way to exercise my mind and body and I think that it helped me get into my college of choice. (I got into Carolina as an out of state student – a pretty difficult thing to do I hear.) Fencing is suited for those that like to do things for themselves – if your child is into puzzles and other problem-solving games then the individual and mental components mesh nicely into a new and cool activity.*

Fencing: So Many Flavors to Choose From

Some form of fencing has been around for centuries. In fact, fencing is one of only four events to have been contested at every Olympics since the modern Olympic Games started in 1896. As fencing has moved away from warfare, several offshoots have developed: fencing as art and fencing as sport. In general fencing can be divided into three broad categories:

- Competitive fencing, which distinguishes itself by having a sport or competitive element to it. This is also referred to as Olympic Fencing and is the most common form of fencing.
- Fencing as a Western Martial Art where the goal is to train for and/or reconstruct a theoretical duel. Within this category are Classical and Historical fencing; there

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is considerable overlap between these two types especially with regard to 19th-century fencing practices. The element of sport is absent (or nearly so) from these forms of fencing, but they share a common origin with each other and with competitive fencing.

- And finally, there are other forms of fencing such as Stage fencing which has little in common besides history with either of the other two. With Stage fencing theatrical fight scenes are choreographed and fencing actions are exaggerated for dramatic effect and visual clarity.

In addition to these types of fencing, there is also sword and rapier combat available via the SCA (Society for Creative Anachronism.) Depending on the region, aspects of SCA combat will have elements of modern fencing and also of historical fencing.

Types of Competitive Fencing

Within the Competitive Fencing category, there are several varieties including Olympic fencing, and wheelchair fencing, which is an event at the Paralympics. These disciplines approach the activity as a sport, with varying degrees of connectedness to its historic past. Since the majority of fencing done in the U.S. falls under the Olympic fencing umbrella, this guide focuses on this genre.

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Olympic-style fencing (or simply "fencing") refers to the fencing seen in most competitions, including the Olympic Games. It is marked by the use of electronic scoring equipment, and conducted according to rules laid down by the Fédération Internationale d'Escrime (FIE), the sports federation governing international fencing competitions. The current rules are loosely based on a set of conventions developed in 18th- and 19th-century Europe to govern fencing as a martial art and a gentlemanly pursuit. The weapons used are the foil, épée, and sabre (more on weapons later).

Wheelchair Fencing was introduced at the 1960 Paralympic Games in Rome and there are now 24 countries that compete in the various wheelchair fencing disciplines. From a spectator's point of view, the most striking feature of Wheelchair Fencing is the fact that athletes compete in wheelchairs that are fastened to the floor. However, these chairs allow the fencers freedom of movement in the upper body only and the activity is as fast-paced as in Fencing competitions for able-bodied. Men and women with an amputation, spinal injury or cerebral palsy are eligible to compete in events including Foil, Epée (men and women) and Sabre (men). The official governing body is the International Wheelchair and Amputee Sports Federation (IWAS).

Is it Safe? (We are talking about sword fighting.)

Fencing is one of the safest sports that you can compete in. The most common injuries in fencing reflect those of other sports – ligament sprains and muscle strains account for over half of the injuries. (<http://extra.org/FencingChptr.htm>).

Even the insurance companies agree! When comparing insurance rates for “Accident Medical Coverage” for sports teams and leagues, the insurance premiums for fencing are the least expensive – cheaper than for volleyball and basketball.

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Right-of-What? A List of Important Terms

As with any sport, a specific vocabulary is necessary to describe the equipment and explain the movements. To follow is a short list of commonly used terms within the fencing community.

| | |
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| Advance | Taking a step forward (towards one's opponent.) |
| Attack | Offensive movement, or series of movements by which a fencer tries to score a point. In foil and sabre, the fencer who attacks first acquires the "right-of-way." In order to execute an attack properly (i.e. one that the referee will acknowledge), the fencer's hand must be clearly extending towards their opponent's valid target in a threatening manner. |
| Balestra | A short, sharp jump forwards; usually used as a preparation for an attack. Often followed by a lunge. |
| Beat | Sharp tap on the opponent's blade to initiate an attack or provoke a reaction. |
| Breeches | This is the name given to the short trousers worn to just below the knee. (Also called knickers or fencing pants.) |
| Disengage | Evasive action in which the fencer avoids the opponent's attempt to take their blade. |
| Engagement | Contact between the fencers' blades - often as the prelude to an attack. |
| En Garde | Position taken before fencing commences. |
| Épée | French for sword. Descendent of the dueling sword. It is the heaviest of the three fencing weapons and has a stiff, V-shaped blade, and a large bell guard for protecting the hand from hits. |
| Feint | A false attack intended to get a defensive reaction from the opposing fencer, thus creating the opportunity for a genuine attack. ("feint-disengage attack"). In epee, fencers also use the feint to goad their opponent into attacking them. |
| Foil | Descendent of the court sword. The foil was used for training in the duel and featured a blunted (or foiled) tip. |

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| Fleche | Explosive, running attack (foil and épée only). |
| Flunge | Action unique to sabre - a combination of a lunge and a fleche. Evolved recently after sabre rules were modified in 1992 to prohibit running attacks. |
| Guard | Part of the weapon between the blade and handle; protects the hand, also known as: "bell-guard." |
| Lame | Pronounced La-may (not lame). This is the conductive over jacket that is used for electric scoring in both Foil and Sabre. |
| Lunge | Most common attacking footwork technique, in which the fencer launches themselves at their opponent by pushing off from their back leg. |
| Opposition | As in "thrust with opposition" and means to simultaneously deflect the opponent's point with one's guard while making an attack of one's own. Commonly used in épée to avoid a double touch. |
| Parry | Defensive action in which a fencer blocks his opponent's blade. |
| Piste | French term for the fencing strip: where the actual fencing action takes place. It is 14 meters long and 1.5 to 2 meters wide. Retreating off the end of the strip with both feet gets a touch against. Going off the side of the strip with one foot halts the fencing action. Going off the side with both feet gets a penalty of the loss of one meter, and if this results in the offender going off the end of the piste, a point is awarded to his opponent. After each touch, fencers begin again at the center of the strip, 4 meters apart, or roughly at a position where their blades can nearly touch when fully extended. Many pistes at fencing tournaments are "grounded" so that if a fencer's blade makes contact with the floor, the hit won't register. (Note: most US fencers refer only to the "strip" – piste is rarely used in the US.) |
| Plastron | Also sometimes called an underarm protector; this is worn under your jacket on your sword arm and gives extra protection to the most commonly hit part of your target area. The seams on a plastron are made so that they do not line up with the seams on a jacket for added safety. |
| Point-in-Line | Action in which the fencer, who is generally out of attacking range, points their weapon at their opponent with their arm fully |

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extended. A fencer who establishes a point-in-line has right-of-way, and their opponent cannot attack until they remove the blade from line by executing a beat.

| | |
|---------------------------|---|
| Recover | The return to the en garde position after lunging. |
| Remise | Attacking again immediately after the opponent's parry of an initial attack. |
| Riposte | Defender's offensive action immediately after parrying their opponent's attack. |
| Sabre | The sabre is a light and fast weapon. The blade is V-shaped, or Y-shaped and not as stiff as the epee. The sabre uses both cuts and thrusts to score points. |
| Second Intention | A tactic, in which a fencer executes a convincing, yet false, action in hopes of drawing a true, committed reaction from their opponent. |
| Stop Hit, Stop Cut | A counter-action made at the moment of an opponent's hesitation, feint, or poorly executed attack. To be awarded the point, the fencer attempting a stop hit must clearly catch their opponent's tempo. Hence, if their Stop Hit is not "in time," the referee may award the touch to their attacker. A stop cut is specifically for sabre. |
| Strip | See "Piste" above |

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Overview of the Three Weapons

Foil...epee...sabre, what's really the difference?



Each weapon has its own distinct “character” and resulting pace of action. For example, the sabre is the fastest and most aggressive, epee is the slowest and requires the most patience while foil is in between and attracts fencers who like to employ both aggression and patience. If you (or your child) are going to participate in this sport, you need to understand the different nature of the weapons, their characteristics, how they're used and how a fencer can win with each weapon. And, of course, a little trivia never hurt anyone.

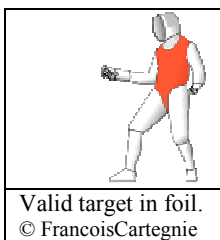
Though many recreational fencers compete in multiple weapons, Olympic level fencers concentrate on one weapon for their competitive careers.

Foil – *The Court Sword*

The foil used by fencers today is the modern version of the original practice weapon used by nobility to train for duels.

It all evolved as fencing for exercise - based on speed and skill – (as opposed to the ability to cut someone in combat), began to emerge. As this practice became more popular, a longer, lighter weapon was developed. The weapon's extended length forced opponents to fight at a distance with quick but controlled lunges, attacking the enemy with the point of the sword, replacing rudimentary hacking techniques.

Under Louis XIV in France, a change in fashion led to a new kind of sword, a shorter sword. (Apparently the long sword clashed with the brocaded jackets, breeches and silk stockings.) The court sword, as it was known, turned out to be an excellent weapon for fencing because it was both lighter and stronger, so it could be used for defense as well as offense. As a result, the modern one-handed fencing technique developed, with the left hand and arm used primarily for balance.



Valid target in foil.
© FrancoisCartegnie

To score points with the foil, the fencer must land the tip of the blade on a valid target: along the torso from shoulders to groin in the front and to the waist in the back. The arms, neck, head and legs are considered off-target. Off-target hits will temporarily halt the fencing action, but does not result any points being awarded.

The concept of on-target and off-target evolved from the theory of 18th-century fencing masters, who taught their pupils to only attack the vital areas of the body (i.e. the torso). While the head is also a vital area of the body, attacks to the face

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were considered rude and therefore discouraged. You have to remember, fencing prides itself on being a chivalrous sport.

Because the foil was a training sword, it was important for the rules of foil to reflect the logic of combat. For newcomers to foil fencing, one of the most challenging concepts to grasp is the rule of right-of-way. Basically, the right-of-way rule states that the fencer who started to attack first will receive the point if they hit a valid target, and that their opponent is obligated to defend themselves. (In other words, you don't get points by committing suicide and running onto your opponent's blade once they have established the start of their attack.)

However, if a fencer hesitates for too long while advancing on their opponent, they give up right-of-way to their opponent. A touch scored against an opponent who hesitated too long is called an attack in preparation or a stop-hit, depending on the circumstances.

Although some foil fencers still employ the classical technique of parries and thrusts, the flexible nature of the foil blade permits the modern foil fencer to attack an opponent from seemingly impossible angles.

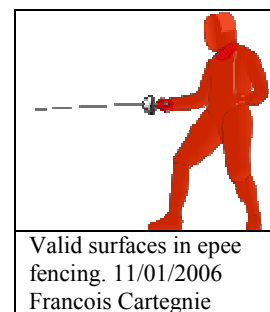
Competitors can execute "marching attacks" where they move down the fencing strip towards their opponent, looking to flick the point of their blade at back or flank of their opponent. Because parrying (blocking) these attacks can be very difficult, the modern game of foil has evolved into a complicated and exciting game of multiple feints, ducking and sudden, explosive attacks, making it a lot of fun to watch.

Epee – (Almost) Anything Goes

While a special version of the court sword, the foil, was developed for practice, another type of sword, the *colichemarde*, was created for dueling. The blade had a triangular cross-section, with slightly concave sides to reduce weight without reducing strength and the forte was grooved to allow the blood to drain away (and to make it easier to remove the sword from the body!). The *colichemarde* evolved into the modern epee.

As the epee (pronounced "EPP-pay") evolved, the idea was to develop epee fencing in a manner that reproduced as closely as possible the conditions of an actual duel to first blood. As a result, in epee the entire body is considered a valid target and there is no "right-of-way" rule: anything goes (almost).

Epee fencers score a point by hitting their opponent first. If the fencers hit each other within 1/25th of a second, both receive a point - this is commonly referred to as a double touch. Initially epee fencers worked to be first to the best of five but over time it became the best of nine wins the bout.



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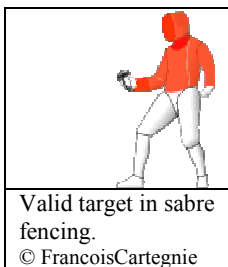
The lack of right-of-way combined with a full-body target naturally makes epee a game of careful strategy and patience - wild, rash attacks are quickly punished with solid counter-attacks. So, rather than attacking outright, epeeists often spend several minutes probing their opponent's defenses and maneuvering for distance before risking an attack. Others may choose to stay on the defensive throughout the entire bout. As an epee watcher you also need to have patience.

Sabre – *The Need for Speed*

The sabre is the modern version of the slashing cavalry sword and was introduced into Europe in the late 18th century as an adaptation of the Turkish scimitar, used by the Hungarian cavalry. It was quite popular (it was very effective) and was adopted by several European armies. In fact, in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the cavalry of all nations practiced sabre fencing and fighting.

Initially heavy and curved, the present day weapon is extremely light and straight. To simulate a cavalry rider on a horse, the target area is the entire body above the waist, excluding the hands. In addition, sabre employs rules of right-of-way, which are very similar to foil, but with some subtle differences. Like foil, the fencer who starts to attack first is given priority should his opponent counter-attack. However, sabre referees are much less forgiving of hesitation by an attacker. It is common to see a sabre fencer execute a stop cut against their opponent's forearm during such a moment of hesitation, winning right-of-way and the point.

Another major distinction of the sabre is that sabre fencers can score with the edge of their blade as well as their point.



The sabre fencer's uniform features an electrically wired metallic lamé, which fully covers their valid target area. Because the head is valid target area, the fencer's mask is also electrically wired. One significant departure from foil is that off-target hits do not register on the scoring machine, and therefore do not halt the fencing action. Sabre fencing is also the first of the three weapons to feature a wireless scoring system.

If epee is the weapon of patient, defensive strategy, then sabre is its polar opposite. In sabre, the rules of right-of-way strongly favor the fencer who attacks first, and a mere graze by the blade against the lamé registers a touch with the scoring machine. As a result, sabre is a fast, aggressive game; with fencers rushing their opponent from the moment their referee gives the instruction to fence. As fending off the attack of a skilled opponent is nearly impossible, sabre fencers very rarely purposely take the defensive. However, when forced to do so, they often go all-out using spectacular tactical combinations in which victory or defeat is determined by the slightest of margins.

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Getting Started: Finding Classes

There are several ways to locate a fencing school. To find a fencing club close to you, use the Zip Code Search tool at Fencing.Net – (<http://www.fencing.net/>) or head over to the USFA web site (<http://www.usfencing.org/>) to view their club listings. Using the search engine you should be able to find a local fencing class. If the Internet proves unsuccessful, try the phone book: simply looking under “fencing” or “fencing instruction” in the Yellow Pages section. Many colleges also offer fencing classes as part of the continuing education curriculum.

Although each fencing program sets their own rates, classes typically cost on average \$100 for a 6-8 week session; prices and duration will vary by region and by the level of expertise of the coaches. And, many classes require a US Fencing Membership to participate.

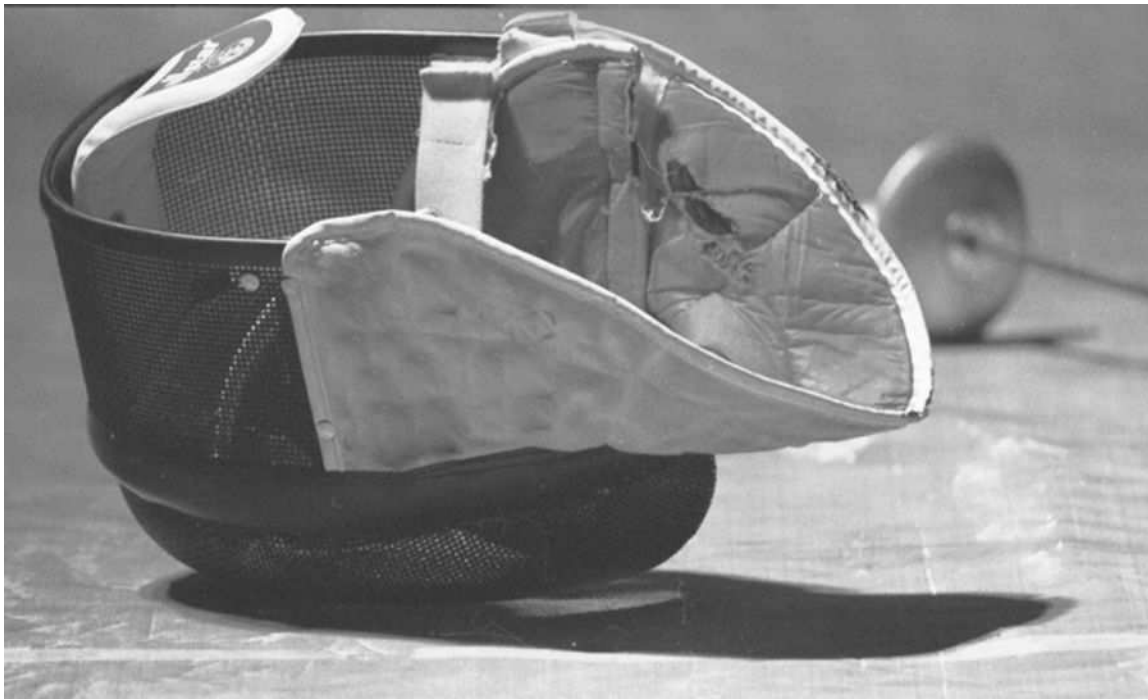
Once you've located a site to begin your fencing training, choosing a good teacher is key. You want your child's (or your) first instructional experience to be positive. Since many fencing teachers have had no training in fencing theory, technique or even the art of teaching itself, it is vital to choose a teacher from among those who have been properly trained and examined. Remember, competing is not the same thing as teaching; a teacher's competitive record should not be accepted as a substitute for sound instructive training. Don't be embarrassed to ask to see some credentials; you are entrusting your child with this person.

Observe the instructor's pupils as they take their lessons to see whether the students are being instructed on proper guard and lunging positions. Is the teacher patient? Is the teacher employing safe techniques? See if the students are having fun and enjoying the process.

Speak to parents who have children taking classes from the fencing coach. Do they feel that their children are learning and having fun? Do their kids look forward to fencing class? Does the coach provide regular feedback to the parents?

Most importantly, use your intuition to determine whether you (or your child) and the teacher will be compatible. You may have located an excellent teacher with exceptional teaching skills, but if the personalities don't mesh, it's not a good fit.

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Fencing mask and foil on strip.

Getting Started: Basic Skills and Gear

Attitude: Fencing is often called the sport of kings, a gentlemanly sport. Not only because of its obvious history with nobility but also because it is steeped with the tradition of royalty, respect and civility. Politeness on and off the strip is integral to the sport. In fact rudeness can earn a fencer a black card (more on that later) and removal from a tournament.

Patience: This is something that you (the parent) need more of than the kids! Fencing is an obscure sport; there are lots of basic techniques to learn that aren't as natural to us as throwing or kicking balls, so there is a large learning curve. Have patience with the process of learning and everything will eventually click.

Basic Gear: Besides a good attitude and a dose of patience, there are several things a fencer needs to actually fence. While equipping oneself for a competition is a little more involved than this, to get started one just needs:

- Jacket
- Mask
- Glove
- Practice weapon (foil, sabre or épée).

Many clubs will lend you equipment when you are just starting and doing a beginner course. Once you've completed the course, and are hooked, you will be encouraged to

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buy your own equipment. There are two options as a beginner, the first is to buy individual items one at a time until you have a full set and the second solution is to buy a “starter kit.” These fencing starter kits have all the “basic needs” items pre-assembled and sold as a bundle.

Overview of Basic Skills: Fencing is a multi-faceted discipline giving the fencer a workout that requires strength, cardiovascular endurance and mental skills. This is achieved by executing the three essential skills of fencing:

- Blade Work: This is perhaps the most difficult of the essential skills to master. It permits a skilled fencer to deceive his opponent and reach the target area despite attempts of an opponent to defend themselves. The fencer needs to be strong enough to execute parries and beats of the blade against their opponent's but also need the fine motor coordination and dexterity to move their point quickly around attempted parries.
- Footwork: The “cardio” component. This is the most physically demanding of the skills, is the one which permits a fencer to move into appropriate positions and distances and allow him to effectively utilize blade work to touch the opponent's target area and allow him to get away from an opponent's attack.
- Tactics: The “mental” component. This is often the hardest to learn of the skills. Fencers will spend most of their competitive careers focused on learning and executing the nuances of fencing strategy and tactics. Tactics consist of the plans and counter plans utilized by fencers to coordinate use of blade work and footwork against the fencing style of opponents.

Basic Equipment: A Little more Detail

You have the list of equipment needed, but now what? Before you actually buy anything or start using your new equipment, it's a good idea to have a basic understanding of the capability and purpose of each.

Jacket: The fencing jacket is to help protect the fencer. It's important to select a fencing jacket that is well made and that will provide adequate protection.

Mask: The mask is also for protection so be sure to choose a mask that has sufficient interior padding, does not press on the top of the head or chin, and fits comfortably.

Glove: Although you can buy non-electric gloves it is almost always worth buying a glove with a Velcro cuff that can be used for electric fencing. The Velcro cuff allows you to easily connect the body cord from under your sleeve to an electric weapon. These are sized either as small, medium or large, or in

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individual glove sizes. Going for gloves that are individually sized will usually get you a better fit but they tend to be more expensive.

- Foil:** The foil is designed for thrusting. The blade is very thin, with a blunted (or foiled) tip. Foil blades are flexible enough to bend upon striking an opponent, in order to prevent injuries.
- Sabre:** The sabre weighs only a couple of pounds is designed primarily for cutting. It differs from the other modern fencing swords, the épée and foil, in that it is possible to score with the edge of the blade. For the other two weapons, valid touches are only scored using the point of the blade.
- Épée:** French for "sword," this weapon is similar to a foil, but has a stiffer, V-shaped blade, has a larger bell guard, and is heavier. Épée is the only weapon in which the entire body is the valid target area and in which there are no rules of "right of way".

Besides the basics, there exists a whole host of other pieces and parts which **fencing equipment suppliers** can provide for you. These consist of everything from spare blades and parts to replace broken gear to component upgrades, premium uniforms, and tools to help you test and fix your own gear.

Note: Blade Sizes – 5, 2, 0, What?

Most fencers use what is called a "Size 5" blade. This is the standard adult size. Youth fencers that are under 10 years old need to use a "Size 2" blade. The size 5 blade is approximately 35 inches long, where the size 2 is approx. 32 inches long and a "Size 0" is, yes you guessed it, about 30 inches long. Most fencing equipment suppliers should let you choose your blade size, or have special products set aside for youth fencers.

If you have any questions about what sized blade to get on your first fencing foil, epee, or sabre, ask your coach.

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2007 Cadet World Championships – Women's Foil Kazhikina (RUS) v Straniero (ITA)

The Next Step: Competing

After you've been fencing for some time you may be ready to hit the strip and compete. There are a wide variety of tournaments in the local fencing area (the "Division"). They vary in size, strength and restrictions on who can enter. Some local tournaments are restricted by classification (more on that below). Some tournaments may only be for one of the three (foil, epee, sabre) weapons, and may be restricted by gender or age group.

Your child's first tournaments should be age or classification restricted. Many areas have "novice" or beginner tournaments for those fencers who have not been fencing very long, or have yet to earn their first classification. Note that most tournaments require an entry fee somewhere between \$10-20 depending on the club and region.

In all cases, your child's coach is the best reference to determine when your child is ready to compete. Some children are mentally ready for competition much sooner than others, so make sure that it's also something they want to do.

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Competition Season

The competitive season for US Fencing runs from September through July. Each local fencing organization (called a “division”) runs a series of tournaments of various skill levels. These culminate into two qualifying events for the Junior Olympics (held in February) and the Summer National Championships (held at the beginning of July).

Most fencers focus on competing at the division and region levels before spending the extra time and money to go to the larger national competitions. In the summer you'll also find a host of fencing camps where your kids can meet new friends and learn from coaches in other parts of the country.

It's important to keep the fun of fencing in mind during the competitive season. With so many clubs running tournaments, it's easy to load up on tournaments and that can lead to overtraining and frustration when your competitor hits the wall. It's perfectly normal to take a week or two off here or there, especially after a big competition or series of tournaments.

Equipment Required

You have the skills, the attitude and the desire, but before you can step up to the strip, you will need:

- A clean jacket in good condition (for national tournaments, the jacket, lame, or knickers must display the last name of the fencer).
- A mask free from rips, tears, holes, or dents.
- A glove.
- Fencing pants (or knickers) (sweat pants, warm-up pants, jeans are not acceptable). The jacket must overlap the fencing pants by 10 cm.
- An underarm protector (sometimes called a plastron).
- Women are required to wear a hard chest protector.
- Tall socks that overlap with the bottom of the knickers.
- Shoes. (They do not have to be fencing shoes, but some sort of athletic shoes preferably racquetball, volleyball, or badminton shoes.)
- At least two body cords.
- At least two working weapons.
- For foil and sabre: a lame in working order (the metal vest that goes over the fabric jacket).
- For sabre: a metallic over-glove (sometimes this is built in to the regular glove).
- For sabre: at last two working mask cords.

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Remember – Fencing Blades Break!

Don't scold your child when they break their \$50 foil after a few competitions. Blades break, especially the cheaper blades in the hands of fencers who are still learning the proper techniques and distance for fencing. When a blade breaks, you can replace just the blade – you don't need to purchase a complete new weapon.

Fencing Classifications: Age & Ratings

When entering a tournament, you'll have to know your fencer's classification, ensuring they are competing within a fair playing field. The first distinction is **age**: Youth, Cadet, Junior and Senior. There are three Youth categories for fencers that are under 10, under 12, and under 14 years of age. Cadets are fencers who are 16 years old or younger at the start of the fencing season. Juniors are fencers who are 19 years old or younger at the start of the fencing season. For the United States Fencing Association purposes, it's not your age as much as the year you were born. For example, for a fencer who turns 20 on January 1st can fence the entire year as a Junior because they were born after the start of the fencing season. But a fencer whose birthday is December 31 would be bumped up to the Senior division.

In order to compete in a Senior Open (or "Open") event, the fencer must be at least 13 years old.

The **ratings** system in fencing is similar to that of the "belts" in karate, but instead of belts, fencing uses letters. The highest caliber fencer would be an "A", the next a "B" and so on until you reach "E." An un-rated fencer (i.e., beginner) would be classified as a "U" for un-rated. Your letter is also distinguished by the year in which you achieved your rating. For example, if you earned your "B" in 2006 then your rating would be "B06." The newer your rating is, the higher your rank, so that a "B06" would be ranked higher than a "B01." Once a fencer earns a rating they keep it for 4 seasons, and then drops one letter.

How does one earn a rating? Through tournaments: there is a matrix that the USFA publishes that describes what ratings can be earned at each tournament. The matrix is based off of the number of fencers in a tournament, the ratings of the fencers in the tournament and the finishes of the fencers in the tournament. To read more about the USFA ratings matrix, go to: (<http://www.fencing.net/forums/thread7493.html>).

What's important to remember about ratings is that they are just that, a rating. They don't always tell the whole story. You may see "C" rated fencers that can consistently beat "B" fencers, but take a long time to earn a higher rating because of how classifications are awarded at tournaments. Unfortunately a lot of fencers get hung up on their "rating" when they should be enjoying the process of learning to fence and fence better.

Different Tournaments

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As mentioned there are several different types of tournaments distinguished by who can enter, which weapons can be used and what can be earned, they include:

Epee, Foil or Sabre tournaments only allow fencers using the specific weapon, highlighted to fence.

Open (sometimes called “Mixed Open”) tournaments allow men, women and fencers at any rating compete.

Aged tournaments require that a fencer can only fence in the age group they belong to such as Senior, Junior, Youth, etc.

Ratings restricted tournaments necessitate a specific rating to enter competition.

What to Expect at a Tournament

Before going to the tournament, make sure that you are prepared. Fencing tournaments can be all-day affairs, often with no food vendors (or only fast food) available. Pack a snack bag with all of the good stuff your kids will need to keep their energy up all day – things like bagels, granola bars, and fruit. Make sure to have a water bottle and if you use it, some of the preferred sports drink. Remember to bring yourself a snack too – we don't want grumpy parents watching fencing!

There is also a lot of down time in tournaments. The kids should have something to do that isn't going to interfere with other fencing bouts that are going on. Activity books, puzzles, art supplies are all good ideas. (You'll want a good book or the latest set of sudoku puzzles.)

Clothes – Bring a change of clothes for after your child is done fencing for the day and also a towel as well as one or two extra t-shirts, just in case they need to change into a dry shirt halfway through the competition.

Also, before setting out for the tournament, have a print out of the directions and contact phone numbers for the tournament hosts or other parents at your club that are going. It's often a good idea to caravan to events.

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Tournament Format and Fencing Bouts

The formats can vary, but in general the following format is observed:

The entire field of fencers who have entered a tournament are divided into groups, called "pools." The tournament committee (the organizers of the tournament) balances pools as fairly as possible so that the first pool and the last pool, in theory, should be about the same level of difficulty, with some variation.

Pool size varies between five and seven fencers per pool, depending on the size of the field. Each competitor fences a bout against all of the other members of the pool. The bouts last a maximum of three minutes (start-and-stop time, not continuous time), or until one fencer scores five points.

During a bout, if time runs out, and the score is tied, the referee will flip a coin or otherwise randomly select one fencer to have "priority." One minute of overtime is added to the clock and the fencers fence one minute of "sudden-death" overtime. If one fencer scores a point, he or she wins the bout. If time elapses, and no point has been scored, the fencer with priority, as randomly determined at the beginning of the one minute, is given the victory.

Once all of the bouts in the pool have been completed, the referee counts up all of scores. The referee lists the number of victories each fencer has earned, the number of points each fencer has scored in all of his or her bouts combined, the number of points that were scored against each fencer in all of his or her bouts combined and then the referee determines the differential between points scored by and against each fencer (referred to as their indicator).

These sets of numbers are used to determine the "seeding" of fencers into the Direct Elimination (DE) table (also referred to as the bracket or tableau). Fencers with the highest percentage of victories are seeded highest. It is important to note that it is the percentage of victories are used, not the actual number of victories. The win-loss percentage is calculated by dividing the number of victories earned by a fencer, divided by the number of bouts he or she fenced.

If fencers are tied, based on their percentage of victories, the tie is broken based on the "indicators" or differential between the number of touches scored and touches received for each fencer. A more positive number means a higher seed.

If fencers are tied on percentage of victories and on indicators, the tie is then broken by whomever has the highest number of points scored. If there is still a tie after this point, the fencers are considered tied for that placing.

Once the seeding has been completed, and the bout committee has arranged the fencers on the DE table, the next round of fencing will commence.

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DE bout lasts for three three-minute periods with a one-minute break in between the first and second periods. If one fencer reaches 15 points, that is the end of the bout. Sometimes bouts end because time has elapsed, but more often they expire because the score has reached 15 points. If all three periods expire, and the score is tied, then the same overtime procedure takes place as was described above.

In a standard DE table, if a fencer has lost, they are "out" of the competition. If they win, they advance to the next round of DE bouts, until eventually a winner is reached through this process of elimination.

If eliminated early, it's proper etiquette to stay around and cheer on fellow club members. Watching the bouts later on in the event is also one of the best ways to learn. Encourage your child to change clothes and come back out to watch their friends after elimination. (Just give them the time and space they need to get over the loss first.)

Being a Spectator: How to Follow (and enjoy) the Action

To the uninitiated, watching fencing can be difficult and downright frustrating. Winners and losers are not always that obvious. But if you are a beginning fencer (or a parent to one), watching fencing bouts is one of the best things you can do to help familiarize yourself with the sport. And while it may take awhile to truly understand and appreciate all the complexities of modern fencing, there are some basic concepts that will help you along the way.

Scoring

All bouts are scored electronically with a referee or director watching and all weapons are scored the same way: 5 touch, 4-minute pool bouts, 15 touch, 3-minute period D.E. bouts (U12 and Veterans are exceptions.)

Penalties

The penalties handed out are the same for all weapons:

- Yellow card = Warning. No points are awarded but a fencer can't score a touch if he or she gets a yellow card while they are scoring. Any subsequent penalty results in a red card.

An example of a yellow card offense would be coming to strip with a weapon that fails inspection.

- Red card = A point is awarded to the offended party. Also, a second yellow card action in the same bout results in a red card.

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An example of a red card offense would be dangerous, violent or vindictive action; blow with guard or pommel. Another more common example is the fencer who comes to the strip and whose first two foils fail inspection – they have to get a third foil and they start the bout down 0-1.

- Black card = The worst offense. If a fencer receives a black card he/she is kicked out of the tournament.

An example of a black card offense would insulting a referee, or throwing a fencing weapon or mask down on the strip.

For a complete listing of offenses and their corresponding penalties go to http://shop.fencing.net/product_p/fdn-81999.htm and download a copy of the rule book.

Distinctions Among Weapons

The action:

Epee

Epee fencers tend to fence defensively, so look for subtle tactics and deeper strategy.

Foil

Foil tends to feature a rich array of tactics, mobility, and long complex attacks. Look for a balance of aggression and defense.

Sabre

Sabre tends to be a fast and simple game, where athleticism and aggressiveness are key. Because it is a cutting weapon, defensive options are often limited. Look for simpler tactics, and lots of movement.

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The scoring:

Epee

Pretty simple, when their light goes off, they've scored.

Foil and Sabre

Which fencer actually gets the touch is determined by the right-of-way rule so that a fencer can only score when he/she has the right-of-way. In foil, there are white lights that indicate an "off target" hit. An off target hit stops the action, but no point is scored.

(Sort of like going out of bounds.)

Final Words



While there are benefits in terms of having something unusual and conversation provoking to put on a college resume, the true benefits of fencing go much, much deeper. By learning fencing, a child learns self discipline, respect for others, independence and the importance of honesty and fair play. Such skills are transferable to any endeavor and help to create a well rounded and active person.

Fencing is a life-long sport that welcomes duelists of all ages. You can learn it when you're young, or when you're young at heart. While most sports only reward speed or power, fencing lets you choose whether you are going to win by using your speed, or using your guile – which allows the parents to teach their children a thing or two while our children do the same to us.

Join us and Share Your Experiences

Have you found a fencing club and started up with a program? Come share your experiences with the fencing community at Fencing.Net, or just come by and ask any questions that weren't covered here. Visit the forums at <http://www.fencing.net/forums/> to join in the conversation.

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Tournament Checklist

Fencing tournaments require a lot of planning on the part of the organizers, fencers, and the parents. Take the extra time to double and triple check that you have all of the tournament necessities before you go to the venue. There's nothing more unnerving to a fencer than having to scramble to find the plastron that was left hanging in the laundry room. While you may have your own additions, this makes a good checklist for the essentials.

- USFA Membership Card or other proof of USFA Membership
- Shoes
- Socks
- Fencing Pants
- Fencing Jacket
- Plastron (Underarm Protector)
- Chest Protector (Women)
- Glove
- Lamé (for foil and sabre)
- Mask
- 2 working weapons
- 2 working body cords (and mask cords if sabre)
- Entrance fee
- Extra T-shirt
- Towel
- Change of clothes for post-fencing
- Water bottle
- Snacks for between rounds
- Money for lunch or snacks (or a tournament t-shirt if they look good)
- Journal or notebook
- Book or activity for between rounds (fencer)

- Book or activity for the day (parent)
- Portable or folding chair (camp chair)
- Extra layer if the venue is air conditioned (parent)