

Be a 'Positive Participant' in Your Child's Athletics

Sport needs good leadership, particularly sport for children. It always has and it always will. Harry Edwards, a well-known sport sociologist, showed us very clearly that sport is value neutral. It is neither good nor bad: it takes on the values of the people in charge and the culture in which it is housed. You need only look at sport in the US vs. Canada vs. the old USSR to see different values being expressed and reinforced.



By Sandra Stark

Jim Coleman, another sport sociologist, spent his life looking at the role sport plays in a culture. He showed that there is no proof that kids who are involved in sport do better in life than kids who hang around in malls.

To many, this seems counter-intuitive. Certainly most parents believe that kids are better off in sport than hanging around in malls. They believe that sport has the potential to build character, or they wouldn't enroll their children. The fact is, sport can be a source of positive growth and development in a child, or sport can do great damage. Unless it is in the hands of someone who is focused on growth and development, you won't get growth and development. It doesn't just occur naturally because it is baseball. It depends on the values of the people, league, and culture in which it is housed.

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The Importance of the Parent

Many parents today know this. They couldn't tell you about Harry Edwards or Jim Coleman, but they spend time learning the values of the coach or supervisor to whom they are handing over their child. If those values aren't clear, or a parent mistrusts them, they will keep a very close watch. What can be more difficult for parents is to turn the same questioning eye inwards and ensure that they remain a positive participant in the culture of sport - that they are also working to contribute to their child's growth and development through sport.

My interest in this topic comes out of being a parent, and working with so many athletes and parents over the years; watching parents struggle to stay grounded in the competitive arena. Originally, I assumed that this struggle was largely a result of the very high levels of competition I was working at - mostly at the Olympic level, where the pressure to succeed is intense. Recently, though, more and more people have come to me with an increasing number of problems with parents, at a much lower level of competition. So how come? Is there something inherent in sport at all levels that makes it difficult for parents?

To discover the answer to this question, I only had to go back to my experience as a parent to remember how difficult it was emotionally to stay centered. A quote by Elizabeth Stone sums up the source of this difficulty perfectly: "Making the decision to have a child - it's momentous. It is to decide forever to have your heart go walking outside your body."

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Be a Positive Participant

If you have made it this far I will take the bold step of assuming that you have a child, and that they are probably involved in sport in some way. What follows are four guidelines to keep in mind as you help your child navigate the peaks and valleys that accompany participating in any sport. Ways in which you can help make sport a positive experience for your child. They came about as a result of a phone-in show on this topic that I conducted on CBC Radio, and subsequent speech delivered to coaches from across Ontario. They represent my thoughts and lessons learned over years of experience.

Four (Not so) Easy Steps to Being a Positive Participant

1. **Provide continuous positive reinforcement** - Positive reinforcement is the single most important factor in performance. Remember that reinforcing effort is far more beneficial than reinforcing success (i.e. 'you were really working hard out there! You never gave up!').
2. **Focus on confidence** - You need to be always working on building confidence. This doesn't necessarily mean praise; it means that there is no question in your child's mind that your love and acceptance of them is not tied to their performance on the field in any way.

If it has been a bad game, point out something that the child can do something about. It is important to always attribute the problem to something within the child's control (i.e. 'You just need to get near the ball more often - but hey, you touched it 5 times this week, as opposed to only twice last week!')

Fear ('you're going to get dropped from the team!') and rejection ('don't speak to me right now') may get results temporarily, but neither is good over the long haul because they impact confidence at a very deep level. Attempting to motivate in this way will carve a big hole of fear and self-contempt in your child, and damage your relationship. John Wooden, the legendary NCAA Basketball coach, used the following feedback mix: 75% specific instruction, 12% requests to hustle, 7% praise, 6% scolds. This applies to coaching of course. Obviously working to such specifics as a parent is impossible because you are not doing the teaching of the skills, but the general idea holds: Negative feedback does not lead to great successes over the long haul. You are the parent for life; not for a three year contract as some of these successful negative coaches are.

3. **Work on your emotional discipline** - Athletes need to continuously learn, re-learn, and improve their emotional discipline as they work to move higher under increasing levels of pressure. You are your child's first and most important teacher. If you can't control yourself on the sidelines, it is unreasonable to expect your child to do so on the actual field.

It is extremely difficult to watch your child out there - but you need to recognize that you must learn along with your child. Learn to recognize your own habits and limitations - if staying in control is something you struggle with, you need to prepare ahead of time.

4. **Be a parent, not another coach** - As a parent, you must be looking at the bigger picture - not just helping your child become a better hockey or soccer player. Your job is to make sure that they are doing okay, becoming stronger and better as a person.

Kids can be very vulnerable to thinking they are no good, that they are failures. They need a parent to help them make sense of some of the disappointments and setbacks, and show them how to handle the successes if they are going to build a strong character.

Some of the decisions the coach has to make are very hard on kids. The parents need to help them frame them, understand them, gain back their perspective, and point out how well they are doing. Most important, as mentioned above, your child should never feel that your love and acceptance is in any way tied to his or her athletic performance.

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If you consciously work on the four areas above, it is very likely that your child's experience with sport will be a tremendously positive one - and that's something we can all cheer about.