

10 Tips for Parenting Your Athlete

What Parents Can Do to Create a Positive Youth Sports Experience

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We all know “that parent.” The one who runs up and down the sidelines shouting instructions to their child during the game. The one who critiques the game with their child following the event. The parent who yells at the coach or the referee during the game, questioning their calls, decisions, or expertise. The one who tells the coach how to coach their child. While “that parent” just wants the best for their child, we know that actually works to the detriment of their child’s performance and more importantly their mental health. Mindful of this, here are ten tips for parenting your athlete.

1. Support for your child is unconditional. Children need to know their parents think they are doing well. Parent involvement in their child’s athletics is the primary reason children participate. Alternatively, parents can be the primary reason children quit playing sports, due to excessive criticism of their child’s play, bad-mouthing the team, other players, coaches, referees/judges. Parents should limit their involvement to praise, celebration, transportation and enjoying the game/activity with other well- intentioned parents. Be interested, supportive, accepting, tolerant, and understanding. Acknowledge and enjoy your child’s participation and successes, even the small ones.
2. The 24-hour rule: Wait 24 hours before expressing a complaint about the game, coaching, refereeing, etc. Ask yourself
 - “Does my issue, if unresolved, have a real effect on my child’s experience?”
 - “Will my issue embarrass or cast my child in a negative light?”
 - “Does my issue involve the health/safety of the athletes?”

If the issue remains relevant after 24 hours, then it should be expressed to the appropriate people.

3. Have honest conversations with your son or daughter about their WHY. Why are they playing basketball? What do they want to get out of it? What are your reasons? It is best that the athlete and parents why align.
4. Have a positive influence on their athlete by bringing a good attitude to the event. Be mindful of language used, tone of voice, body posture, facial expressions. Do not challenge or contradict the coach. This confuses your child and undermines the coach.

Neither of these outcomes will improve your child's performance nor contribute to their enjoyment of the game. Focus on effort instead of performance. On the car ride home talk about something specific that you can praise and resist the urge to give constructive criticism.

5. Be willing to let your child make his/her own mistakes and learn from them. When your child makes a mistake, ask what they think they could have done differently, what they learned from the experience, and if they would like any feedback (not criticism or blame) from you (such as what you saw, and what you think they might have done differently, and what you think they might have learned.)
6. Be a good role model. It is important to raise a good person before you raise a good athlete. How an athlete acts after an event may be more memorable than the score itself. Teach your child to have class and respect. Instill in them the knowledge that sports and the scoreboard do not define them as a person. A key way to teach these things is to lead by example. Teach your child to respect his/her coach. Do this primarily by showing respect to the coach yourself. It is vital to the child's progress and performance that he or she listen to and trust the coach's advice and instructions.
7. Encourage your child to participate. Sport is a lifelong activity, providing opportunities for personal growth, life skills, social skills, how to succeed, how to fail, how to overcome adversity. Instill a sense of value in exercise and fitness. Watch for warning signs of burnout or avoidance, e.g. change in diet, or sleep habits, moodiness, wanting to be alone. Allow changes in sports and encourage exposure to different sports.
8. Encourage your child to develop a supportive internal coach/voice. What would the coach say? What would the coach do? This will assist them to overcome difficult experiences like, losing a game, performing poorly.
9. Help your child build a strong sense of self-worth and identity that is independent from the sport itself or level of achievement. *"Basketball is something I do, not who I am."* The last thing you want is for your child to believe that their athletic failures are also character failures.
10. Be aware of your child's changing body and abilities as they grow. Realize that physical, chemical, and mental development all affect ability and all progress along different timetables. This means being patient with normal developmental processes during puberty and its possible impact on ability.

Parents, caregivers, coaches and officials all make important contributions to the growth of our children. Utilizing these tips enhances quality relationships with all parties and lifts the quality of the experience for our children. Have fun and enjoy their experience!

About Dan Rizzardini

Dan is a Licensed Professional Counselor at Affiliates in Counseling in Northbrook. Dan has an M.S. in Clinical Psychology from Benedictine University, and an MBA from the Quinlan School of Business: Loyola University Chicago. Dan is a former college football player.

Dan provides individual, couple's and group therapy with adults and adolescents. Dan has worked with athletes to help with performance and mental health issues including depression, anxiety, self-harm, self-esteem, anger, parent communications, etc.

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