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ParentingAthletes for lifelong success

The 8 Winning Practices for Parenting Athletes

© Pam Richmond Champagne, MCC, *The Sports Parenting Coach*

“As a parent you have the most powerful and long-lasting influence on your child. As you understand and apply the following eight concepts, you support your child’s sports *and* lifelong success.

They are called “winning practices” for a reason. Athletes must first understand a key concept or technique. Then they must implement it and continue to practice it until the skill becomes second nature. So it is with these eight winning practices for parenting your athlete.

Winning Practice 1: Support your athlete emotionally.

Emotional support is the bedrock for developing a child’s self-acceptance and self-assurance – critical traits for long-term sports and life success. Children are naturally sensitive to the emotions and feelings of their parents (and coaches). They are adept at “reading” emotional undertones, not to mention more obvious body language. Make sure your child never feels they must earn your approval or love on the athletic field.

Parents who lose control or push hard create too much pressure. This contributes to unhappiness and poorer performance. Michele Uhlfelder, one of the best female lacrosse players in the world and currently coach at Stanford, says having a pushy parent stacks the cards *against* an athlete. Coaches don’t want to have to deal with difficult situations so a talented young athlete can get turned away for this reason alone.

Pressure exists naturally in competition. While it’s fair to expect your child athlete to put out their best effort, it’s your job to *relax* the pressure.

Winning Practice 2: Allow your athlete to guide the sports experience.

It’s a great idea to expose your athlete to champions in their sport and point out what’s possible. Children rely on parents and coaches to expand their vision. However, a child knows when a parent takes over their goals and claims the victories and losses as their own. If you care more than your athlete does, helpful encouragement will turn into detrimental pushing in a heartbeat.

Let your child lead the way by *their* words and their actions. This will reveal their commitment. Have you asked your child what *her* sports goals are? Invest your time and energy equal to, but no greater than, the interest and effort that your child demonstrates. Keep in mind this comment in “U.S. News & World Report” (6/7/04): “Fewer than 5 percent of children can be called elite athletes.” Of course, even less go on to play at collegiate or professional levels.

Winning Practice 3: Champion your athlete.

Knowing how to champion your athlete will do more to ignite and sustain your child's enthusiasm and persistence, especially through the tough periods, than anything else. It's a natural human tendency to focus on and express what's wrong rather than what's right. We do it to ourselves when we self-criticize, or when we zero in on everything we didn't get done rather than what we accomplished.

Championing skills go beyond mere compliments and typical praise. You can champion actions, progress, dreams, traits, commitments, gifts, and qualities. To champion most powerfully, speak to a deeper level. Become more aware of and acknowledge the qualities and character traits that your child demonstrates.

These *qualities* might include persistence and determination, focus, resilience, team spirit, or honesty, to name just a few. Whether or not your youngster wins a particular competitive event, nurturing these kinds of qualities in your child will make a lifelong difference.

Winning Practice 4: Respect your child's individuality.

It never works to compare your child with another. Each child has unique strengths, limitations, temperament, and natural abilities. For example, the ideal temperament for ice skating would be different than for football or soccer. Also, some kids are more naturally competitive than others.

Children mature physically and emotionally at different times so expectations need to be adjusted accordingly. Some coaches say parents are often surprised that kids who mature early physically do not always outshine the late bloomers, who had to work harder at their sport.

Winning Practice 5: Teach and model the bigger picture continually.

Participation in sports is potentially an amazing vehicle for growing character, honing key life skills, and teaching important life lessons. But it's only a potentiality, not a certainty. Sports can also pervert character and impair long-term well being and lifelong success.

What do you want your athlete to learn through participating their sport? What core qualities and sense of ethics do you want her to develop? Being crystal clear about all of this and weaving these topics into conversations with your child – as well as demonstrating them yourself – will provide a strong foundation for your child's future.

Many athletes over-train and cause themselves extremes of fatigue, strain, and pain. We hear of athletes, often teenagers, on steroids or struggling with eating disorders. In the bigger picture, over the span of a precious lifetime, what will it cost these athletes?

As adults we hopefully have a broader life perspective, a wiser patience. You can help your child athlete understand that in sports, as in life, any particular loss, or victory for that matter, is small and relatively insignificant. Even seemingly devastating slumps can be put into a healthy perspective.

Winning Practice 6: Focus on mastery and enjoyment rather than winning.

Whether it's sports or a business situation, it is best to focus 100 percent where you have the full control. Winning the game or tournament can be an inspirational end goal, but it is not the ideal focus! There are many elements not under an athlete's control.

An athlete needs to focus on what he has control over -- his development process, skill mastery, and attitude. In doing this, tension decreases and the increased relaxation and enjoyment will

boost performance.

Notice what thoughts are upper most in your mind. As a parent you can model focusing on mastery and enjoyment. Simply help your child stay focused on the process rather than the outcome. Be interested in what's she's learning about herself and what skills she's developing. Find out what he enjoys about his sport.

This is a key concept for coaches, as well as parents, to understand and implement.

Winning Practice 7: Honor your family unit.

Sports might involve a sizeable chunk of your family's time, especially if you have more than one child participating or you are involved in multiple sports. No doubt it's a challenge, yet find a way to commit to some family time that focuses on other interests. Let your child and yourself have regular unstructured, unscheduled time.

The mother of world champion tennis pros Venus and Serena Williams says they never talk tennis away from practice and matches. Could this be at least a part of the secret to their amazing success?

It's easy to spread your child and yourself too thin by signing up for lots of extracurricular activities. There's no set rule here except to know your child's natural energy level, capacity, and level of desire. Be on the alert for any signs of burnout, fatigue, or stress. At the *early* signs, have a talk and make a change.

Winning Practice 8: Build supportive relationships with your sports family (coaches, refs, administrators, other parents, and child's sportmates).

You're all in this together, bonded by common goals. Mutual respect and support pays big dividends. With this in mind it's possible to communicate concerns to coaches and other sports officials in a respectful, thoughtful manner.

Some ways to be a positive influence include letting the coach do the coaching and addressing any concerns with administrators, coaches, or others privately. You can model upbeat behaviors such as cheering for the good efforts of all team members and refraining from spreading negativity. Instead, go directly to the source of any problem or upset and seek to resolve it in a respectful manner.

If another parent is talking or acting negatively, don't feed it any energy – starve it. Steer the conversation in another direction, or simply move away. Keep your conversation continually focused on the positive.

The more harmonious the relationships in your extended sports family, the more “happy success” is made possible.