



Across the world on weekend mornings and weekday evenings, parents and kids pile into the family car following the child's game, practice or event. As a parent, what you do with that time is critical to your child's development as an athlete.

Your child feels good after having fun playing with their friends and putting their skills on display.

What happens next?

Get out of the way and let them play!

A simple communications guide for sports parents and coaches

John Haime, President, New Edge Performance

"Jess, why didn't you go for the goal when you had the chance?" You can see him in the rear-view mirror. Your nine-year-old is looking out the window at the familiar scenery like it's a favourite TV show. "Why did you pass the ball to Jimmy? Why didn't you make the shot?"

"I dunno."

What can you do? He used to be so animated about soccer. After a game, he wouldn't stop talking about his friends and the fun he'd had. Why have things changed so?

"Carrie, you're going to remember to keep your feet stable in your backswing today, right? She doesn't look up from her handheld ... twelve-year-olds! "Carrie?"

"Uh huh."

Are Your Children Likely to Abandon Sports?

Is your vehicle a "mini-van sports prison?" Is your child trapped in the vehicle as you express your frustration? While your intentions are good, your child becomes the target for all sorts of emotions you felt while watching your child play. Your child has nowhere to go and must listen to your frustration.

"What happened out there today?"

"You looked tired out there—was that it?"

"Why don't you try harder ...?"

"You could have done better today ..."

New Edge Performance

The challenge with athletes under 15 years of age is that it is difficult for them to articulate how they feel.

New Edge Performance specializes in the mental and emotional development of athletes, and in bringing young performers to higher performance levels. We simplify psychology in sports by helping the young athlete to:

- Understand themselves as an athlete and a person and
- Get out of their own way so they can perform to their talent level and potential.

We use special assessment tools designed for the young athlete, to find out how they feel about their sport, what they want to achieve, and what their strengths and limitations are.

Then, starting from the key mental and emotional fundamentals that separate average and outstanding athletic performers, we work with the young person to help them fall in love with their chosen sport again.

Finally, and very importantly, we set out how we, as adults, can help the child enjoy the sport enough to want to keep playing and achieve their potential.

These questions all begin a spiral of frustration between a child and parent. Unfortunately, these opening lines lead to deeper criticisms and questions all resulting from the parent's frustration as the child doesn't quite reach the expectations created by ... the parent! I really wish I could measure how much confidence the mini-van syndrome has destroyed in young athletes. It's immeasurable!

The sad reality is that the majority of young athletes drop out of competitive sports by the time they are 14 years of age. A study from the National Alliance of Sports tells us that over 70% of young athletes leave competitive sports by that age. The fun goes away and they lose interest. Why? It has nothing to do with the games themselves. It isn't the teammates, the competition, the work involved or the effort required. Instead, it is the young people's greatest fans, their parents—and their coaches—who take the fun away and make the experience of sport too complicated for the child to enjoy.

Instead of the pure joy of playing and achieving, young athletes-in-the-making get bogged down by heavy expectations, the pressure to win and other complications introduced by the very adults who are most invested in them playing the sport.

Dear Parent, Do You Have a Frustration Gap?

Watching youth sports and working with coaches and young athletes, I see a phenomenon that has a great impact on the performance of young athletes. A parent's behaviour and expectations play a major role in the performance of young athletes—and the parent's frustration gap explains a lot of the *problem* behaviour.

Many parents see their child on the ice, on the field, on the court, on the course etc. for what they'd *like* their child to be and not what the child truly *is*. The gap between what we would like to see from the child, and what the child is at this moment, is what I call the Frustration Gap. Parents sit in the stands each weekend watching their kids play and the frustration builds ... and builds ... and builds, as the parent waits for the child to reach the performance level the parent hopes to see. While this frustration is not much fun for the parent, it is *less* fun for the child who is constantly trying to

live up to the parent's expectations. Usually, those expectations are unrealistic and not in line with the child's abilities or motivations.

Week after week the parent sits in the bleachers waiting for the child to reach superstar status—and the child falls short. Children are aware of these expectations. And the pressure on the child gets in the way of play and takes the fun out of the game.

Winning is *not* the priority for youth athletes

While winning is the priority for adults, it is secondary to children.

Just watch children in the minutes and hours after a game or event. The game is quickly forgotten as their minds are in constant motion. The wonder of children is that they are resilient and move on to the next activity very quickly. I often listen to parents trying to convince me that winning is critical to their child. While winning is a moderate factor to some young people, parents confuse this with the fact that winning is not the *priority* for the child. That's good. For a child to reach their potential in sports, winning should not be the priority while they are young.

Development, **fun and achievement are the priorities for youth athletes**

If you want your child to succeed in sports and retain their love of sport for a lifetime, you need to create an environment where your child can develop skills, have fun and feel a sense of achievement.

A fun environment where achievement is highlighted keeps the young athlete motivated and wanting more, and builds confidence. You want your child to love the sport and enjoy playing it. So, focus on fun and take positive notice of your child's real achievements.

“I really liked the way you kept after the ball today.”

“You seemed really focused all through your game today.”

“You're a really great team player. You shared the ball well today.”

Worrying about wins and losses can be a de-motivator for many young children. There is plenty of time later on, when the child reaches a level of maturity in sports and in life, to shift the emphasis to winning and make it a primary objective.

The objective of youth sports should be simple. Allow the kids to play and have fun and allow them to experience a sense of achievement and accomplishment. Winning will become important later, but at a young age, it is secondary to the athlete and should be secondary to both coaches and parents. Development is the key goal.

The benefits of youth sports are enormous: Physical self-expression, the beginnings of life-long fitness, teamwork, friends sharing a common passion, understanding the importance of work ethic and how it relates to results, instilling discipline, time management, and the

ongoing experience of learning about yourself by testing your abilities. The benefits of sport will be seen well beyond sport—in school and in the child's personal development.

But parents and coaches can really mess that up. Kids most often get in their own way in sports because of adult pressures. This impacts the child's performance, reduces the joy they feel playing a sport, and jeopardizes the child's continuing involvement in athletics.

Parents can inadvertently add to their own frustration and impede their child's progress in and enjoyment of sports by falling into some negative patterns. Here is a list of Don'ts to help you and your child avoid the *Frustration Gap* and escape the *Mini-Van Prison*.

Don't be critical or instructive. Praise achievement instead.

Learn to praise achievement and not focus on your child's limitations. Make sure the child knows you are proud of a great play/game etc. Refrain from instructing your child. That is the coach's job.

Don't be too results-oriented. Focus on process and achievement.

Your priority for your child needs to be that they feel good about themselves and happy so that they are motivated to play again the next game.

Don't forget this is your *child's* life and experience. Step back emotionally.

It's a joy of being a parent to live through our kids but this can be taken too far. If you become obsessed with your child succeeding in their sport and living up to expectations you set, you may need to re-evaluate and step back. Understand why your child is playing the game. Parent and child often have different motivations and reasons for playing and this can cause conflict for the child.

Don't push the child based on your desires. Let your child do what is right for them now.

Encouraging your child is great, but don't cross the line and push your child further than he or she wants to go right now. Self-reliance is an important competency to develop and self-motivation is an important part of self-reliance. Let your child progress only when the child is ready and not before.

Don't be both the parent and coach. Let coaches coach!

Being a sport parent is a wonderful thing. You have the opportunity to watch your son or daughter achieve and enjoy themselves. Be a parent by supporting your child and encouraging them. Let the coach do the coaching and allow the coach to develop your child's athletic abilities. Getting coaching and instruction both from parents and coaches confuses the child and has little positive impact.

Don't talk about the game in the car. Make the car rides positive experiences.

The only game talk should focus on effort and not result. Let the child know you are their biggest supporter and will be whether they play well or make mistakes, win or lose. Before the game, avoid pressuring the child to win, score goals or avoid mistakes. Talk to them about other things they are doing – where they will go after the game, activities at school—subjects other than their performance in the game.

Don't allow your frustration to build. Adjust your expectations.

Letting your Frustration Gap build is damaging for both you and the child. A parent who bottles up frustration becomes a ticking time bomb waiting for an opportunity for the frustration to become uncorked. Adjust the expectations you have of your child to avoid the Frustration Gap. Accept who your child is right now. Second, if you become frustrated during your child's game, understand where that negative emotion is coming from and do something to prevent the frustration from building.

Don't hyper-focus on your child. Every child makes mistakes!

Parents put their own children under a microscope and live and die by each movement the child makes. This hyper-focus on your own child, watching their every move, creates a lack of perspective relative to the other kids on the field and the game in general. Watch the game, talk to other parents and avoid putting your child under the microscope. Remember that your while your child is making mistakes, all of the other kids are too!

Keep Kids Playing

While these strategies enable your child to fall in love with their sport, listed below are a number of strategies you can use to develop your child's long-term interest in the game.

Help your young athlete to become self-aware

While self-confidence may be the single most important asset for an athlete, to improve performance, an athlete must have self-awareness. For a young athlete to truly believe in themselves and have confidence in their abilities, they must know their strengths, limitations, trigger points (what bothers the young athlete), and their own goals and values. They also need to understand what makes them happy and identify their expectations of themselves. They need to note their beliefs (both self-limiting beliefs and others) and take stock of what they can and cannot control. When the young athlete begins to understand him or herself and what makes him or her tick, they will then be able to believe in themselves and build confidence in their abilities. I remember as a young athlete (and even in my professional sports career), sports psychologists encouraged me to believe in myself but because I did not have a deep understanding of myself, I was being asked to believe in something that I didn't really understand. Early in their sport careers it is very important to

help young athletes develop self-awareness so they can build self-belief, the confidence that leads to success in sports.

Talk to the young athlete, ask them questions and help them learn about themselves. It's a great exercise and you'll hear their feedback right away: "Oh yeah, I'm good at that," "Yeah, I can see I need to practice that," "You know, maybe I am expecting too much of myself," "Yes that does bother me when I'm playing."

Help the young athlete develop their own goals

Setting goals is vital to athletes and is often the difference between those who reach their potential and those who do not. Goal-setting can be introduced to kids early in their sport lives, to help them understand what they'd like to achieve and, more importantly, to enable them to create a plan to get there. Let young athletes create their own goals; to help them, you can ask questions about what is important to them. It may be:

- having fun,
- learning some new skills,
- spending time with my friends, etc.

Once the child has established goals, ask how they are going to achieve it, what steps they will take to get there. When children take ownership of their goals, they become personally committed to them instead of goals established by Mom, Dad or the coach.

Here are the keys to helping your child develop self-awareness, set goals, and begin a lifelong love of their sport:

Talk to them

Communicating clearly with young athletes is vital so there are no issues in their mind that could erode confidence and impact the fun of the game.

Parents should express what they would like to see in terms of the child's effort: "We'd like to see you try your best and listen to the coaches carefully." Encourage your child to communicate with you. If they have a problem or are not enjoying the sport, let them know you will help.

Help the Young Athlete Build Self-Reliance

Ultimately, parents want their young athletes to be self-motivated, and coaches appreciate this attribute in players. If a child is self-motivated, they are playing the game because they want to play, for the right reasons – and not playing for the motivations of the parent or coach. Many kids get tired of being pushed and pressured or hearing parents tell them they have to play.

Build Confidence at Every Opportunity

Confidence is the critical mental/emotional fundamental that will determine whether an athlete is successful or fail to reach their potential. Parents must focus on developing the child's confidence – helping the child believe in themselves as a young athlete.

Confidence is the solution to all the little fears, doubts and hesitations that creep into the young athlete's mind during performance. Fears, doubts and hesitations are normal. Address fears and doubts with the child by asking them why they have these feelings - "what are you afraid of?" and "why are you doubting yourself?" are good questions to begin.

Young athletes are unsure how they feel or don't know why they are feeling a certain way. That's why it's important to ask them and help them understand why they might have fear, doubt or hesitation. With good communication, young athletes will realize that most athletic fears are perceived and not real – perceptions about the future they create in their minds re: something that may or may not happen (and most likely won't). Doubts often originate from the child feeling they can't live up to expectations of adults or focusing on other competitors or distractions around them - instead of their own talents and abilities.

For some young athletes, confidence is plentiful because of exceptional physical abilities and the successes in youth sports. What can help a young athlete become more confident? Here are a few ideas:

- ✓ Build skills in practice sessions—well-organized practices that have well-understood and useful objectives
- ✓ Offer support and positive reinforcement from parents and other family members
- ✓ Watch the child's favourite player/athlete and point out what the child has in common with his or her sports hero
- ✓ Get great coaching—your child needs a coach who adapts their style to your child's needs, identifying strengths, overcoming limitations and applying an approach of "guided discovery"
- ✓ Build fitness to be able to meet the sport's challenges and keep up to the demands
- ✓ Get equipment that helps the child be more effective

Help the Young Athlete Learn to Focus

Often a young athlete's attention is everywhere except where it needs to be – putting attention on the task in the moment they are playing in. An important skill for a young athlete to learn is keeping their attention only in the present – not on what has happened – or what is going to happen. These are distractions, fuelling negative emotions (fear, hesitation, doubt) and paralyzing the young athlete from using their talent in the moment. Encourage the young athlete to put all of their attention in the moment on the process (how they are doing it) and not on the outcome (what the result will be) which is in the future and the result of them doing a great job. Winning and losing at a young age is not the priority, so help the kids enjoy the process of the game, enjoy the moment and this will create the mental discipline for later on when wins and losses are more important.

Encourage risk-taking

One of the top fears of a young athlete is the fear of making mistakes and looking funny in front of the crowd, their parents, the coaches or their teammates. This is a lot of pressure for a young athlete and the game is not fun when fear is a motivating force. Many kids will stay away from the general play of the game to avoid making mistakes and risking embarrassment.

Young athletes need the permission to take risks, be creative, and try new strategies. They should be applauded for trying new things. Mistakes and miscues are a large part of sports and while they may be noted by coaches and parents within the context of development, they should be framed around the child's positive impact on the game. Make kids aware that even professional athletes make mistakes—it is all part of playing a sport. Show them videos of the best athletes making blunders—and then recovering later to make a positive impact on the game. This will give the young athlete confidence that even the best professionals make mistakes and move on with their game. Young athletes must be encouraged to take risks and work outside of their comfort zones. If done early, the mentality of risk-taking will be a useful cornerstone in building the confidence of your young athlete.

Coaches' Communication Must Be Clear

Coaches must clearly explain what they want from the athlete and consistently communicate with the child so the child understands what is expected. Praise followed by correction is the most effective way to help the child improve. Never allow a young child to be guessing about what the coach wants and expects. In team environments, coaches who sit a child on the bench after a mistake or underachievement and do not explain the reason for the penalty are impacting both the confidence and the development of the young athlete. Communicating what steps the child should make to improve or solve the problem is a must in young athlete/coach communication. Immediate feedback with clear direction and the action forward is the way the child learns and builds the trust in the child/coach relationship. An average coach uses the same communication style with each athlete. A great coach adapts their style to each player and understands what each player needs.

Following games and practices, ask the child questions to encourage them to evaluate their own performance and help them gain self-awareness:

- What did you do well?
- What do you have difficulty with?
- What stopped you from playing better?
- What can I do better to be a better player?
- What did I contribute to the game/practice?

Similar questions can be posed to the team as a whole:

- What does the team do well?
- What does the team need to work on?

Sports provides a great opportunity for kids to engage in self-reflection and performance critique.

Set the Table for a Life in Sports

Coaches and parents can have a major impact on the motivation and desire of kids to “love the game” and want to play for a long time. They can also have a major impact on turning kids off sports and never coming back. Unfortunately this happens far too often.

It’s in the hands of parents and coaches to help young athletes experience the joy of sport by building their confidence, putting the priority on skill development, letting them have their own dreams and making the experience of sport fun so they want to come back. Unrealistic expectations, criticism, poor communication, fulfillment of adult desires and a constant emphasis on winning are sure fire ways to turn new, young athletes off sports and send them to the land of video games.

Get out of the way and let them play!

A Simple Communications Guide for Sports Parents and Coaches

John Haime, President, New Edge Performance

In this article, John Haime, New Edge Performance President, former world-class professional golfer and a pre-eminent consultant on emotional intelligence and performance in sports and business, gives parents and coaches simple tools to build a lifelong love of sports in children. John describes the *Frustration Gap* that parents can create, a trap that can ruin sports for their children. He shows parents how to help their child love sports, to enable them to stay with their game for life. And he outlines the secrets to building success in sports for children who enjoy the competition and who want to excel.

See www.newedgeperformance.org to learn more about performance in sport and to experience the Emotional Intelligence Sports Inventory (ESi) assessment tool – the world’s most robust mental/emotional online assessment tool for coaches and athletes.

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