

# Pre-game Jitters



→ By Charles A. Popkin, MD

**Q:** *My son looks like an all-star at his high school practices, but he falls apart in games. The longer this “slump” goes on, the more nervous he gets and struggles. The anxiety is so bad, he sometimes vomits before games. How can we help with his jitters and stop this cycle of doom?*

– Stressed Hockey Mom in Trenton, New Jersey

**A:** Jitters are seemingly universal no matter the game. This might mean your heart beats a little faster right before puck drop or maybe it's insomnia the night before. There is a fine line between nervous energy and debilitating anxiety, the latter of which can negatively impact game performance and take the fun out of the sport.

Pre-game jitters are experienced by players everywhere, but with the right strategies to encourage a healthy mindset, your young hockey player can learn to manage their nerves and play with confidence.

Here are some tips that will help your player hit the ice with confidence.

## Reframe Nervousness as Excitement

Many young athletes interpret jitters as a signal that they are not brave or tough enough to play. Remind them that butterflies in their stomach are just their body's way of preparing them to perform. Help reframe their anxiety as excitement. A simple phrase like, “That feeling in your stomach means you're getting ready to play!” can turn nerves into motivation and will go a long way.

If they reiterate their nervousness, be sure to acknowledge and validate those fears. Then, let them know that bravery is not the absence of fear, rather, it means feeling the fear and having courage to do it anyway.

## Control What is Controllable

Frequently, the focus of anxiety is something the player cannot control. They may worry about how much playing time they are getting or if a teammate is “playing better than me.” This takes the focus off the only important thing and the only thing a player can control: their own effort and attitude while playing.

**Stacey Goodrich, a mental strength coach for athletes and owner of So Connected in Minnesota,** recommends having players make a physical list of what they can control. This may include nutrition, sleep hygiene, physical fitness, knowledge of hockey strategy, game preparation, and the attitude and perspective that

they bring to the game. This can be an invaluable exercise to help your player feel empowered which, in turn, will boost their confidence.

## Create a Consistent Game Day Routine

Predictability can help ease anxiety. Establish a pre-game routine that includes a healthy meal, hydration and some light activity before heading

to the rink. Keep it relaxed and enjoyable. Consider listening to your player's favorite playlist on the way to the game. A structured routine gives kids a sense of control and familiarity, reducing stress.



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

## Model a Calm Confidence

Kids pick up on their parents' emotions. Do your best as the hockey parent to stay positive and relaxed before games. Show them that you believe in them, *no matter the outcome*. Putting undue pressure on your player to perform will serve only to increase their anxiety. A reassuring smile and a casual, “You've got this,” can go a very long way.

## Emphasize the Fun

Sometimes kids get pre-game jitters because they're worried about making mistakes or disappointing their teammates, coaches or parents. Hockey is supposed to be fun. Encourage them to focus on what they love most about the game—the speed of play, the locker room friendships and the development of a skill—rather than just winning or losing or scoring goals. ☆

“**The only thing a player can control while playing: their own effort and attitude.**”