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www.youthsportspsychology.com

Published by Peak Performance Sports, LLC

10 TIPS TO IMPROVE CONFIDENCE AND SUCCESS IN YOUNG ATHLETES

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Lisa Cohn is an award-winning writer and author who specializes in parenting. Her stories have appeared in *Mothering*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, *Parenting*, *Brain, Child: The Magazine for Thinking Mothers* and other publications. She's been quoted about parenting by the *New York Times*, *Associated Press*, *Time Magazine* and *Washington Post*. A soccer coach, Lisa is a mom and stepmom to four young athletes. Lisa is a member of the Board of Directors of *Showtime Athletics*, a nonprofit organization that provides trained coaches and other services to young athletes. Lisa played soccer, Lacrosse and ice hockey as a student at Wesleyan University, Middletown, Ct.

Dr. Patrick J. Cohn, President of Peak Performance Sports of Orlando, Florida, earned his Ph.D. in Education from the University of Virginia in 1991, specializing in sports psychology. He founded Peak Performance Sports in 1994. Dr. Cohn is an author, professional speaker and one of the nation's leading mental game coaches. His coaching programs instill confidence, composure and effective mental strategies that enable athletes and teams to reach their performance goals. Dr. Cohn has helped athletes from a variety of sports backgrounds (both amateurs and professionals) identify and develop the mindset needed to achieve peak performance. World-class golfers, runners, shooters and auto racers, as well as motocross, tennis, baseball, softball, football and hockey players, are among those who have benefited from his mental game coaching and training. In addition, he has written a number of sports books, including *Going Low*, *The Mental Game of Golf*, *The Mental Art of Putting* and *Peak Performance Golf*

10 Tips to Improve Confidence & Success in Young Athletes

Introduction

Seventy-five percent of all young athletes drop out of sports by the time they are 13 years old.

Why? Because sports is no longer fun for them. Playing and competing no longer brings them satisfaction or happiness.

You, as a parent, have the power to determine whether your child drops out of sports or stays with it. You, as a parent, have the ability to build your child's confidence, ensure he or she feels successful and has fun.

In the often high-stakes youth sports scene, it's not always easy to figure out how to raise a confident, happy youth athlete. You face the challenge of coping with our society's pressure to win, untrained coaches, other parents' attitudes,



and the emotional ups-and-downs your child experiences as an athlete. Add to that the financial costs and time commitment. It's not surprising many kids feel immense pressure, lose confidence and lack self-esteem in the athletic arena.

In this booklet, we're going to give you ten critical tips for improving your child's confidence and success in athletics. Five of those tips focus on how you can help your child deal with classic "mental game" obstacles. Five other tips are more about you - the sports parent - and how you view your child's sport experience. We're going to help you evaluate your own attitude and suggest ways to ensure you're supporting your child's sports experience in the best way possible.



This booklet briefly provides top tips for improving your child's happiness in athletics. If you're interested in learning much more, check out our new workbook and audio CD program, ***"The Ultimate Sports Parent: A 14-Day Plan for Kids' Success In Sports."*** In addition, tune into our internet radio show, "The Ultimate Sports Parent Radio Show," which you'll find on our blog:

[Youth Sports Psychology Blog](#)

The Pressures Kids Face

Many kids in sports today feel immense pressure to produce results for their parents—either to gain respect or approval, or to make their parents happy.

In some sports, parents spend thousands of dollars on equipment, instruction and travel for their children and teens. Often times the child athlete feels a deep sense of obligation and responsibility to ‘pay back’ his or her parents by winning.

Below are some real-life stories from young athletes:

Kevin, a 12-year-old motocross athlete felt pressure to perform after his dad sold the house and bought an RV to travel across the country to and from Kevin’s races. “I feel like my dad has sacrificed everything in our life - his job, our home, every penny he owns - for me to be successful and make it in motocross and

eventually become a professional racer,” he says. “To me, that is pressure. If I don’t produce each race, I disappoint my dad and let my family down. Everything is riding on my success in sports.”



Lauren, a 12-year-old who plays soccer, Lacrosse, basketball and tennis, feels embarrassed because her Dad is loud on the sidelines. “Dad’s cheering on the sidelines embarrasses me in front of my friends and team. Just before I shoot in soccer, he yells, ‘Pull the trigger!’ It’s so awful and a huge distraction,” she says.



John, a 15-year-old high school basketball player, is a starter on his team who can’t seem to develop a healthy level of self-confidence. That makes it difficult for him to play his best in games. His dad is extremely critical after his games. “The moment I get off the basketball court, my father points out the two or three errors I made during the game and questions why I am not playing up to my ability. I feel like he is never happy with my performance. I don’t hear any positive

reinforcement about the good plays I make. This makes me question my own ability and if I am good enough to be a starter,” he says.

Swimsuits make 12-year-old Kateland feel self-conscious, a common confidence issue for girls. “I really worry about how I look,” she says. “Swimsuits have to be so tight and you’re never comfortable around other people.”

The Role of Youth Sports Psychology

Many parents and young athletes do not understand how sports psychology can improve a child’s athletic performance. The term “psychology” often conjures up ideas of illness, rather than ways of improving performance.

Sports psychology is part of the larger field of sport science. Sports psychologists study human behavior in the sport environment and the benefits of mental training. The goal of sports psychology and mental game coaching is to help athletes and teams perform their best by improving participants’ mental skills.

Youth sports psychology aims to help coaches, parents and athletes create a healthier, more satisfying experience in sports.



Mental training or “mental game coaching” concentrates on coaching athletes to break through the mental barriers that keep them from performing up to their peak potential. This form of coaching teaches “mental skills” that instill confidence and success. Mental game coaching seeks to improve performance and enhance consistency in performance.



Youth sport psychology is a segment of sport psychology that concentrates specifically on helping coaches work effectively with youths. Additionally, youth sport psychology focuses on educating sports parents about how to make the sports experience positive and successful for young athletes.

When is “Mental Training” Helpful to Young Athletes?

How do you know when your child could benefit from mental training? Sports psychologists start by asking some important questions. Is your child performing up to his or her ability? Does your child perform as well in competition as he or she does in practice? If your child performs great in practice, but chokes in competition, he or she could likely benefit from mental training or “mental game coaching.”

First, consider these questions about your child:

- Is your child so self-conscious that he or she worries about what others think about his or her performance?
- Does your child have any doubts about his or her sport before or during competition?
- Does your child get so anxious that he or she can't think straight or have a calm mind in races?



- Is your child motivated by fear of failure and does this affect his or her performance in competition?
- Does your child get distracted easily by friends, adults and activities around him or her?
- Does your child become easily frustrated when things don't go according to plan?
- Does your child leap onto the court, hell-bent on scoring six three-point shots and tromping the state's second best ranked team, but quickly sink into depression after missing the first two free-throws?



The Role of the Sports Parent

In order to evaluate whether you—and your child—could benefit if you **as a parent** learned more about sports psychology, ask yourself:

Am I doing everything I can to help grow my child's confidence in sports? Do I provide positive feedback, and help him or her to be happy and successful with the sport experience? More specifically:

- Does the way I coach my child interfere with the child's coach's efforts?
- Does my behavior during or after games cause my child to feel embarrassed, to lose confidence or get angry with me?
- Is my child self-motivated or do I feel as though I need to push my child into participating in sports?
- Does my child only participate in sports to please me or make his parents happy?

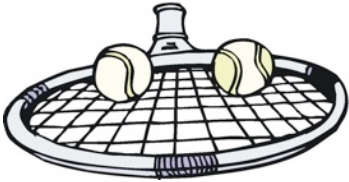
Later in this booklet, we'll give you tips for addressing these issues.

The Top 5 Challenges for Young Athletes

Young athletes face common challenges everyday. It's important for young athletes to develop an awareness of common challenges and how to tackle them.

Your role as a sports parent is to identify the challenges by noticing typical signs.

Here are some classic challenges:



1. Your child performs better in practice than during competition. Your child has a lot of confidence in practice and performs very well. But in competition, she doesn't fare as well. She may feel free, loose and confident in practice, then plagued with doubt or indecision in the competitive arena. Something changes between practice and competition, but she just can't put her finger on what it is. Usually fear of failure, high expectations, and self-criticism are at the root of this problem.



2. Your child can't perform when important "others" are watching. When important people are watching the athlete - you, fans and coaches - she becomes

overly aware of their presence, and loses her focus. Often she may even worry about letting others down or failing in front of others. This is similar to stage fright. Most likely, your child is afraid to embarrass herself in front of others who are watching her perform. She worries she'll look like a bad athlete and even worse, she may make assumptions about herself as a person based on her success as an athlete

3. Your child doubts his ability before or during games. Your child performs with confidence and gains confidence in practice. But when it's time to play a game, he begins to entertain doubts about his ability to get the job done. We call this "competitive self-confidence" as opposed to "practice self-confidence." Your child starts to think, "Can I really beat this person across the net?" "Do I have what it takes to strike out this batter?" Doubts can be disguised subtly in the form of a simple question. When your child questions his or her ability to perform, it's really doubt in disguise. In the absence of confidence, a child harbors doubt. When doubts surfaces, his confidence suffers.



4. Your child gets anxious or scared during competition. Your child performs freely and feels relaxed in practice, and has few worries. During games, she is paralyzed by fear and anxiety. Generally, children who fear failure get tight and anxious in competition because they want to win so badly. Or they're afraid of being embarrassed. Fear of failure causes your child to try too hard and worry too much about outcomes.



5. Your child loses focus during critical times of the game. Your daughter is up to bat with the bases loaded, two outs and the game tied. She can't think clearly. She feels pressure to produce for her coach, teammates, or fans. Your child forgets the count or doesn't pay attention to the sign from the coach. Your child commits simple mental errors that he or she wouldn't normally commit. She can't clear her mind and focus.

The Top Five Challenges for Sports Parents

As we mention above, it's not always easy being a sports parent. It's often hard to know just how involved to be in your child's athletic experience. If your child loves sports, his or her love is often contagious. You get wrapped up with the experience along with him. Sometimes you begin to confuse your own dreams with the child's dreams about sports.

Confesses Barb, one sports parent: "For many years, my son's team beat its arch-rival, a team from a neighboring town. The first time my son's team lost, I was upset and asked my son if he was upset, too. But then I realized, for my son, the game had ended 10 minutes earlier. He had moved on, but I hadn't. I was the one wrapped up in the emotional rivalry."

In the following section, we identify common Sports Parent characteristics that can undermine a child's experience. Most sports parents experience some of these thoughts or feelings sometime during their child's sports career.



If you recognize yourself here, don't beat yourself up. You're likely a concerned, involved, and caring parent, just like the parent quoted above. Later in this booklet, we'll give you some tips for evaluating your behavior in ways that benefit your child.

1. You live at times through your child. Your dream is to make your child succeed, and when your child succeeds, it makes your day. You sometimes cancel important events so you can watch your child participate and perform. It is personally hurtful when your child does not live up to your expectations.



2. You evaluate your child's success or failure based on his or her performance, not his or her happiness. When your child wins or scores well you believe this represents an improvement in his or her performance. You get frustrated and don't understand when time and effort during practice do not produce "results" in competition. Getting results is your top priority.

3. You're over critical of your child's performance. After your child has competed or played in a game, you focus on his or her shortcomings. When your child does well, you fail to applaud him or her. Instead, you give pointers about how his or her performance can be improved.

4. You over coach your child on the sidelines. You try to give your child a lot of helpful tips during games. You believe that extra coaching can increase your child's motivation and performance. However, this can sometimes can become a distraction or embarrassment for the athlete.

5. Your child is parent-motivated, not self-motivated. You as sports parent must push your child to go to practice and games. When your child wants to stay at home or take part in another activity, you have trouble comprehending why. When you recognize your child has done well, you give him or her additional tasks and drills, rather than applauding his or her improvement.



How Can Your Athlete Benefit From Youth Sports Psychology?

Youth Sport Psychology is all about improving your child’s attitude and mental game skills so he or she is happier and more successful. Specifically, youth sport psychology identifies “limiting beliefs” or beliefs that undermine a child’s experience. One of your goals should be to help your child embrace a healthier philosophy about sports. Following is our list of the top ten ways you can help boost your child’s confidence and happiness in athletics. We begin with the issues your child may be grappling with—issues you can identify and talk to your child about. Then we give you five tips about your own behavior on the ball court or soccer field.



10 Top Tips for Sports Parents

How you as sports parent can identify and address your child's mental game challenges.

1. Boost your child's confidence.

Confidence is an athlete's best friend—the most important factor determining whether he or she feels like a success or failure. As a parent, you want to do everything you can to develop your child's confidence in sports. This confidence will likely spill into other aspects of your child's life. Doubt is the opposite of confidence. If your child maintains doubts prior to or during performance, this suggests low self-confidence. Or perhaps your child sabotages confidence at the start of the competition.

We want to make sure you understand what we mean by “confidence.”



Confidence is what we call a core mental game skill because of its importance and relationship to other mental skills. Confidence is an athlete's belief in his or her ability to perform. Some kids get this from being naturally talented athletes. They're the fortunate ones. Others derive confidence from practicing and mastering skills.

Here are some of the factors that help young athletes feel confident:

- Having supportive parent or friends
- Attending practices
- Performing well in practice
- Having access to good coaches
- Having access to good equipment
- Being fit



Tip: One of the best ways to boost your child's confidence in sports is by identifying beliefs, doubts and expectations that undermine confidence. The

beliefs may sound like: “I’m too small to be successful.” Doubts sound like “I haven’t practiced enough this week.” An expectation might be “I need to score 12 points in today’s game to make my parents happy.” These are all thoughts that undermine confidence. You should help your child identify doubts and beliefs that undermine confidence and then encourage your child to practice positive thinking.

2. Help your child cope with fear of failure.

Fear of failure is characterized by high expectations, a strong desire to succeed (and not fail) and anxiety or tension. Kids affected by fear of failure worry too much about results or outcomes, about being approved by peers or about what others think. Young athletes often fear:

- Being embarrassed
- Being scolded by parents
- Wasting hours of dedicated practice time
- Not performing up to others’ expectations



Tip: Fear of failure is often rooted in a phenomenon called social approval or social acceptance. A young athlete worried about social approval focuses too much on what she thinks other people think about her performance. As a parent, you should honestly and openly discuss your child's fears. Try to help her stop thinking so much about what she believes others think. Help her focus on her own goals.

3. Help your child identify “self-limiting” expectations.



Some young athletes with very high and strict expectations about themselves have trouble dealing with minor errors that are a natural part of sports. As a parent, you should identify expectations that undermine confidence. Help your young athlete identify his expectations about results such as the score at the end of a game or the number of points scored. When athletes do not perform up to their own expectations, they often become upset, frustrated, and lose confidence in themselves.

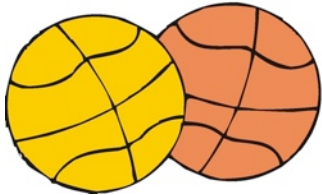
Tip: Help your child identify his or her own high expectations—expectations that can cause him or her to lose confidence and focus. If your child plays with high expectations, she will judge herself during performance, and undermine her ability to enjoy her experience.

4. Improve your child’s focus by helping her deal with distractions.

Many athletes have the ability to concentrate, but often they focus on a single issue that distracts them. One example is the batter who thinks, “I need to get a hit” while in the batter’s box. This is a results-oriented focus. It’s best to help the child stay focused on the moment, to let go of worries about results. Tell your child, “One hit at a time,” or “One shot at a time.”

Tip: Help your child focus on the process, not the outcome. Teach your child to define what he or she should focus on in the batter’s box, for example. Focus on task-relevant cues such as setting up in the batter’s box, concentrating on the ball,

and reacting to the pitch. This will ultimately help improve his or her performance and confidence.



5. Help your child cope with setbacks.

Athletes who expect too much of themselves have trouble dealing with the minor errors that are a natural part of sports. As a parent, you need to address these strict expectations. Help your child stay composed. Give him or her “permission” to make mistakes. Tell her it’s okay to shoot an “air ball” from time to time and that no one can be perfect!



Tip: Dealing with setbacks and errors means moving on to the next play or shot. Help your child to stop dwelling on the past. Encourage her to look forward to the next shot, play, or period of play.

Top Five Tips for You, As Parent

How you, as parent, can evaluate your own behavior.

1. Your child may have a different agenda than you.

In some cases, a parent's agenda may collide with a child's agenda about sports. As parents, it's our role to determine whether a child is playing to satisfy the parent's agenda or if the child is following his own dreams.

Keep in mind that your child may participate for any number of different reasons. Try to understand why your child takes part in athletics. He or she may express any number of reasons, including:

- To be with friends
- To enjoy being part of a group
- To master a skill
- For the love of competition
- To feel confidence for reaching a goal

- And many others



Tip: Tap into your child's reasons for participating in sports. Simply ask your child why they like sports and what it brings to him or her. Ask him or her what was fun about the last practice or game. Then you can motivate your child based on his or her desires, not yours.

2. Your child just wants to have fun.



Your child may not be practicing to become the next Tiger Woods. Many children take part in sport for fun or to be with friends. Of course, winning is important for some kids but there are other reasons your child may be involved in sports. As a sports parent, make sports a time for fun, games (kids love games) and friendships. If you keep these objectives in mind, your child will likely be motivated and will continue to learn and stay involved in sports. Remember, most kids drop out of sports when it's no longer fun for them!

Tip: Your child's fun and enjoyment is the seed that develops real motivation. If you create a climate emphasizing fun, enjoyment and friendship, your child will stay involved as long as these motives are satisfied. Also, when your child is involved for fun and games, he will be free of expectations that pressure him to perform well.

3. Use positive reinforcement and constructive feedback.

Constructive feedback and positive reinforcement help develop many mental game skills...confidence, focus, and self-esteem. As a sports parent, be sure to give constructive feedback when discussing errors about your child's sport performance. Similarly, use positive reinforcement when your child shows confidence and ability, even when the results suggest otherwise. By using positive communication and feedback with your child, you create a strong foundation for growing your child's confidence and self-esteem.

Tip: Constructive feedback comes from your willingness to instill confidence and bolster mental skills in your child. Try to park your negative criticism. Ask



yourself: What can I say after a game to help my child grow confidence? For example, if your child comes off the court unhappy that he didn't score 10 points; help him look at what he may be doing well and how to improve. Don't dwell on the missed shots. Focus on the improvements he has made, and the plays he executed successfully. Many athletes, by nature, harbor enough self-criticism. They don't need yours, too.



4. Leave the coaching to the experts.

As a sports parent, you may want to coach your child to success, which is how some great athletes evolved (think Tiger Woods and the Williams sisters in tennis). However, your child may already have an experienced coach and he or she has the knowledge and skills to help your child progress. Over coaching on the sideline or during games can make your child feel embarrassed.

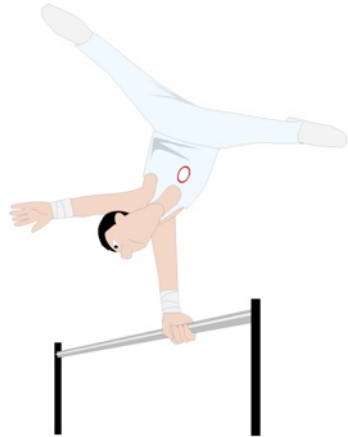
Additionally, to a child athlete, a sports parent's input can be confusing, especially if it conflicts with the coach's instruction. Your duty as a sports parent is to support the coach. Help your child get the most from his or her sport

without undermining the coach's role. If you truly don't like the coach, you need to find a new team or coach for your child.

Tip: Become an observer and cheerleader at games instead of a second coach. Talk with your child's coach. Try to understand the coach's agenda and philosophy. Your role is to help communicate the coach's philosophy to your child. Your child will feel less confused and more confident.

5. Teach self-motivation instead of other-motivation.

Self-motivation is the key to a long and successful career in a sport. It is common for many child athletes who are parent-motivated to drop out of sports because of burn out or because they feel too much pressure to succeed. If the athlete places too much emphasis on external sources of motivation—such as a desire to please a parent—he or she won't be happy and will not control his or her destiny in sports. As a sport parent, it's essential to help your child develop an internal drive or motivation based on their love of sports and



competition. You can do this by understanding the child's objectives and goals. Nurture and support those goals and objectives.

Tip: Self-motivation is the best type of motivation. Therefore, your role is to help instill internal motivation in your child. That is motivation derived from the love of sports. Goals should be set by the child. Make these goals attainable. It's important that your child athlete believes he or she is creating these goals—that they're not your goals.



Conclusion

Confidence is the most important factor that influences a child's level of success and happiness in sports. Most young athletes will gain confidence from practice and success over time. However, you as a sports parent can be proactive and help make your child feel even more confident and happier right now. We invite you to try some of these tips and see how they improve your child's sports experience.

This booklet provides just a few of the many tips available to you and your young athlete.

A more comprehensive discussion would provide your child with a number of benefits, including:

- A higher level of confidence
- Improved focus and concentration
- Better composure under pressure
- Improved performance in crunch-time

You and your child could learn:

- Pre-game rituals to “get in the zone”
- Relaxation and visualization techniques
- How to create an overall game plan or strategy
- How to get into the Zen of sports and think only about the moment
- How to banish distractions
- How to set small, simple goals
- And much more!

The fastest way to improve mental toughness:

Most people don’t know that Dr. Cohn works with parents and young athletes to help improve kids’ mental game. In addition, he works closely with sports parents to teach them how to instill confidence and mental toughness in their athletes.

For more information, visit: [Mental Coaching For Young Athletes](#).

Check out our popular **“Confident Sports Kid” CD Programs** on the next page!

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