



SUCCESSFUL SPORTS PARENTING

Goal Setting and Mental Preparation

Q: I worry that my child is overwhelmed by all of his commitments. What can I do?

A: Talk to your son. Is this your perception or is it really happening? If your son is overwhelmed, it's time to work together in establishing priorities. Be sure to make any observations of "wasted" time in his day. After helping him establish his priorities, help your son determine whether it is necessary to drop some activities. Then, some decisions have to be made by you and your child to relieve this pressure and allow your child to be better balanced and enjoy his activities. This experience will teach your son how to better manage his time and balance his schoolwork, family, training, and activities.

Q: What are "Process" goals?

A: There are two types of goals that athletes can set:

- **Outcome Goals:** focus on the end result of performance. "Win, qualify for finals."
- **Process Goals:** relate to process of performance. "Maintain technique, streamline."

Athletes have much more control over Process Goals. Outcome Goals are uncontrollable since they also involve the performance of other competitors. Athletes and coaches, especially at the young age levels, should concentrate on Process Goals.

Q: Should my child begin setting goals?

A: Of course! Everyone should set goals. In fact, most kids have already set goals. As adults, however, we must remember that kids are not simply little versions of us and are not going to set the same types of goals as adults. One developmental difference is that children lack the cognitive ability to distinguish time and are also very concrete thinkers. Therefore, setting long-term goals often doesn't provide the motivation for kids that it does for adults. Kids want results today. With younger athletes, it is appropriate to talk about short-term goals: what they need to work on today. Most coaches will emphasize goals that reinforce skill development and the process of performance. Additionally, based on cognitive development research, we know that around the age of 6 or 7, kids enter the stage of social comparison. In this stage, they begin to evaluate their own performance by comparing it to others. So as the parent, reinforce what the coach has emphasized and help her focus on individual improvement.

Q: My son has set some great goals but I am not sure if the coach is aware of them.

A: Ask your son if he developed the goals with his coach. You might find that the coach actually helped your son set these goals. This is the beginning of your son learning to take risks and responsibility for his sport. Encourage his goal to be "SMART".

- **Specific:** tells the athlete what to do
- **Measurable:** able to measure and record progress
- **Attainable:** athlete can experience success
- **Realistic:** challenging but "do-able"
- **Trackable:** short-term goals build into long-term goals

Q: All my athlete talks about is being an Olympian. Should I discourage this since it may not be realistic?

A: Most kids will have long-term or "dream" goals of making the Olympic team or winning a National Championship. Dream goals can be beneficial by helping motivate your athlete to go to practice and to train hard (and there is no way of knowing if it is realistic or not). While it is okay to have dream goals, there are



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several problems with athletes **only** having dream goals. These problems include not knowing if they are making progress towards their goal, not experiencing little “successes” along the way, and losing motivation when the goal seems so distant. To combat this, it is important to also talk to your child about setting short-term or even daily goals. Ask him what he is working on in practice this week (just as you ask him what is going on in school), get him to identify skills he needs to improve on, and follow up with him to help him recognize successes along the way. Be sure to ask your son to speak to his coach if he needs help seeking some practice or short-term goals.

Q: I know the mental aspect of sports is important. Should my child be using mental skills, or is she too young?

A: If we equate mental skills with physical skills, as we should, this question becomes easier to answer. Just as there are certain physical skills that a young athlete is not physically, developmentally, or cognitively ready for, there are also mental skills he is not ready to learn. But, on the flip side, there are basic mental skills young athletes can be taught at this level. It is great to begin laying a foundation of mental skills (just as it is great to introduce basic physical skills at a young age). Some basic skills that can be introduced include setting goals, imagery, concentration, and relaxation. We often tell athletes to “concentrate” or “relax,” but fail to teach athletes what it means or what they need to do to concentrate or relax. These are skills that coaches can work on with young athletes

Q: My child gets so nervous before a competition. Is this natural? What can I do to help her to reduce this competitive pressure/stress?

A: To a degree, nervousness is part of the competitive experience and can be used as an opportunity to teach the young athlete specific strategies or skills to help her manage this arousal or nervousness. A simple skill that young athletes can learn to help manage the “butterflies in their stomachs” is belly breathing. The athlete is taught to take slow, deep breaths into her belly, hold it briefly, and then exhale slowly. Words can be included to help the athlete focus her thoughts on something besides worry. This is a quick strategy that helps calm the body and mind and only takes a few seconds to do. Another skill to help the athlete deal with muscular tightness brought on by nervousness is progressive muscle relaxation. In this procedure, the athlete goes through the major muscles in her body and first tenses and then relaxes each muscle. This teaches athletes to learn the difference between a tense and relaxed muscle, to learn where different muscles are located, and to eventually be able to relax specific muscles as necessary. Remember that these skills must be taught and practiced before the athlete will be able to use them effectively.

We also know that excessive anxiety can be damaging to both performance and to the athlete's desire to enter such situations in the future. Two factors which have been found to play a role in the level of anxiety experienced are the importance of the event and the uncertainty of the outcome. Greater importance and greater uncertainty lead to increased anxiety. Parents, this suggests that you can play an active role in reducing competition anxiety by de-valuing the outcome of the event and by focusing on the individual performance over which the athletes have control.

Q: What are the symptoms of anxiety?

- increased heart rate
- rapid breathing
- sweating
- negativity
- jittery



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- frequent 'pit stops'
- excessive worry
- doubts
- talk of failure
- low confidence

Q: What are some strategies to manage anxiety?

- Deep belly breathing
- positive self-talk
- relaxation exercises
- think of successes
- stretching
- visualize race
- listen to music
- focus on goals
- light massage
- distract by talking with friends, family