

Guidelines for Supportive Parents

Few youth sports programs are successful without the support of parents. Below are a few guidelines which coaches can share with concerned parents as they strive to be supportive of their young athletes without being pushy.

SUPPORTIVE PARENTS FOCUS ON MASTERING SPORT SKILLS AND STRATEGIES RATHER THAN COMPETITIVE RANKING. Sport mastery focuses on performance which can be controlled by the athlete while competitive ranking focuses primarily on winning and losing, an outcome which is frequently outside the athlete's control. An overemphasis on competitive rank and an under emphasis on sport mastery is a primary cause of the dramatic dropout rate from competitive sports by 12 to 18 year olds.

SUPPORTIVE PARENTS DECREASE THE PRESSURE TO WIN. Supportive parents realize that sport creates its own pressure to succeed. Additional pressure from the parent is likely to be counterproductive, particularly in the long run. Supportive parents avoid making the outcome of a game bigger than life. As a game or a competition becomes blown out of proportion, a youngster's self-esteem can become tied to winning or losing. A child should not feel less valuable.

SUPPORTIVE PARENTS BELIEVE THAT SPORT'S PRIMARY VALUE IS THE OPPORTUNITY FOR SELF - DEVELOPMENT. The probability of achieving lasting fame and glory via sport is low. Many outstanding athletes never achieve professional status but their sports experiences have allowed them to develop lifelong values and self-respect.

SUPPORTIVE PARENTS UNDERSTAND THE RISKS. Competition places the athlete on center stage. Anytime you attempt to succeed publicly, you risk failing where others can judge you. In the long run, competing is willingness to chance failure. Giving your best is what athletics is all about.

SUPPORTIVE PARENTS COMMUNICATE THEIR TRUE CONCERNS DIRECTLY WITH THE COACH. A positive working relationship is based upon clearly communicated, mutual goals among parents, coaches and athletes. While a parent cannot control the behavior of a coach, they can communicate with the coach on a regular basis about the overall development of their child.

SUPPORTIVE PARENTS UNDERSTAND AND RESPECT THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN PARENTAL ROLES AND COACHES ROLES. Both parents and coaches need to understand their different roles in supporting the young athlete. While parents are ultimately responsible for their child's development, once they have chosen a coach, they must leave the coaching to the coach. Even though supportive parents often play sports with their child, they avoid coaching "over the shoulder" of the coach and or publicly questioning coaches decisions.

SUPPORTIVE PARENTS CONTROL NEGATIVE EMOTIONS AND THINK POSITIVELY. Few athletes wish to perform poorly. A negative reaction to poor performance only adds to an athlete's pressures. Supportive parents realize that even the athlete who "chokes" is trying to succeed. In fact, part of the problem with many athletes is that they are trying too hard to succeed. Criticizing such athletes does little to enhance their performances.

SUPPORTIVE PARENTS AVOID THE USE OF FEAR. The use of punishment and withdrawal of love can pressure kids to perform better. Unfortunately, such strategies tend to trade short-term performance gains

for long-term emotional risks to the youngster's health and well-being. Supportive parents recognize that a love for sport is rarely fostered by fear of the consequences of failure.

SUPPORTIVE PARENTS AVOID CRITICIZING. Nagging parents often confuse support with constantly reminding the children that they need to practice more, condition more, concentrate more, etc. Overly involved parents frequently lose their objectivity. They are unable to provide critical emotional support which children often need before and during highly competitive contests.

SUPPORTIVE PARENTS RECOGNIZE AND UNDERSTAND EXPRESSIONS OF INSECURITY. Youngsters who express high anxiety, more often than not, have parents who are insensitive to their symptoms. When children are nervous, uncertain, or feeling pressure, insensitive parents may trivialize the child's fears or see such concerns as signs of weakness. Supportive parents realize that such expressions are normal and are a call for emotional support.

SUPPORTIVE PARENTS AVOID THE USE OF GUILT. "We've done so much for you", or "The family's given so much for you, the least you could do is to take advantage of what we've provided for you" are typical remarks of unsupportive parents. They use guilt to manipulate the child to perform the way the parents' desire.

SUPPORTIVE PARENTS SHOW EMPATHY FOR THE YOUNG ATHLETE. Empathy is an understanding of what the child is feeling and an awareness of the pressures and demands that the sport places on the athlete. Empathy is not sympathy or agreement necessarily but rather a true understanding that the task is difficult. A sympathetic response to an expression of doubt by the athlete might be "Perhaps you're right. Perhaps it is too difficult. Maybe you shouldn't compete today." Empathy on the other hand, might be expressed by a supportive parent as "Yes, it will probably be tough competition today, C'mon, let's help you get ready."

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