



Inside the Zone

SPORTS PERFORMANCE GROUP, LLC

"You can't control the future but you can prepare for it" – Rob Polishook

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Championship Parenting

10 steps to helping your child achieve peak performance

BY ROB POLISHOOK, MA, CPC

How many times have you seen a parent watching their child play at a tournament but paradoxically the parent is the one that looks like they are playing? You've seen it, the parent is talking to themselves, hair disheveled, and sweat dripping down their brow. The over-involved parent looks as if they are making hand signals to their child but in reality these are simply spontaneous contortions as a result of the match! However, with each contortion or expression the child on the court gets tighter and tighter. From the child's perspective, they often feel like they are playing against two opponents, the misguided expectations of the parent and the actual opponent.

Certainly, most parents that push don't mean anything by it, they simply want what they see as best for the child and are willing to do anything to make this happen. In fact, they may not even understand that their behavior is actually putting more pressure on their child and making it almost impossible for them to perform their best because of things like fear of failure, fear of not being perfect, or fear of not living up to expectations. The precedents in professional tennis are on the TV scene all the time. Alan Goldberg, nationally known sport psychologist, describes it this way: "parents that are over involved in their child's sport run the risk of severely hindering their performance, but also, much worse, ruining their relationship with their child.

So, what's a parent to do? What's the best way to encourage your child and create a situation where they feel good about themselves and their sport?

A situation where they are not afraid to risk and they are internally motivated not simply trying to live up to other's expectations. The first step is to know that the role of the parent is the most important role in a child's life. Whether dealing with everyday matters or issues related to their involvement in sports. The parental relationship is akin to the roots of a tree. It is the foundation from which everything flows.

If the parents play their position well then the child will learn the sport faster, perform better, develop self confidence and have fun. Wayne Bryant, the infamous father of the #1 ranked doubles team, Mike and Bob Bryant, lectures all over the world and talks about parents bringing fun to the game. If the role is not played well, then the sport becomes old, the self esteem drops, and relationships become strained.

Your child, needs you on his/her team. The child's coach needs you on the team. It is extremely difficult to win without a solid child, parent, and coach relationship; one that is trusting and communicative. The following are key strategies for parents to use when helping your child to achieve peak performance.

1. Unconditional Support. No matter if your child wins or loses. Remember they are not defined by whether they win or lose a match but rather who they are as an individual. Parents who chastise a child or punish them after a tough match run the risk of alienating the child. How many times have you seen a parent come up to a child and criticize them after a tough match? Remember, this is the

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time to support them not to be offering could've or should've. The real question is "what does my child need from me now?"

2. Person first and athlete second. Remember, behind that super athlete is your child, a teenager that is a person first. Often times we view our children as more mature than they are because of the success they may experience on the court. On the field they may be beyond their years, especially in terms of handling pressure and competing, but underneath all of that your child is a kid that likes to hang out with friends, go to movies, laugh and be silly. Make sure when they are not competing on the court this natural laidback environment is available. Accept them for just being themselves. Pretend they do not play a sport.

3. Coaches shove 'em and parents love 'em! This goes back to the idea that the parents greatest role is to support their kids as they navigate through the competitive world of sports. The kids are going to need this unconditional love when times get rough, the challenges are tough and pressures peak. Feed your technical and strategic ideas to your coach. They are the ones that work with your kids on a day to day basis and understand where they are in terms of integrating specific strategies and techniques. Be supportive. Leave the coaching to the coach. You hired the coach, you've paid the dues, now it is time to trust their judgment.

4. The gift of failure. Allow your child to fail and let them know its ok. Without failure a child will never learn how to bounce back from adversity or they may never see what needs to be corrected for the next time. Failure is simply an opportunity to gather feedback and perspective. Rocky Balboa tells us, "It's not how hard you can hit, but how hard you can get hit and bounce back." Coaches across the country value the ability to bounce back from a loss or adversity as a key characteristic for personal and team success.

5. Process, not the outcome. All too often kids get caught up in wanting to win or needing to win. Parents even follow or lead this charge in terms of emphasizing rankings, scholarships and the like. Of course, we all want to win and achieve

glory when we step on the court, however as a parent this is where your valuable perspective is necessary. Don't get caught up in defining success or failure through wins and losses. Help your child understand and think in terms of what are the things that need to be done in order to properly prepare ourselves to compete and play proud. If these stepping stone issues are addressed, your child will understand that the little things are what makes the difference between competing your best and not. Winning is not something that can be controlled, it involves an opponent. Let go of the need to win and focus on what needs to be done to compete at the highest possible level. This strategy is not so different from how a child studies for a test. Of course they want to get an A but the question becomes how they can properly study to put themselves in the best position for this to happen. How they organize their notes, go to the library; ask others for help along with getting the proper rest and sleep in order to be awake for the test are all steps that lead to results. Simply wanting an A is not going to get it done. But properly focusing on the plan or process is the best way to attempt it. If the A does not happen, the child can know that they did their best, and learn from how they studied. Look between the lines, not just at the score at the end of the game. By doing this you will begin to see the gauntlet that all champions navigate. Remember, it's not when you get to the finish line but how.

6. Growth mentality. It's important to understand that your child's development is not fixed in a particular point in time. Just because they cannot hit a slice backhand deep today does not mean this is a life long sentence, rather it is something to work at and will continue to be a work in progress. Often times a kid will come off the court and say "I suck!" They may have felt like they sucked and its practically impossible to convince them otherwise. However, the tact to take is to explain to them that they may have not played well today, but tomorrow is a new day. Or ask, you may not have hit your shots well today, but what can you do tomorrow to work on things so you can keep improving? The key is not

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having a fixed mentality about their game, rather, it's knowing that it is a work in progress and will evolve based on practice, discipline and calm.

7. Keep it simple. When people describe “the zone” they talk about just letting it happen, relaxing and playing within themselves. Conversely, when a child walks onto the court to play a match, the stages of preparation should be complete, the strategy sessions and pattern play ideas hashed out, technical adjustments made, and, of course, the fitness work completed long ago. That leaves the crucial elements of simply trusting and feeling your game. No talk of technique should come into play. Here the focus should be on the present creating an awareness of and curiosity for what's happening and using your game to adapt to the situation.

8. Have fun. Wayne Bryant says this is the #1 principal in developing your game at all levels! Fun and the sport go hand in hand. When fun leaves the sport and parental pressures come to bear, the player is setting themselves up for a fall. A child should play because they want to, for their own intrinsic reason, not because they are doing it for someone else or to please someone else. If their reason for playing or big Y starts with themselves they will be able to push past adversity and obstacles. This is the secret of the great stars. Think: Sampras, Federer, Davenport and Nadal.

9. No comparisons. The key here is to encourage your child to compete against themselves. Using others as a comparison will make your child get

tight and feel like they are inadequate. This is because they are trying to live up to something or someone they cannot control. But more importantly, this idea is limiting because if they play their game in their way and style they may be able to compete as well or better than this comparison. If they do that they have accomplished the goal, and who knows they may well exceed that erroneous benchmark. I often say the sky is not the limit, rather, see beyond the sky. The key is to have the courage and determination to find out what your potential is. If this is encouraged and done, not only will the player not look back, but, in most cases, they will exceed their self or other imposed ideas about their limitations. The idea is to compete without limits!

10. Time to mourn. It is important to understand that it's ok for your child to be sad, especially after a difficult match. Know that the child has earned the right to be upset for a time after a losing a match. Of course if it goes for days and weeks something may be wrong. However, simply be there for your child. Your acceptance and support are equal to thousands of “its ok”! They know its going to be ok, they just need a measure of space to give themselves the permission to feel that. Give them that space, trust that if they want to talk about it they will, or, after an appropriate amount of time after the event, ask them if they would like to talk about it. By allowing them time to decompress they also have time to learn from the loss.



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