

Young Athletes in Sport – Five Tips for Parents

Written by Dr Haley Perlus

To best understand ways we can better support our child athletes, we would all do well to remember a few important facts. The number one reason your athletes participate in sport is to have fun. Organised sports programmes are increasingly emphasizing winning while the “fun” aspect is being neglected. Research in sport psychology continues to demonstrate that when your athletes have fun, they exert more effort. Effort directly influences their physical and psychological development, leading to performance enhancement.

Winning is inevitable in sport. The desire to be the best will never disappear, nor should it. That said, when the pressure to achieve high levels of performance is not balanced with the enjoyment of sport participation, your athletes are susceptible to emotional exhaustion that can lead to burnout or sport dropout. Too many athletes have suffered these consequences and have never truly realized their potential as an athlete as well as develop a lasting active and healthy lifestyle.

As a parent, you have the opportunity and responsibility to support your athletes through their participation in sport. Here are five key factors that will help you be a strong support system and influence a balanced focus on performance and enjoying the sport experience.

1. Focus on effort and support them in talking about what they’re learning

Ask any professional and Olympic athlete and they’ll tell you their main goal is to win. They will also tell you that the only way to be No. 1 is to focus on the process and exert 100% effort during competition and in their preparation. Effort is the only thing your athletes have complete control of. When only one athlete or one team can be the best in a specific competition, it’s necessary to emphasize additional methods for measuring success. After training and competition, allow and encourage your athletes to share their technical and tactical improvements. These achievements will help them develop confidence and enjoy their sport participation. In turn, your athletes will develop a stronger focus on the process, leading to performance improvements.

2. Attend “significant” competitions AND “less significant” competitions.

Qualifiers and championships place a tremendous amount of pressure on your athletes. When you make more of an effort to attend the “bigger” events, you give your athletes one more reason to feel anxious. In addition to wanting to perform well for themselves and their team, they also want to please their Mum and Dad who took the time to come and watch them compete. Being present at the less significant competitions as well as the significant ones will help to provide your athletes with a sense of stability and balance across the season. It will also communicate to them that you attend competitions because you enjoy watching them compete and not because you care only about the season’s results.

3. FIND qualified coaches – and then – ALLOW them to coach

It is your responsibility to ensure your athletes have coaches who are caring, knowledgeable, experienced and fun. Once you have found suitable coaches, allow the coaches to fulfill their roles. Athletes are very perceptive. When they believe you don't trust their coaches, it makes it difficult for them to follow instruction. If an issue does arise, ask yourself, *will intervening mid-season be advantageous or damaging to my athletes?* Sometimes, it may be better to let the season play out. Then, in preparation for the next season, you can get involved to ensure your athletes are given the best opportunity to succeed.

4. ASK, even if you think you know the answer

Always ask your athletes how you can best support them throughout the season. Ask them what they would like you to say before, during and after training and competition. If you don't ask, you will say what you think is helpful and what worked (or works) for you. Your athletes may want something different. Even if they don't have an answer for you, the lines of communication will be open, making it more comfortable for your athletes to talk to you once they identify the best way you can support them.

5. DEMONSTRATE a positive attitude and a commitment to excellence

Every sport comes with victory and defeat. Be happy and enthusiastic when your athletes succeed. Allow them to express their feelings after a disappointing performance, but also help them see the positive side of the competition or focus on their efforts for the next day. Teach your athletes to lose with dignity and win with grace. ALWAYS REMEMBER that you are the most important role model for your athletes in sport and every life endeavour.



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