

The Champion or The Child?

How to Encourage Without Being Pushy

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Raising children in competitive sports can challenge even the most well-prepared parents. At every turn, families are faced with critical decisions and unique circumstances regarding athletic participation. Healthy parental involvement is an illusive standard that is not easily mastered. We've all heard horror stories of sports parents, who place so much importance on their child's athletic performance that it becomes life altering for the youngster. I've been to competitions where parents scream and their daughters cry. I've seen parents cry and daughters scream. I've talked to athletes who want to quit because parental pressure is too great. I've counseled other athletes who want to quit because they think their parents don't care enough.

All parents want the best for their children. But many place so much emphasis on winning, they squelch opportunities for long term success and health. Often parents ask me, "How do I encourage excellence without becoming the proverbial 'pushy parent'?" "What should my role be when it comes to sports?" It is obvious they want to be supportive but they also want to avoid unhealthy over-involvement. Balancing the development of a child is not an easy task.

When addressing this topic, I encourage parents to **A-F-F-I-R-M** their children.

A - Give Affection

F - Be Focused

F - Be Flexible

I - Interact

R - Reframe

M - Model

A - Give Affection regardless of performance outcome. Children need to know their failures and successes don't affect parental support or acceptance. Unconditional parental love gives kids a safe haven from which to launch lofty dreams and ambitions. Conversely, children who believe their worth to Mom or Dad increases with every ribbon or trophy will most likely buckle under the weight of unrealistic expectations. You can express unconditional love by communicating to your children that your love is based on who they are rather than what they accomplish. Avoid criticism after disappointing meets and emphasize improvements in performance rather than results. Value who your children are as people, by asking them for their thoughts and opinions especially on topics unrelated to sports. Instead of asking, "How was gym today?" Try asking, "How do you feel today?" When you show your children affection by sharing experiences and interests beyond gymnastics, you affirm their value and reinforce their self-esteem. The pursuit of excellence is then transformed from a daunting task to a realistic goal.

F - Be Focused but don't coach. It is the parents job to develop the child and the coach's job to develop the champion. So stay away from detailed, technical discussions

about performance. Instead encourage your children to establish good goal setting habits. On the way to workout ask, "What are your goals for today's practice?" "How are you going to work toward those goals?" That preliminary discussion serves as a great springboard for processing practice later. "What went well today?" And, "What hindered you from reaching some of your goals?" These talks help clarify the goal setting process which is a valuable component of competitive success and an effective life skill as well.

F - Be Flexible. At the first of success, single minded parents place their budding athletes on the fast track to the Olympics without taking time to find out their goals and objectives. (And without discussing the time frame with the coach!) Some parents have to "die to their own dream" before their children can truly enjoy sport participation. Learn to set aside your own feelings and take cues from your children. Allow your agenda to be set by what is best for your child's long term health and well-being, not short term goals. Sometimes children may not want to talk about sports. Don't make them relive practice on the car ride home if they don't choose to share. Being flexible enables both you and your athlete to enjoy the journey more fully.

I - Interact without dominating the conversation. A supportive parent listens more than talks. Parents provide great comfort for children by creating a safe environment in which children know it is acceptable to express true feelings of loss and disappointment. A key element in establishing that safe environment is learning to listen with your ears and not your mouth. Listen for descriptive words that express how your children feel about themselves and their performances. It is natural for your children at times to speak negatively about themselves and their performances. However, when they begin to catastrophize the situation and make their negativity permanent by using such words as "always" and "never" or describing themselves as feeling "hopeless" or "helpless", your children need assistance in developing appropriate coping skills. Once they express their feelings validate the experience by paraphrasing what you hear. For example, when your child tells you, "I'm so nervous", a typical response is to attempt to dispel the anxiety by saying, "Don't be nervous...there is no reason to be nervous." Instead, validate what you hear by saying "I understand that you might be scared. Those feelings are natural before a competition. Even though you're anxious, I bet you can think your way through a great performance." By listening to your children, you communicate to them that their thoughts and feelings are worthy of expression and that you respect their sport experience.

R - Reframe. It's the parents role to provide perspective. Remind your children of the bigger picture which includes long term goals and other aspects of their life such as academics, friendships, family and spirituality. Your guidance and feedback affirms gymnastics is only one aspect of a multidimensional life. This truth serves as a valuable balance to the pressures of competition. If your athletes are struggling after a difficult workout, try to reshape their view of the situation by asking open-ended questions that illicit positive responses like, "What went well today?" If they respond, "I don't know." Try asking, "Well, if you had to take a guess?" Remind your children of the many benefits they receive as a result of their sports participation. As athletes gain perspective, the weight of the challenge lessens and they are more able to enjoy their involvement.

M - Model. Parents are one of the most powerful role models for children. Kids learn valuable coping skills watching Mom and Dad deal with difficult situations. Examine how you talk about your own day. Do you come home from work harping on the negatives, focused on the uncontrollable, blaming others or do you balance negative with positive and search for solutions to the uncontrollable? Show them it's okay to become frustrated, upset or even angry while practicing and competing. But exhibit the healthy way to respond to anger and frustration. For example, when you get upset with your children say, "I'm really angry. I need to get my thoughts together before we discuss this any further. I am going to get some water. I'd like you to meet me back here in five minutes so we can discuss this." This lets them know it's okay to be angry, and that effective responses and coping mechanisms for your anger exist. Live your own life with integrity by insuring that your actions correspond with your values and beliefs. When you make mistakes, admit your errors, and explain to your children the more appropriate response. Your personal life experiences can provide powerful learning opportunities for your children.

With circumstances and personalities so varied, there certainly is no magic formula for successful parenting of athletes. But, by focusing your energies on the child, you can provide support, encouragement, and boundaries without becoming overbearing. Your children may or may not realize their ultimate dreams in sport. However, if you maintain a strong commitment to character development, you will be providing them with an environment that gives them the best chance for becoming a champion while ensuring they enjoy the journey.

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