

FUN is #1 in Youth Sports



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Share decision-making -

Recognize that children want and need to make some decisions on their own, with girls generally wanting more input into team “happenings” than boys. So, in developmentally appropriate ways, include players in the planning and implementation of practices or competitions. For example, for each practice a child could be the “team leader” and be given the responsibility of leading warm-ups or selecting a drill from a coach-approved list. Parents, too, can share decision-making. For example, they could allow their younger children to select the “team snack” that is brought to competitions. With older children, parents might let them decide on their level

of sport involvement, allowing for the possibility that they may only want to play recreationally or not at all.

Be supportive and enthusiastic -

Positive support and enthusiasm from coaches and parents make sport a truly satisfying and enjoyable activity for kids. So, catch them doing things right and give them plenty of praise and encouragement. Focus on what the children are doing correctly rather than on their mistakes. When correcting poor performances or errors do so in a non-punitive and specific manner, and make sure feedback is sincere. Insincerity and sarcastic responses destroy the message. Also, provide opportunities for children to share their thoughts and feelings about their sport experiences and then LISTEN to what they say.

Research in youth sport has identified three critical factors that threaten the continued sport participation among children and adolescent:

- lack of having fun
- too much emphasis on competition
- lack of learning the skills of the sport

If parents and coaches want kids to continue in sport, it is important that they establish an environment that encourages maximum participation and emphasizes learning new skills and techniques in an enthusiastic approach.

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FUN is #1 in Youth Sports

by Scott Martin, Ph.D., & Trent Petrie, Ph.D

Coaches and parents are a primary influence in children's sport experiences. Typically, parents make the initial decision to enroll their children in youth sport programs and may even play an important role in making sure the program is properly organized. Coaches' influence comes from their position as well as the time they spend with the kids. In addition to time spent in practices and competitions, coaches may eat and travel with the kids and even attend family events outside of the sport environment. Although parents and coaches uniformly want children to have enriching and satisfying sport experiences, sometimes their attitudes and behaviors can have a negative effect. For example, some place greater importance on winning than do the participants, particularly children 5 to 12 years of age. Competition is important for this group, but it falls far lower on the list of reasons they provide for participating in sport. Over the past thirty years sport psychologists have studied why children participate and discontinue involvement in youth sports, and have consistently found that FUN is the number one reason children stay involved.

So what can parents and coaches do to keep FUN the number one priority:

Focus on learning new skills and improving existing ones - Provide opportunities for children to learn new skills and demonstrate their skills to others. The competitive aspect should always be secondary to skill instruction. Parents, as well as do coaches, need to know the technical and strategic aspects of the sport to be able to help the children successfully improve. Instruction is most effective when you provide demonstrations and give feedback contingent on behaviors. When providing instruction use the KISS principle, Keep Instruction Short and Simple. Maximize equipment and facility use and shape children's behaviors by rewarding successful approximations. Likewise, emphasize what children do correctly by rewarding effort and technique regardless of outcome.

Foster a love of physical activity - Help children enjoy sports by keeping practices active, so avoid lines, standing around, and spending too much time on any one drill. Develop practices that incorporate a variety of activities and maximize participation, and make sure that activities are developmentally appropriate for the age of the child. For example, you could increase the size of the goal or reduce the field or court to maximize action and participation. Likewise, create an environment that reduces fear and allows children to attempt new skills and activities. Every child should have the opportunity to learn various positions or skills and the chance to be physically active in every practice. Remember,

you are not developing future collegiate or professional athletes as much as you are fostering a love of physical activity and sport to last a lifetime.

Plan times to socialize with teammates

The better team members know one another the more accepting they will be of differences in skills, personality and physical development. Create a team climate that involves mutual support and respect and allows teammates to help one another learn or master skills during practice. Also, schedule social events and free time before and during practices to give children the chance to socialize. For example, a pizza or swim party provides the opportunity to learn more about one another.

Set and work towards realistic goals - Teach children when to compete and when to cooperate. Help children define winning as not only beating others but as achieving one's own goals and standards. Learning new skills, playing together as a team, and having fun are more likely to define team success than a win-loss record. When you set goals, make sure they are realistic given the children's developmental level and focus on making improvements from past behavior. Also, make sure children understand what they need to do in practices to improve and actually reach their goal.

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# Sharing the Playing Field: Establishing Positive Coach-Parent Relationships

by Latisha Braddock, B.A., & Eric Rosmith, M.A.

*The toughest things kids have to face is the unfulfilled lives of their parents.*

~ John W. Gardner ~  
Management Consultant

Recently, a youth soccer league in Seattle restructured their rules to give referees more latitude in penalizing teams. What brought about this change? Unfortunately it was the parents' behaviors at matches. The league wanted to give referees a way to help curb the inappropriate actions of some parents, such as yelling negative comments at their children and deriding coaches, officials or other players.

Sound like a familiar scenario? Unfortunately, this has become commonplace in today's youth athletic leagues. At one time or another, most coaches have had to deal with an overzealous parent. As these coaches can attest, such interactions often interfere with the team and negatively affect children's participation in and enjoyment of sport. However, this does not mean that parents should not be involved. In fact, parents should be an integral part of their children's and adolescents' sport experiences. The key is for coaches and parents to work together to create the best possible atmosphere for children and adolescents to learn from their involvement in sport.

So how do coaches foster positive, supportive relationships with parents? First, it is important for coaches to understand parents' perspectives on sport and their children's involvement. Most parents are truly concerned for their child's welfare and want to create the best possible sport experience. Unfortunately, some over identify with their children and become overzealous and behave in ways that are counterproductive. Such misbehavior can stem from:

**Biased Perceptions.** Parents care deeply about their children and want to provide them with experiences the parents did not have when growing up. As a result, some parents can have difficulty remaining objective and unbiased, and have trouble keeping their emotions in check during their children's sport experiences. At the beginning of the season, coaches can educate parents about this natural occurrence and help parents develop a more objective view of their children's sport experiences.

**Living Vicariously.** Some parents will relive, or live for the first time, an athletic glory through their children. Such vicarious living can

create unrealistic expectations about athletic performances. To short-circuit such expectations, coaches should constantly remind parents that the focus of sport, particularly for children under age 10, is to develop skills and friendships, and to have fun. Very few children are destined to become the next Tiger Woods or Mia Hamm, but many can develop a life-long appreciation of sport and physical activity.

**Being Overprotective.** Some parents are overly concerned about their children's safety and well-being. As a result, the parents may view sport primarily as a dangerous place where their children are likely to be injured. In response to these fears, some parents may threaten to take their children out of the sport. To help parents cope more effectively with these concerns, coaches can clearly communicate team and league rules regarding equipment and safety, and explain how they structure practices and training so as to minimize the possibility of injuries occurring.

**Bleacher-Seat Coaches.** These are the parents who "coach" from the stands. You can recognize these parents because they are the ones yelling instructions from the sidelines, which may be counter to what the coach has taught the children. Here, a private discussion after a game or before a practice is in order. Let them know that you appreciate their enthusiasm, but having two people telling the players what to do only brings about confusion. As the coach, you need the athletes' full attention to teach them and keep them safe.

The second thing coaches can do develop supportive, positive relationships with parents is to hold a preseason parents meeting. At this meeting you can lay the foundation for talking openly and respectfully with one another and keeping the focus on how you can work together to ensure the children have a great sport experience. Here are some suggestions for having a successful preseason meeting:

**Make the Meeting Mandatory.** All parents and interested family members (e.g., grandparents, uncles, and aunts) should attend this meeting. This is your chance, as a coach, to introduce yourself and the assistant coaches, as well as outline your coaching philosophy and expectations for the season. If a parent cannot attend, make sure you make contact with that person to discuss what was covered at the meeting and answer any questions he/she might have.

**Provide a Basic Understanding of the Sport.** Outline the rules and regulations of the sport and the league, which provides the parents with a basic understanding and appreciation of the sport as well as the role that you, as coaches, play. Outline your philosophy (or league rules) regarding playing time, and help parents understand how you will make decisions regarding who starts and who plays.

**Explain Safety Rules and Regulations.** Doing this helps to alleviate parents' fears of injury, and communicates that you take the children's safety seriously.

**Involve the Parents.** Enlist parents to bring snacks to games, transport the children to and from games and practices, have team functions in their homes, etc. Getting the parents involved helps them feel included and gives them some ownership in creating the best possible sport experience for their children.

**Outline Your Expectations of Parental Behavior.** Let the parents know that you will be, and you expect them to be, positive role models for the children. This means cheering positively, supporting all players on the team, and not yelling at or criticizing officials or the other team. Emphasize how you want to establish a positive environment for the athletes, but will need the parents help to accomplish that.

**Outline Your Expectations of Athlete Behaviors.** Explain your expectations and definition of sportsmanship and how you want the athletes to conduct themselves at all times. If you have team rules, let them know what they are and what the consequences will be for infractions. Encourage the parents to back these rules and support you in their application.

**Ending the Meeting.** Let the parents ask any questions they may have, which is a good way to clear up any misunderstandings that may exist in regard to the topics you have covered. Take the time to individually meet each parent, which communicates that you care about each person. This approach also helps the parents feel more comfortable with relinquishing control of their children over to you during their sport experience.

# What We Can Learn From the World's Greatest Athletes

By Gretchen Jones, M.S., Karen Cogan, Ph.D., and Eric Rosmith, M.A.

Muhammad Ali, Steffi Graf, Tiger Woods, Michael Jordan, Mia Hamm, Marion Jones, Lance Armstrong, Bonnie Blair, the Duke Blue Devils...What do these highly successful athletes and teams have in common beyond their sport achievements? Each exemplifies mental toughness and performance excellence. Very few athletes will end up being Olympians, Professional athletes, or national champions, but everyone can improve their performances, whether in sport, business or any other life endeavor, by improving their mental focus.

Through our work with elite level athletes, we have identified five core characteristics for being mentally focused and ready to compete:



These are the "5 C's" of performance excellence.

**CONFIDENCE** - All great athletes possess an intense, seemingly unshakable, belief in themselves and their abilities. No matter the competition, playing conditions or obstacles to training the world's greatest athletes believe they can overcome anything and be successful.

Setting goals and positive self-talk are two key ways for improving confidence. By setting challenging yet realistic goals, athletes improve their chances of actually achieving their goals. And when they do, they feel more capable and ready for new challenges. Positive self-talk goes hand-in-hand with this. Learning to talk themselves through challenges ("I can do this") and in realistic ways ("this team is going to be tough, but we have prepared and are ready") can help them achieve their goals. Changing the negative to the positive, means making something a challenge rather than an impossibility.

**CONTROL** - Great athletes control their bodies and their emotions. All athletes must learn to control their bodies to perform basic athletic skills if they are going to compete, and clearly those who are more physically talented generally rise to the top of their sport.

Emotional control, though, may be what truly separates the world's greatest athletes from others. The best athletes know when to think about things (e.g., mistakes) and when to simply perform. Thinking at the wrong times during performances is often counterproductive, interfering with one's ability to perform automatically (which is the result of the hours of physical practice). Great athletes understand their level of competitive arousal - how "up" do they need to be to compete at their best. They then learn how to achieve the optimal level of arousal prior to each performance. Finally, great athletes are able to delay immediate gratification for long-term gain. Whether that means passing up a quick outside shot so a teammate can get an uncontested lay-up or working out every day for a competition that may be months or years away, great athletes know that to achieve they have to work from a long-term perspective.

**CONCENTRATION** - How many times have athletes or coaches said, "We should have won, but we lost our focus." Concentration and focus are often the deciding factors in competition. Great athletes learn how to minimize distractions and focus their attention on the task at hand. They also know how to identify and focus on select stimuli during competitions. Whether it is "seeing the whole field" or "picking up the seams of the ball," great athletes match their focus and concentration to the demands of the situation. If athletes focus on nonessential aspects of competitive environment, such as when the basketball player who is shooting free throws sees the crowd behind the basket, they become distracted and performance generally declines. Setting goals, physical practice, and mental visualization are all ways that great athletes improve concentration and focus.

**CONSISTENCY** - Great athletes are able to maintain a high level of performance from one competition to another. They are able to do this, in part, by establishing pre-game routines and by incorporating visualization into their preparations.

A pre-game routine consists of a set of behaviors, thoughts or feelings in which athletes engage prior to each performance. The purpose of this routine is to help them achieve the ideal mental and physical state so they can be focused and perform their best. Great athletes use rou-

tines before games, such as when an athlete listens to a tape to psych himself up, or before particular plays, such as when an athlete dribbles the basketball three times and spins it twice before shooting a free throw. Because everyone's pre-game routine is different, athletes need to identify what works and then practice that routine before every practice or competition.

Visualization is the ability to create an image in your mind. Through visualization great athletes practice skills, competitive situations, overcoming obstacles, preparing for a competition, and performing confidently in any situation. Great athletes know that visualization is an excellent complement to physical practice, because it provides many of the same benefits without the wear and tear on joints and muscles.

**COHESION** - When a team is cohesive, they often feel that they are able to overcome anything set before them. Great teams know that being able to work together effectively requires respecting each other as players and individuals. It means understanding that each athlete has unique qualities and strengths that contribute to the team. It also means having a shared vision and common goal toward which everyone is committed. As the saying goes, "there is no 'I' in team."

To learn more about the 5 C's of athletic success and how you can incorporate them into your program, call us at (940) 369-SPORT or send us an email at [sportpsych@unt.edu](mailto:sportpsych@unt.edu).

