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How to Be A Successful Youth Sports Parent

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Rider:
Escaping the Parent Trap

A Parent's Greatest Strength *And* Weakness

It is no easy task to be a parent of a young athlete. Hard enough are the tasks of helping the child learn how to handle the ups and downs of competition. But perhaps most challenging are the demands on your *own* coping skills - learning how to manage emotions that are repeatedly tested under trying conditions.

As a parent, you experience a rush of positive emotions when your child triumphs, a deflating sense of emptiness when they lose. This emotional process can almost become addicting. Instead of focusing on the child's goals, you can get caught up in seeking more experiences where you can feel that rush of positive emotions. You can begin to focus on your own fantasies for your child - fantasies of success, fame, and recognition.

A common problem is that your love of your child may lead you to behave in ways that ultimately hurt the child's development, or hurt their relationship with you. The paradox of being a parent is that the good reasons we have for pushing our children to succeed can, at the same time, lead to behaviors that teach our children to be selfish and grasping instead. A parent's greatest strength - their unwavering emotional support of their child and their willingness to make sacrifices for their child's athletic advancement - is thus also their greatest weakness.

The Parent Trap

Unfortunately, parents get caught in this trap all the time. It shows itself in the following ways:

- **Over-identification.** You naturally identify with your child, but over-identification may lead you to ignoring your child's feelings and focusing instead on your own.
- **Selfish dreaming.** It is normal, as a parent, to dream of your child's future, but sometimes parents get so attached to their own dreams that they lose sight of what the child wants.
- **Confusing investment with sacrifice.** As a parent, you love your children so much that you are willing to make tremendous sacrifices on their behalf, spending money to support the child's sport and taking the time to be there for the child. But parents may come to see these sacrifices as investments and then expect that the investments will pay off and yield tangible benefits.
- **Competing with other parents.** You want your child to excel but it easy to get caught up in competing with other parents, pushing your child to succeed and hoping that the other children will fail, giving your child a chance to shine.

The Positive Versus The Dark Side

Watching parents who do a great job of supporting their child's development in sports, and watching those who fall into the trap of pushing their child beyond the limits, I have seen that the difference between them is whether they can put their own desires aside (Dark Side) and focus on what *their child* wants (Positive Side).

Here are some specific examples of ways in which parents can cross the line between positive and negative in supporting a child athlete:

Positive Side	Dark Side
Giving Encouragement	Becoming Over-Involved
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shouting out praise for a good play or in joy or excitement when a goal is scored or the child gets a base hit is a natural response for any parent. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • While the vast majority feel loved and supported by having their parents present at competitions, in some families the presence of Mom and Dad on the sidelines causes tension in the family, even

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being a parent of a young athlete can require an <u>enormous commitment in terms of time and energy</u> ⁽¹⁾. The majority of parents are strong supporters and encouragers of their children’s athletic participation. • The influence of parents on good athletes is well documented. In a survey of baseball players who made it to the professional minor leagues, most reported that, when they were young, their parents: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Provided money to buy equipment ◦ Regularly attended their games ◦ Provided money for team fees and clinic costs ◦ Gave them an allowance during high school ◦ Went with them to see major and minor league baseball games ◦ Advised them to pursue professional baseball careers ◦ Regularly practiced baseball with them. 	<p>to the point of negatively impacting on the child’s athletic performance.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents who act in ways that upset the young athlete, or that upset the coaches or officials, can create tension not only for the family, but also for all the children on the field, and often for all the parents watching. • Even when a young athlete feels encouraged and supported by her own parents, the behavior of <i>other parents</i> can ruin the experience for them. "It wasn't even my own parents," said one nineteen year-old client , "it was the other parents screaming at the coach and the referee that made most games a misery."
<p>Providing Constructive Criticism</p>	<p>Becoming A Pushy Parent</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents are in a good position to offer constructive criticism to their young athlete. • Many parents provide early coaching for their child. It is very common for a parent to teach a child new skills if the parent also played the game. Skill building of this kind can take place in an informal way, free of the structure of an organized sports program. • It is more challenging when a parent becomes a coach for a son or daughter’s sports team. You should remember that while you can easily make the distinction between being a parent and being a coach, your children can’t easily distinguish between criticism from “Dad, the coach” versus “Dad, the parent.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Problems can arise when a parent’s natural tendency to be supportive and to offer advice clashes with the coaching process in youth sports. • The greater the skill level of the young athlete the more likely it is that the coach will perceive coaching by parents as intrusive. • Your child can be put in a no-win situation if you yell out some advice from the stands that differs from what he or she was told by the coach. Who does she obey? You or the coach? • Your child may view your offering critical advice negatively and unwelcome, especially as they get older. A father or mother who offers constant criticisms of their sports performance frustrates many thirteen- and fourteen-year olds I talk to. • You may see yourself as a great resource for your child, helping him to learn the nuances of the game, but your child may see you as a parent who cares not about him but about how well he plays. • The danger is that your child will see himself as an athlete and evaluate his entire self-worth on the basis of how well he plays.
<p>Being A Role Model</p>	<p>Becoming Abusive</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children learn the skill of self-control by watching you display good self-control skills • Organized youth sports programs frequently offer parents good chances to model good behavior for children and effective ways to deal with conflict • Handling a dispute over a clash in game schedules, deciding on who plays what position, making a tough call in a close game - such situations abound in youth sports. • A parent or coach who remains calm and thoughtful in such situations provides the young athletes with an appropriate role model for handling emotional situations. • Remember: children learn far more from their own observations of adult behavior than they do from verbal instructions on how to behave. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Your child can become intimidated by your presence at her games if she hears you shouting at officials. • Actions speak louder than words. If you tell your child to display self-control and to respect authority but your child sees you losing your temper and yelling at an official at his game, all your efforts will be undermined. • The sort of fan behavior that may be tolerated at a professional sports contest (such as yelling at players and criticizing an official for what you perceive was a bad call) is not appropriate at a youth sports contest; as more and more youth sports mimic the intensity and competitiveness of professional contests, parents are more and more likely to act like fans. • Acting as fan at your child’s athletic competition can have serious repercussions. Said one of my patients, a quiet and thoughtful fourteen-year old girl, about her father, “It’s all a bunch of crap, what he says. He has no respect for authority, but he expects me to toe the line. And when I say something about it, he yells at me.”

The Way Out

All too often, parents feel justified in acting in ways that their child and others perceive as controlling, negative, or confrontational. It is indeed a paradox. The question is, is there any way out of it?

To begin with, I don’t believe that there is any way to avoid the emotional pressure that parents feel when they support their young athlete. As your child moves up the competitive ladder, this pressure naturally increases. You will always be tempted to step over the fine

line between providing encouragement, constructive criticism and being a role model and becoming an over-involved, pushy and emotionally, and worse yet, physically abusive parent.

But I do believe that parents can *learn* to change their behavior, so that they do not give in to the emotional pressure they feel, but choose instead to act in a mature and responsible manner, to develop the skills to deal with the pressure and learn to pass those skills on to their child.

Over the course of more than a decade in youth sports, I have observed that some parents have broken the mold and managed to escape the clutches of the youth sports parent trap. These parents typically display the following behavior:

- **They talk with their child.** What motivates parents to have their child participate in sports, and what motivates their child to participate, are sometimes very different. Parents need to examine which of the twenty-eight [possible reasons](#) ^[2] they may have for encouraging their child to participate in a sports program, have their child complete a similar [survey](#) ^[3] listing the reasons that children give for playing sports, and then sit down and compare their answers. Often there are some surprising differences, as well as some reassuring similarities. Once good communication has been established, it is easier to identify where potential problems might lie, and what to do about them.
- **They periodically look at themselves, and get feedback about their behavior from others.** When parents are devoting a great deal of time and energy to their child, they periodically need to look at themselves in the mirror, be honest and ask themselves the tough questions: Am I over-identifying with my child? Am I placing her needs first? Am I really listening to her? Am I getting feedback from others that I am out of control, over-controlling, pushy or driving others crazy? Often, talking to a spouse or a good friend can help give perspective and feedback that is difficult to come by otherwise when you are intensely involved in your child's athletic career.
- **They cheer for the other children.** Parents who focus obsessively on their own child at athletic competitions clearly signal that they don't really care about the team or the event - they just care about their son or daughter. Parents who shout and cheer for all the children on the team show that they have not fallen prey to the seductive self-centeredness of youth sports. All parents should try to be role models, not only for their children, but *other parents*, who are struggling with the same pressures and emotions they are experiences.
- **They take time to compliment the officials.** Many parents feel they have the absolute right - perhaps even obligation - to criticize the officials at their son or daughter's sports contest. The officials don't feel the same way. Many youth sports officials to whom I speak regard parent abuse as the most stressful and negative aspect of officiating. (A [recent survey](#) ^[4] confirms my anecdotal findings). Parents who can somehow resist the urge to criticize a bad call, who can even compliment the officials for their hard work after a game (especially if their child's team loses), are rewarded with the pleasure of seeing a surprised smile on the face of the referee or umpire.
- **They talk to parents of the other team.** Several years ago I attended a state championship baseball playoff game for boys under eleven. The winner would play in the league's state final. After seven innings the game was tied and moved into extra innings. The tension in the stands among the parents I was sitting with kept rising as each extra inning passed. Mothers would cover their eyes as their son came to the plate, or hold hands tightly with the parents next to them. Finally, after ten innings one team broke through and scored the winning run. There was more relief than jubilation from the parents of the winning team, but the parents of the losing team sat in silence. Then one of the parents of the winning side went over to the parents of the other team and began shaking their hands, telling them what an exceptional and competitive game their sons had played. I watched closely and noticed the smiles on the faces of these parents, saw their shoulders lift and their energy return at this simple gesture from a member of the "opposition." It is actions such as these from parents that give me hope that we can learn ways to overcome the behavioral excesses associated with youth sports today.
- **They resist the urge to critique their child's performance.** The urge to critique a child's performance is very natural for parents. You may think that spending the time in the car on the way back from a competition pointing out your child's mistakes will help her improve, but it usually ends up backfiring. Most kids already know the mistakes they have made and don't need you to point out the obvious. Mistaking their quiet stoicism in the face of a bad performance for a lack of caring when, in fact, your child cares a great deal and hates to do poorly, can lead to miscommunication and conflict. I have found that many of the successful athletes I work with remark on their parents' lack of criticism of their sporting performance. "They just wanted me to play and have fun" is a typical comment from an Olympic basketball player. "Mom and Dad never had much say in how I played. They left that to the coach. But I knew they were always there for me, no matter how I did.

Parents need to learn ways to express their support for their child without detailing their shortcomings. Change is sometimes very hard, especially for a parent who grew up in a family where pointing out the mistakes of others was a common approach. Remain silent if it is the only way you can overcome a tendency to criticize. Better yet, learn to leave your child's performance completely behind and discuss the social aspects of the experience with your child. Chances are that these social experiences and friendships are what your child wants to talk about with you after a tough competition.

Instead of behaving in the expected way, the parents who exhibit these behaviors act in way unexpected and surprising. The results? More fun at games, more friendships among other parents, and respect from coaches and officials.

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