



**SUMMIT SPORT PSYCHOLOGY**  
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# Parents' Guide to Supporting Excellence in Sport

How to champion your child's growth,  
mindset, and mental health while navigating  
high-performance culture

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## INTRODUCTION

# Welcome: You Matter More Than You Know



You want the best for your child. You believe in them. You see their spark—their drive, their talent, the way their eyes light up when they play—and you want to give them every opportunity to grow and succeed. That's a beautiful thing. And it matters.

But the world of youth and competitive sports can be overwhelming. It's easy to get swept up in the chase: club teams, performance metrics, rankings, scholarships, social media highlights. Somewhere along the way, the simple love of the game—the joy that got your child started—can get buried beneath pressure, perfectionism, and fear of falling behind.

This guide is here to help you stay centered in what truly matters. Your role is more powerful than you think. More than the coach, the stats, or the scoreboard, it's you—the parent—who helps shape the kind of athlete and person your child becomes. You're their safe place to land.

## INTRODUCTION

You model how to handle stress, setbacks, and competition. You teach them whether their worth is tied to performance—or something deeper and more unshakeable.

We want to help you support your child like a true champion—not just of their talent, but of their whole self. That means celebrating effort over outcome. Growth over comparison. Courage over perfection. It means showing up with presence, listening without fixing, and helping them define success on their own terms. The ultimate goal isn't just a win today. It's a lifelong love of movement. A healthy relationship with pressure. A strong sense of self. And the resilience to face whatever life throws their way—with grit, grace, and joy.

Let's raise competitors who play with heart and live with purpose. Starting with us.

## COMMON TRAPS FOR SPORT PARENTS

Why even the most supportive parents sometimes get it wrong—and how to do it better.

Even the most loving, well-intentioned parents can unintentionally create pressure, miscommunicate expectations, or send mixed signals. In the fast-paced world of youth and competitive sports, it's easy to fall into patterns that seem helpful on the surface but actually undermine confidence, motivation, or joy.

The good news? These traps are common—and reversible. With a bit of reflection and a few intentional shifts, you can become an even more powerful ally in your child's development, both as an athlete and a human being. Let's take a closer look at five of the most frequent traps.

### **Going all-in too early**

When a child shows talent, families often rearrange their lives around that sport. Seasons get longer. Teams get more competitive. Costs rise. Identity narrows. Before long, the sport defines the family. Early specialization is linked with higher risk of burnout and overuse injury (Jayanthi et al., 2013). Kids lose their playfulness, and performance becomes pressure.

Example: Your 12-year-old is on a travel team year-round. Every vacation, weekend, and dinner conversation revolves around the sport. They may start to dread practice, get overuse injuries, or start to believe that if they aren't progressing they're falling behind. They also risk over-identifying with the sport and under-developing other parts of their personality.

### **Living through your child**

It's easy to become overly invested in their journey, especially if sport meant something deep to you. But when your child senses that your emotions depend on how they perform, it blurs boundaries and adds invisible weight. They're not just playing for fun or growth—they're playing for your approval.

Example: You feel crushed after a poor performance, replaying their mistakes like they were your own. You're more upset than they are. Often what is occurring here is that you, without full awareness, "need" your child to perform well, and this prevents you from: 1) seeing and validating your child, 2) meeting the child where they're at in their athletic journey, and 3) reinforcing healthier mindsets in how your child relates to themselves, their effort, and sports. At best your child tunes you out, and at worst they develop a fixed mindset and believe that sport is where they need to take care of you. This is a sure-fire way to demotivate your child.

**Control instead of support**

It is well established that coaching and parenting from an authoritarian perspective characterized by high demand and low support causes children to misbehave, decreases resilience, and these kids then struggle to learn to effectively regulate their emotions. Kids need more motivation than the hope to avoid a lecture. In his book *Win The Inside Game*, Steve Magness (2025) highlights research wherein excessive parental psychological control (e.g. parenting aimed at controlling a child's thoughts, feelings, and actions through tactics such as invalidating feelings, inducing shame or guilt, or withdrawing love) led to decreased motivation, increased burnout, and increased fear of failure. See the table below for examples of controlling vs supportive parenting. In the moment, your attempts to motivate or help them figure something out may be control in disguise; what the child is almost certainly going to experience in these moments is rejection, invalidation, a sense of isolation, and feeling criticized rather than supported. Kids who grow up in these households struggle with self-autonomy and developing an identity, as this type of parenting unintentionally signals to the child that their worth is conditional.

Example: After a tournament, your child avoids eye contact in the car because they know what's coming: a full critique. They stop wanting to talk about games at all. You interpret your child shutting down as a lack of care or respect, but what they're really trying to do is survive the ride home.

Psychological Control	Supportive Parenting
"After all we've done for you, you better not waste this opportunity."	"We're proud of your effort no matter what. We're here to support your journey, not control it."
"You made us look bad out there."	"I know that was tough. What did you take away from the experience?"
"You can come back when you fix your attitude."	"Looks like you're hurting. I'm here when you're ready to talk or need support."
"You're being dramatic. It's just a game."	"I can tell this matters to you. Want to talk about what you're feeling?"
Only expressing your pride and affection when your kid wins.	"I'm proud of your courage, your attitude, and how you keep growing—win or lose."
"You've got to toughen up." / "Don't get so easily upset."	"It's brave to feel things and keep going. Emotional strength is part of being a great athlete."

## **Mental toughness isn't about toughness**

Many parents want their kids to be “mentally tough”—to bounce back from mistakes, stay focused, and push through discomfort. But too often, mental toughness is misunderstood as emotional suppression or stoicism. When we tell kids to “suck it up,” “stop crying,” or “just push through,” we may unintentionally teach them that their feelings are a problem, rather than valid signals to be acknowledged and understood. True mental toughness isn't about being unshakable—it's about being flexible. It's the ability to experience big emotions and still choose intentional action. It's learning to regulate under pressure, respond instead of react, and stay grounded in purpose even when the outcome is uncertain. Helping kids build real mental strength means making space for their emotional world, not dismissing it.

Example: After a tough game where your child feels frustrated, they say, “I just couldn't get anything right.” A common response might be, “You need to be tougher—stop getting in your head.” But a more supportive response could be, “That was a hard one. I get why you're frustrated. Want to talk about what threw you off and how you might handle it next time?” This helps them develop emotional regulation—not emotional denial.

## **Outcome obsession**

Focusing on wins, points, and stats unintentionally communicates to kids that their value lies in results. Over time, this teaches them that what matters most isn't how they grow, how they play, or how they feel—it's whether they produce results.

According to research by Dr. Carol Dweck (2006), this kind of performance-focused praise fosters a fixed mindset, where kids start believing their abilities are static and must be constantly proven. It increases anxiety, makes setbacks feel threatening, and causes children to shy away from challenges that might expose their imperfections. They stop taking risks. They play to avoid losing. And slowly, their joy and internal motivation for the sport can fade. When kids internalize the message that results define their value, they also become more likely to experience burnout, performance anxiety, and even disordered thinking around perfectionism and failure. Their self-esteem rises and falls with every game. And when sport stops being fun, many kids simply walk away.

Common Signs include: Your first question after a game is: “Did you win?” or “How many points did you get?” You show more enthusiasm when they play well than when they grow through adversity. Your child becomes fearful of trying new positions or styles of play. They're harder on themselves after mistakes than they used to be.

## **Coaching instead of parenting**

Even if you know the game well, your role as a parent is not to correct technique or break down film. Athletes need a safe space where they feel

unconditionally supported. Post-game analysis in the car can damage connection and joy. As Steve Magness points out, your role is not to critique, berate, or coach-up your kid. Rather, be there to support them no matter the outcome. A psychological concept, the peak-end rule, dictates how we remember past events. Essentially, our brain holds onto the most emotionally salient parts; if you're lecturing your kid, what they're likely to remember most is this.

### **Not trusting your child's internal motivation**

It can be unsettling when your child doesn't seem excited about practice or wants to take a break from a sport you've invested in emotionally or financially. But trying to push, prod, or guilt them into staying committed can backfire. When we override their internal signals—like boredom, burnout, or curiosity about trying something new—we risk creating resistance, resentment, and emotional disconnection from the sport.

Long-term motivation is built when young athletes feel ownership over their journey. That means trusting them to gauge their own level of excitement, fatigue, and engagement—and making space for those signals to be heard without judgment. It doesn't mean we let them quit at the first sign of discomfort, but it does mean we stay curious and collaborative, not controlling.

Example: Your child says, "I don't know if I want to do this tournament." A reactive response might be, "You signed up—you're not quitting now. We've already paid for it." A more connection-based response might be, "Sounds like something's shifted. What's going on for you? Let's figure out what's behind that feeling and decide together what's best." This shows you're a trusted partner in their growth, not just a manager of their schedule.



## HOW TO TRULY SUPPORT EXCELLENCE

What actually helps kids thrive in competitive sport? It's not pressure, perfection, or control—it's presence, process, and trust.

### **Prioritize your relationship with your child**

*Connection before Correction.*

The single most powerful buffer against stress and pressure in youth sport? A parent who is a safe, steady base. When kids know their worth doesn't rise and fall with performance, they take more risks, recover more quickly, and enjoy the journey. Your presence isn't just emotional—it's neurological. It regulates their nervous system, quiets their inner critic, and makes sport a safe place to grow. In fact, emotional safety is often the hidden ingredient behind high performers who take healthy risks, bounce back from mistakes, and pursue excellence for the right reasons. This doesn't mean avoiding all conflict or never challenging them—it means your relationship stays rooted in love and connection as well as firmness. When you prioritize connection before correction, your child learns that their identity is not tied to outcomes. This helps them hold their sport lightly enough to grow in it deeply.

This is the antidote to living through your child or coaching instead of parenting. They don't need another evaluator—they need to know they're unconditionally seen and valued. When you ground your relationship in who they are, not how they perform, they feel free to explore their full potential without fear of disappointing you.

Try this:

"No matter what happens out there, I'm proud of who you are becoming."

### **Embrace challenge and failure**

*Praise the controllables. Normalize the struggle.*

One of the clearest ways to build long-term excellence is to focus on what your child can control: effort, persistence, learning, and courage. This shifts their mindset from "I have to prove I'm good" to "I get better through challenge." According to Dweck (2006) and Duckworth et al. (2007), a growth mindset creates athletes who are more motivated, more resilient, and more open to feedback—all essential traits in high-performance environments. This directly counters the outcome obsession trap. When you praise effort instead of results, kids stop fearing failure and start embracing the process.

When parents try to control outcomes, fix problems, or remove obstacles, it sends the message: You can't handle this. Instead, allow your child to wrestle with difficulty, reflect, and bounce back. Support them by showing that

failure is not shameful—it's a training ground for resilience. This helps replace the control trap and the misunderstanding that mental toughness = suppression. Mental strength is built through hard experiences that are met with support, not avoidance.

Try these:

"I saw how hard you worked in that second half—you didn't back down even when it got tough."

"That didn't go the way you wanted—and I love how you kept showing up. These moments build character."

### **The power of co-regulation**

*Your presence teaches their body how to feel safe again.*

Sport naturally stirs up big emotions—adrenaline, fear, anger, embarrassment, pride. And in high-pressure moments, your child's nervous system may tip into fight, flight, or freeze responses. They might shut down, lash out, or spiral into self-criticism. In these moments, your child is not being dramatic—they are biologically overwhelmed. The best thing you can offer isn't advice. It's calm.

Co-regulation is the process by which your child's nervous system learns how to settle by syncing with yours. This is backed by polyvagal theory (Porges, 2011), which shows how safety is felt before it is understood. If you meet your child's dysregulation with your own frustration, it compounds their stress. But if you can offer stillness, softness, and steady breathing, you invite their system to come back online. This skill directly replaces the trap of parental controlling behaviors under stress—like yelling from the sidelines, post-game lectures, or pressure-filled car rides. It teaches your child that it's okay to have big feelings, and that they are not alone in them.

Try this:

"That game brought up a lot—I felt it too. Let's take a minute to breathe. I'm not going anywhere."

### **Check your subtle expectations**

*What we don't say still speaks volumes.*

Even the most loving, well-intentioned parents can send powerful messages without realizing it. A tense silence after a loss, a small sigh when your child says they're tired, a look of disappointment from the stands—these moments communicate expectations that may go unspoken but deeply felt. Kids are exquisitely attuned to our emotional signals, especially when it comes to approval, success, and belonging.

Unchecked expectations can make sport feel like a performance for you, rather than a journey with you. They may learn to hide their true feelings, push through pain, or pretend to be motivated even when they're burned out

—all to protect your pride or avoid your disapproval. But when you stay curious and self-reflective, you shift from projecting pressure to cultivating trust. This builds psychological safety and strengthens your connection. This is the heart of avoiding the control trap—where your ambitions unintentionally override theirs. The work isn't about having no expectations. It's about keeping them in check, being transparent, and staying open to your child's evolving goals and identity.

Try this:

"It seems like you've been a little less excited about training lately. I don't want to assume anything—can we talk about how you're really feeling about sport right now?"

### **Protect and encourage play**

*Joy and internal drive is what keeps them in the game.*

In a culture that often glorifies early specialization, constant competition, and achievement at all costs, it's easy to forget that the foundation of high-level performance is joy. Not pressure. Not perfection. Play is where kids fall in love with movement. It's where creativity flourishes, experimentation is safe, and identity gets shaped through curiosity—not comparison.

When sport becomes all grind and no play, kids lose the internal spark that fuels long-term motivation. Research shows that allowing kids opportunities for early sampling of multiple sports, unstructured play, and self-driven exploration lead to better performance outcomes and lower burnout (Côté et al., 2009). Play helps kids regulate stress, recover from pressure, and reconnect to their purpose. This is your invitation to push back against the trap of going all-in too early. Yes, training matters. But, shooting hoops in the driveway with friends, inventing games at the park, or goofing around at open gym is more important. These moments don't distract from excellence—they build it.

Try this:

"You've been working hard. Want to play just for fun today—no coaching, no drills, just being a kid with a ball?"

"What's your favorite way to move when no one's watching?"

### **Foster ownership, not obedience**

*The fire has to come from within.*

No amount of external pressure can replace internal drive. You can enroll them in the best programs, hire elite coaches, and build the perfect schedule—but if they aren't connected to why they're doing it, the motivation won't last. True excellence is fueled from within. When a young athlete feels ownership over their journey, their confidence, creativity, and resilience all grow stronger.

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Your role isn't to steer the ship—it's to ride shotgun. That means asking

questions instead of making decisions, listening more than instructing, and creating space for them to lead. It also means being okay with periods of low motivation, curiosity about other interests, or decisions you might not fully understand. This doesn't mean being uninvolved—it means being involved without hijacking the wheel and aiding them in curiosity, openness, and discovery. This directly addresses the traps of over-control, coaching instead of parenting, and not trusting their motivation. When you shift from managing their passion to supporting their autonomy, you create the conditions where sustainable drive can actually grow.

Try this:

"What's lighting your fire lately in sport—or is anything feeling a little off? I'm here to support your direction, not just push the one I think you should take."

## SCRIPTS AND CONVERSATION STARTERS

### How you show up more than what you say

Words are powerful—but only when they come from a place of presence, trust, and love. In high-pressure moments, many parents reach for advice, correction, or motivation. But what kids often need most is connection. A sense that you're with them, not managing them. That your relationship is steady, even when their performance isn't. While we are going to focus here on scripts, it is important to remember the 7-38-55 rule: words convey 7% of our meaning, tone conveys 38%, and body language conveys the largest amount at 55%. What we say matter's but how we say it is paramount. You just need to show up with presence, humility, trust, and love. These moments of connection build emotional resilience, confidence in themselves and who they're becoming, and most importantly, your relationship.

The phrases you choose after a loss, before a game, or during a hard stretch can either add pressure or relieve it. They can invite your child to reflect, regulate, and grow—or they can make them feel judged, evaluated, or alone. The goal isn't to say the "right" thing. It's to create an environment of emotional safety, honest reflection, and unconditional support.

This section gives you simple, grounded language to use in those key moments. Whether your child is walking off the field, sitting in the backseat, or staring at the ceiling the night before a big game—these scripts are invitations. They say: You matter. I'm with you. We'll figure this out together. They also model the kind of self-awareness, emotional regulation, and humility you hope to see in them. Because one of the most powerful tools in parenting isn't what you teach—it's what you practice.

Use these not as rules, but as starting points. Try what feels natural. Adjust to your child's age and personality. And above all, remember: it's not about perfect words—it's about showing up with an open heart.

### **After a tough loss or poor performance**

*When emotions are high, kids don't need analysis. They need attunement.*

- "That looked like it was really hard. I'm proud of how you kept going."
- "You didn't get the outcome you wanted, but you didn't quit. That says a lot about your character."
- "Do you want space, a snack, or someone to just sit with you?"
- "It's okay to feel disappointed. You care deeply—and that's a strength."
- "That was rough. I'm proud of how you showed up, not just how you played."

**Before a big game or competition**

*Anxiety often builds before a performance. Help them feel grounded, not managed.*

- “You’ve done the work. Go have fun out there.”
- “Play with heart. I love watching you compete.”
- “Whether you win, lose, or make a mistake—I’m proud of how you carry yourself.”
- “I believe in you. You don’t have to be perfect to make me proud.”
- “Let it rip. This is what you’ve trained for—go enjoy it.”

**When they’re struggling with confidence, comparison, or burnout**

*Avoid trying to fix. Stay curious and compassionate.*

- “You get to feel this. I’m here with you in it.”
- “You don’t have to figure it all out right now. Want to talk, move, or just rest for a bit?”
- “You’re not alone in this. Even the best athletes have doubts—what’s been weighing on you lately?”
- “It’s okay if your motivation is low right now. Let’s explore what’s behind that together.”
- “You’ve hit rough patches before and worked through them. What helped last time?”

**Instead of coaching or critiquing**

*Shift from directing to reflecting. Let them lead the post-game processing.*

- “What felt good out there?”
- “What challenged you today—and how did you respond?”
- “What’s one thing you’re proud of from that game?”
- “Was there a moment you had to dig deep? What did that feel like?”
- “If you could do one thing differently next time, what would it be?”

**When you want to connect**

*Remind them that your relationship is bigger than sport.*

- “I love who you are, not just how you perform.”
- “You’ve got a lot on your plate. Want to just hang out and do something totally non-sport related?”
- “It’s fun to watch you grow—not just as an athlete, but as a person.”
- “What’s been giving you joy lately? On the field or off it?”
- “Let’s go for a walk / shoot around / listen to music—no pressure, just us.”

## PARENT SELF-REFLECTION PROMPTS

*Because how we show up starts with what we notice in ourselves*

Being a sport parent is a powerful role—one filled with pride, emotion, hope, and complexity. We want our kids to succeed. We want them to be happy, confident, and resilient. But sometimes, without realizing it, our own unspoken fears or desires can shape how we parent—especially in high-pressure environments. That's why reflection matters.

Doing our own inner work doesn't mean we've done something wrong. It means we care enough to lead with self-awareness and intention. These prompts are an invitation to pause and ask: Where am I coming from? What am I bringing into this relationship? Am I supporting growth—or subtly steering it? When we get honest with ourselves, we become better guides, better models, and better sources of safety.

And here's the truth: your child will learn far more from how you manage your own emotions than from anything you ever say about theirs. The more you practice humility, flexibility, and emotional regulation, the more you give them permission to do the same. This isn't about perfection. It's about presence. These questions are here to help you get curious, stay grounded, and grow—right alongside your athlete.

- Which of the traps am I most at risk of falling into?
- In what ways am I doing a good job in supporting my child?
- How do I relate to sports?
- When do I feel most anxious about my child's performance? Why?
- What do I most want them to feel after a game or competition?
- How might I be showing approval only when they perform well?
- Am I staying connected to who they are and what they want?
- How can I model humility, emotional control, and resilience?
- What subtle expectations am I susceptible to projecting onto my child?
- What emotional regulation skills do I have, and which do I need to develop?
- What did I learn about sport, outcomes, winning, emotions, etc. from my parents/coaches?
- What is my biggest opportunity to express connection with my child?
- How can I demonstrate care for them over outcomes?
- What is needed to make sure my child knows that who s/he is is more important than anything else?

## SPORT PARENT AFFIRMATION

I am not here to perfect my child. I am here to walk with them as they grow. I will choose connection over control, curiosity over assumption, and presence over pressure.

I trust that the most powerful thing I can give is not more feedback, but more safety. Not more expectation, but more belief. Not more correction, but more compassion.

I will show up with love that doesn't hinge on outcomes, and with the humility to let their journey be their own.

I am raising more than an athlete. I am raising a whole person. And that is the win that matters most.





## BEYOND THE GAME: WHAT LASTS

*Because the best kind of excellence lasts a lifetime.*

In youth sports, it's easy to get caught up in the pace—game schedules, performance metrics, rankings, team politics. There's a sense that if we don't move fast, we'll fall behind. But real excellence isn't built in fast-forward. It's built in the quiet, consistent, intentional moments over time. And the truth is, your child's development is not a race. It's a becoming.

Your child is not a project to be optimized. They are not a résumé to be built or a scholarship to be earned. They are a whole, growing human—shaped not just by the sports they play, but by the relationships that surround them. The way you show up for them—calm in the chaos, proud in the struggle, present when things fall apart—is more impactful than any trophy or stat line.

And when the seasons change, when the scoreboard fades, and when their competitive days come to an end (as they eventually will), they won't remember every win or every loss. But they will remember how it felt to look into the stands and see your eyes full of belief. They'll remember the car rides where you listened instead of lectured. They'll remember the way you stood beside them—not just when they soared, but when they stumbled.

So take the long view. Build the kind of relationship that will last far beyond their time in uniform. Help them become someone who loves hard things, who learns from setbacks, who plays with joy, and who knows—deep down—that they are loved unconditionally. Lead with love. Cheer with humility. Trust the process. Because in the end, the legacy you leave as a sport parent won't be what you pushed them to do. It will be what you helped them believe about themselves.

You've got this. And they've got you. That's more than enough.



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Thank You

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