



Parent's tips

As sports parents, we want the best for our athletes. We want to make sure that we have done everything that we can do to help our athlete have their best performance. And even when we have the best intentions sometimes we add to the athlete's stress. Here are some parent's tips to help you along your child's athletic journey.

Expectations: Expectations are demands that are put on athletes about how they should perform. Expectations are not goals or aspirations they are what we call the "should" or "should not".

Your athlete may say that they "shouldn't lose at an easy competition" or "should get in the top 3 in the all around". On the surface these comments may seem like your athlete has goals. But these are really pressure that can create anxiety.

If your athlete thinks they shouldn't lose at an easy competition, what happens if they do lose? They can feel embarrassed, frustrated, angry, or even like they failed.

Parent's can also place expectations on their athletes. For example we may think that when we say to our athlete "You should win today." "I'll buy you a new suit if you do well." We think that we are trying to empower our athlete with confidence or motivate them to try hard. But what they may actually hear is:

1. I have to win because my parent's think I should.
2. My parent's think I am going to win, I hope I don't make any mistakes.

3. If I don't do well or win, I will disappoint my parents.
4. If I don't do well, I won't get a new suit.

Be aware of expectations and when if you do come across any, park them at the door and do not let them in your house. Keep the statements that don't have expectations attached to them. You can say general statements like:

1. Stay strong from the beginning of the competition to the end.
2. You look ready to put on a show.

Pay attention to any expectations you hear your athlete say like "I should win, because I am not racing against anyone good." "I should win breast stroke, it is my best." You can convert these comments with statements like:

1. Just do what you do it practice, you are ready.
2. Remember you can't control the judges, just focus on your race.

Remember your job, as a parent you are to support your child so your comments should remain general and not focused on technique.

Focus: Before the competition it is normal for your athlete to be nervous. And many athletes may start be distracted with unnecessary thoughts. You may hear your athletes say comments like "I hope I don't compete first thing in the morning." or "I know _____ team will be there. They are probably going to win. They always win." If you hear your athlete say these comments, you can rebut them with statements like:

1. It doesn't matter what time you compete, you are strong any time of day.
2. It doesn't matter what teams are there to compete. Today is a new day and anything can happen.

As a parent you will want to stay away from statements that may put distracting thoughts into your athlete's head. These statements can be irrelevant to the competition but just as distracting, like telling your athlete

that they have to finish their homework for school as soon as they get home from the competition. You also want to make sure that you don't complain to your athlete about topics, such as:

1. For young athletes- cleaning their room.
2. For older athletes- grades in school.

Behavioral, school, or other issues can wait until after your athlete's competition.

Have your comments focus on your child's process goals. You can ask them what their process goal is for the competition. Process goals are general themes of behavior and attitude for the competition or they can even be geared toward each event. For example a process goal for the competition may be "be aggressive from beginning to end." A process goal for a race can be, "relax and feel the water."

You may help your athlete get into their focus by saying comments like "stay strong" or "go get 'em".

Confidence: Confidence does not come from outside sources. Confidence comes from within the athlete. A parent cannot make a child feel confident but we can help the athletes recognize their own doubt and negative self-talk. When we hear our athlete say comments like "I am going to choke today, I can just feel it" or "I am not sure I am going to make my new pass today." As a parent we want to immediately dismiss these comments and so things like "oh stop, no you aren't."

Athletes may doubt themselves and by saying, "oh stop", you are discrediting their thoughts. A better way of replying to them is by asking them to tell you more about their comment and then listening to their answer. Chances are your athlete may not realize their self-talk in negative.

Another area where a parent can help their athlete's confidence is to make sure they are not tearing it apart. A child's self-talk can mimic what they hear others say to them. Do you say things to your child like "you are so lazy" "you don't listen" "you never follow through with anything" or "you can't remember anything."

Your children believe you and these comments can become your child's thoughts as well. You may be unknowingly hurt your child's self-talk. Make sure your comments do not put labels on your children. Also pay attention to not talking negatively about your children to others. Always build your children up and if you do have something negative to say, make sure they do not hear it.

Trust: Trusting oneself in sport is one of the most difficult concepts to apply. The athlete trains many hours in practice and then they have to take all of their training into a competition and trust that they are able to "let go" and perform to their abilities. Trust has to be earned. As with life trust does not happen with the flick of a switch. Trust happens over time, but without trust we doubt, we are controlling, we are careful, and we are anxious and fearful.

As a parent how can you help your athlete trust in their ability to perform?

1. Eliminate any expectations you may place on them.
2. Do not create any unnecessary distractions.
3. Talk nice to and about your children, they hear everything.
4. Trust them. If you try to control your athlete and do not give them an opportunity to fail and succeed on their own, it will be more difficult for them to be independent and trust in themselves.

Composure: I am sure that you may have seen your athlete have a breakdown in their composure. They may have cried over a fall they had on beam, they may have thrown their gym bag across the gym at a meet, or they may have even fallen on their first event and took their frustration to the next event and blew the rest of their competition.

Your athlete may lose composure when they are frustrated, dwelling on past their performances, not living up to demands from their or other expectations, or any irrational beliefs they may have about themselves or their performances.

In the workbook your athlete learned to be aware of situations where they lose their composure and they learned strategies to “let go and move on”. As a parent it is important for you to “let it go and move on” as well.

Also be aware of your own composure. Your athlete may think that losing their composure is a family trait. If you realize that you may lose your composure you may want to check your expectations and irrational beliefs as well. What beliefs do you hold onto about your child’s performance? Do you find yourself sometime becoming over emotional? If you get so nervous for your athlete that your hands get sweaty or you get an upset stomach don’t make your athlete aware of these emotions. Stay composed and your child will have a better chance of staying composed as well.

Perfectionism:

As a parent of a perfectionist you may already know that your child is hardworking, has a strong work ethic, they are committed to their goals, and they have an intense desire to improve. These children are very motivated and usually don’t need constant reminding of what they *should* be doing. These athletes can be challenging as well. They may have incredibly high expectations, they may seek approvable from others, and they may worry too much and become easily frustrated.

Be aware of your child's perfectionism.

When your child focuses on perfectionist beliefs they may put a lot of high expectations on themselves. They may say things like "I should work hard everyday to achieve my goal" or " I should perform perfectly" or " my swims are either good or bad, no middle ground".

When children have these beliefs they put a lot of pressure on themselves to maintain a state of perfection. They do not need extra outside pressure.

Because your child is human they will make mistakes. They need to understand that mistakes are not bad; mistakes are how we learn.

Perfectionists sometimes set unrealistic goals and when they do not reach them they consider themselves a failure. They also tend to focus on results, like getting a certain score or placement in a competition. Perfectionist may also have low self-esteem and can tend to be very self-critical. They also may have a hard time taking criticism and can become defensive when their coach gives them a correction.

Understand that these perfectionist athletes place extra pressure and anxiety on themselves that is not conducive for training and performing. Let them make mistakes without pointing them out to your athlete. Chances are your athlete knows what they did wrong and there is no need to recap their faults.

Fear of Failure: If you have a child that can hit their routines in practice but tends to "hold back" or "play it careful" in competition, your child may have a fear of failure. This unconscious fear appears when your athlete wants to do well in their competition they are fearful that they won't succeed; they can be fearful that they may not live up to others expectations, they may not get the "pay off", they will be embarrassed, or they will let others down. This fear causes your athlete to perform tentatively or too aggressively. Either way they change what they have been practicing in the gym and they bring a different performance to the competition.

Many times athletes are so consumed with not wanting to fail (fall) and that is mostly what they think about. They fill their minds with falling that they forget to think about what they need to do to make their skills.

Parents can help by helping the athlete think about the worse case scenario. What if they do fail? Life will go on and they will remain loved. Many times the athlete can put too much significance on their performance that they do not allow themselves to perform freely. Take the weight off your athlete's shoulders by allowing them to focus on their process and be able to practice and perform their sport without outside expectations, pressure, and concern.

Putting it all together: Putting together a pre-competition routine is a great way to make sure your athlete is prepared to perform. This routine should be done regardless if your athlete competes in the morning, afternoon, or evening. Usually the pre-competition routines consists of getting dressed, doing their hair, eating, stretching, getting into competition mode, and traveling to the competition. The routine should consist of whatever your athlete needs to get ready. Remember this is what your athlete needs, not what you think they need. So make sure to ask your athlete. Have your athlete tell you if they like to be relaxed or pumped. How long before the competition do they like to eat and what foods do they want? Of course if you have a young child you will need to make sure the athlete is eating the correct foods for sports. The parent's job is to make sure that the athlete has support. You should create the ultimate environment for your athlete to prepare for their competition.