

# Guidelines for Supportive Parents

David A. Feigley, Ph.D.

Youth Sports Research Council from Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

Few youth sports programs are successful without the support of parents. Below are a few guidelines, which coaches can share with concerned parents who are striving to support their young athletes.

## **Supportive parents emphasize improved performance rather than competitive ranking.**

The distinction between performance and outcome centers on what can be controlled. Mastering sport skills (a performance goal) can be totally controlled by the athlete, whereas, the number of wins and losses (an outcome measure) 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 by 12 to 18-year-olds.

## **Supportive parents decrease the pressure to win.**

Competitive sports create the pressure to win. Additional pressure from the parent(s) is likely to be counterproductive, particularly in the long run. Supportive parents avoid making the outcome of the game bigger than life. As the game becomes blown out of proportion, a youngster's self-esteem can become tied to winning or losing. A child should not feel less valuable or less loved when they lose.

## **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. Approximately one out of a thousand high school athletes become professionals. Although many young athletes never achieve professional status, their sports experiences enabled them to develop life-long values and self-respect.

## **Supportive parents understand the risks.**

Competition places the athlete on center stage. Anytime you attempt to succeed publicly, where others can judge you, you risk failing. Over time, 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 child's overall development.

## **Supportive parents understand and respect the differences between parental roles and coaching roles.**

Both parents and coaches need to understand their different roles. While parents are ultimately responsible for their child's development, once they have selected a coach, they must leave the coaching to that person. Although many parents often recreate with their child, they must resist coaching "over the shoulder" of the coach and/or publicly questioning the coaches decisions.

## **Supportive parents control negative emotions and think positively.**

Few athletes wish to perform poorly. Negative reactions to poor performance only add 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 performance.

## **Supportive parents avoid using fear.**

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.**

Statements such as, "We've done so much for you," or "The family has sacrificed so much, the least you could do . . ." are typical remarks of unsupportive parents. They often use guilt to manipulate the child to behave the way the parent(s) desire.

**Supportive parents show empathy for their child.**

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 a young athlete might be, "Perhaps, you're right; it's too difficult. Maybe you shouldn't compete today." Conversely, empathy by a supportive parent might be expressed as "Yes, it will probably be a tough match today. C'mon, let me help you get ready."