

Help your child play their best by Coach Mark Zender

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In over 30 years of coaching I’ve been part of many state championships, been blessed with players drafted at the top of the MLB draft, seen many more go on to play at all college levels and most of all, had many move on to become wonderful parents who pass on their love of the game to their own children. I’ve never met a parent who didn’t want their son or daughter to become the best ball player they could become and perform at their very best in games – no matter what the actual situation. However, I have witnessed many parents, who though very well meaning, have had the exact opposite effect with their actions, hindering their child’s performance rather than helping them. Below is an outline of what will help and what will not.

The Baseball Lens – Confidence, Relaxation, and Concentration

Everything that coaches, players and parents do must lead to enhancing these three psychological mindsets. Players must feel confident. When you played did you ever get on a hot streak? How about a slump? Though at times mechanics-related, it was more often related to confidence. When you performed in sports – particularly alone in front of a crowd with the action stopped (like batting, pitching or in basketball shooting a free throw) – nervousness or lack thereof was a major factor in success. A relaxed athlete always performs better; smoother and more explosive. This is both mental and muscular. And finally, the ability to concentrate – to fully focus – is critical. A distracted athlete might as well carry a 100-pound weight around. As a parent, what you say, how you say it, when you say it, your body language and most importantly what you don’t say affects these things tremendously.

- During a game, never coach your player. Giving performance-related tips sends the message that they aren’t good enough and diminishes confidence, not allowing them to relax. It causes them to think rather than react (which is vital). Most of all it disrupts their concentration. It’s best to say something positive, generic, then be quiet or simply clap. This isn’t easy, but it works best. Do you want to disrupt their concentration and hinder their performance?
- Baseball long ago developed appropriate positive statements that are not specific, that actually help:
 - ✓ “Hum Babe or “Hah Now!” Shows support & enhances proper mind set. Use a positive voice inflection.
 - ✓ “Enjoy the challenge.” In sports we dream of being at bat in a big game with the game on the line. When that actually happens we should see it as a positive, feel no fear and enjoy that moment. When we do that we will perform our best. This statement reminds your child of this. They will be more confident, relaxed and focused.

There are four roles in sports. Players play, coaches coach, umpires officiate and parents support. You get to choose one. If you’re not the coach, it’s not your role and neither is officiating. Just sit back and realize that your child’s success or failure is a learning experience and be thankful that if they fail, they are learning how to deal with disappointment, which life will deal them. So step back, take a deep breath . . . and smile, allow your son or daughter to learn about life.

An extensive study (Brown 2012) asked college athletes what they liked and disliked most about their youth sports experience. The answers on both accounts were overwhelmingly the same. Disliked most was *the ride home*. That drive should not be used to critique their game. Kids hate that and in turn, largely because of it, begin to dislike the sport and quit playing early. It is best to do what they said they like most: just say “I loved watching you play today” and leave it at that. If they trust you and your knowledge they will ask for your help. It may not be right at that moment, but they will come to you. When you allow them to initiate the process it will be more productive – you will have a willing learner. Be selfless and resist this temptation. Make the ride home just that, a ride home. It should be pleasant and not dreaded.

Be supportive and monitor closely what you say, your tone of voice, body language and above all let your child be a kid. Doing these things will be difficult. It will take maturity on your part. Be assured, the goal here is to create athletes who actually perform better – it works! It also allows sports to be one of life’s greatest teachers. Have a great season and allow this sport to be a source of lifelong joy for your son, daughter and in turn their kids. **Enjoy the challenge!**