

## Building Resilience in Young Athletes: A Guide for Hockey Parents

→ By Charles A. Popkin, MD with Suzanne Schimmel, PHD and Maureen Breeze

**Q:** *I want to be helpful when my athlete is struggling with disappointment, setbacks and failure. Are there better ways to think about supporting them?*

– Doris (Hamden, CT)

**A:** *Doris, for this month's edition, I am excited to have Dr Suzanne Schimmel, Clinical Psychologist and Maureen Breeze, executive coach, who are both co-authors of *Playing the Long Game: A Handbook for Parenting Elite and College Athletes* share their wisdom and experience to answer your question.*

Raising an ambitious young athlete is one of the most rewarding and challenging roles a parent can take on as a responsibility. The investment of time, energy, finances and emotion required to support a child pursuing high-level hockey is significant—and with that comes inevitable highs and lows. Perhaps the most difficult moments for any parent are those when a child faces failure, setbacks, or adversity on their athletic journey.

Whether it's losing a starting spot, falling short at tryouts, making a costly mistake or coping with an injury, these experiences hurt—for both the athlete and their family. Our instinct as parents is to protect, comfort and fix. But when it comes to fostering long-term resilience and emotional strength, some of these natural reactions can inadvertently get in the way.

### Why Failure and Setbacks Matter

Sport psychology and performance research consistently show that resilience—the ability to adapt, recover, and grow from adversity—is one of the most important predictors of long-term success in athletics and life. Martin Seligman's foundational research on learned optimism highlights that individuals who view setbacks as temporary, specific, and changeable cope better and persist longer in the face of difficulty. This mindset isn't innate—it's built through repeated experience navigating adversity, supported by emotionally attuned parents, coaches and mentors.

Hockey, like all competitive sports, inherently involves risk, disappointment and failure. If young athletes are shielded from these experiences or taught to fear them, they risk developing perfectionism, anxiety or avoidance tendencies that limit their potential.

Resilience isn't about never falling; it's about learning how to get back up.

Below are some tips to effectively support your young athlete when adversity strikes, but first let's look at some important things not to do.



### Unhelpful Parental Instincts (Try To Avoid These Habits)

In moments of distress, most parents rely on three common instinctive responses:

#### 1. Reassurance:

Telling your child “you’re the best” or “everything will be fine” may feel comforting in the moment, but it robs them of the opportunity to sit with difficult emotions and develop emotional tolerance—a key component of resilience. Athletes need to learn to tolerate frustration, disappointment and uncertainty without rushing to escape those feelings.

#### 2. Fixing the Problem:

Jumping in to email a coach, challenge a decision, or suggest solutions may momentarily alleviate your own anxiety, but it deprives your child of valuable problem-solving experience. Resilience is built through navigating challenges, not bypassing them.

#### 3. Deflecting Blame:

It's tempting to minimize a difficult situation, or shift blame to referees, coaches or teammates. While this can provide temporary relief, it undermines accountability and teaches athletes to look outward rather than inward when faced with adversity. The most resilient athletes learn to identify what's within their control and use setbacks as feedback for growth.



If you have questions for Dr. Hockey, please email [Justin.Felisko@usahockey.org](mailto:Justin.Felisko@usahockey.org)

## Strategies for Supporting Resilience

(Try These As Your New Habits)

Here is what you can do to be successfully supportive as a helpful and caring parent:

### 1. Skillful Listening:

Before offering advice or solutions, simply listen. Validate your athlete's feelings without immediately correcting or rescuing. This can be difficult when athletes make broad statements like, "I can't do anything right". But studies show that when people feel heard and understood, the intensity of negative emotions diminishes. So it's important to show your athlete that you can tolerate their difficult emotions. Use reflective statements like, "It sounds like you're really frustrated," or "That must have been very disappointing."

### 2. Explore the Storyline:

Once emotions settle, gently ask your child what story they're telling themselves about the situation. Are they assuming they aren't good enough? That a coach doesn't like them? These narratives shape their resilience. Open-ended questions like "What do you think happened?" or "What was hardest about that for you?" encourage reflection and perspective-taking.

### 3. Guide Problem-Solving Through Questions:

Help your athlete deconstruct the experience. Start with what went well, then explore what didn't go as planned. Was it nerves? Preparation? A specific skill? Help them identify actionable takeaways: "What's one thing you might do differently next time?" This moves them toward a growth mindset, fostering agency and optimism.

### 4. Model Emotional Regulation:

Your reactions—in the stands, after a game and during tough conversations—profoundly shape your child's resilience. Psychology emphasizes the



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importance of co-regulation; young athletes pick up on your emotions. Work on managing your own anxiety, frustration or disappointment. Take a breath, phone a friend or go for a walk if you need to reset before responding.

### 5. Be Consistent and Present:

Engage with your athlete after both wins and losses. Don't avoid them after a bad game. Consistency communicates unconditional support and helps athletes develop a stable sense of self-worth that isn't solely performance-based.

### 6. Highlight Identity Beyond Hockey:

Incorporate affirmations about your child's character, work ethic and relationships. This not only protects against over-identification with athletic success but also nurtures resilience by reinforcing a stable foundation of personal values and strengths.

### The Long Game: Raising Resilient Young Adults

Ultimately, your role is not to prevent adversity but to help your child navigate it. The long-term goal is to raise a resilient, adaptable young adult who can handle life's inevitable challenges, in sport and beyond. By creating a home environment where mistakes are viewed as opportunities for learning, where emotions are acknowledged, and where unconditional support is constant, you equip your athlete with the tools they need to thrive.

And when in doubt, ask yourself: What does my child need from me right now? Not what would make me feel better—but what will help them grow.

It's not easy, but it's one of the most important and lasting contributions you can make to their journey. ☆

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