

Optimising Parental Involvement in Sport: Helping your children enjoy their participation and be successful

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As parents you influence your child's experience in sport through the actions you display and the opportunities and feedback you provide to your child.

However, sometimes it is difficult to know what feedback to provide to your child, what actions are the "right" actions, and how to best support your child.

Below are a few tips to help guide your involvement in your child's sport and, hopefully, help you help your child enjoy participating in sport and also perform at his or her best.

The Key Factor Underpinning Successful Parental Involvement in Sport: Striving to Understand and Enhance your Child's Sporting Journey

All children are individuals, with different interests, needs and potential. As a parent you play a critical role in helping your child enjoy their sporting journey and achieve their desired outcome.

Ensuring you focus on your individual child (rather than comparing them to other children) is important because not all children will achieve the same outcomes or need the same support.

It is also important to remember that children's involvement in sport can span an extensive period of time and over this time what children want from parents might change.

The following three factors can help you to focus on your child as an individual and support them as they progress in their chosen sport(s).

Shared & Communicated goals:

- Are you and your child striving to achieve the same things? What are your reasons for supporting your child's involvement in sport? Do you know what your child is trying to achieve this year? What is your child's ultimate sporting dream?
- If you and your child are involved in sport for different reasons it could lead to difficulties or conflict. If you want your child to become a professional but they just want to have fun your involvement might be seen as pressuring or overbearing. On the other hand, if your child wants to become a professional and you just want them to play for fun, your child might perceive a lack of support or understanding.
- Identifying the goals you both have for sport, and recognising that these might change over time, is crucial to successful parental involvement.
- Talking to your child about their goals on a regular basis will allow you to alter your involvement as and when it is required.

An Understanding Emotional Climate:

- The "ideal" environment is one in which you consistently display an understanding of your child, of their sport, and the role sport has in your child's life.
- The development of this environment depends on 3 factors:

1. Your knowledge and experience:

The more you know about sport the better you can understand your child's experience. Take time to learn about the sport - the psychological challenges, the physical demands, the technical and tactical intricacies - so you can appreciate your child's experiences.

BUT, if you have experience in the same sport as your child, be careful not to assume your child's experience is the same as yours. Each individual may experience the demands of a sport differently and need different types and amounts of support and guidance.

2. The relationship you have with your child's coach:

The coach plays a critical role in your child's sporting life and is an extremely valuable resource for you as a parent. Use the coach to develop your understanding of your child's sport - for example, what are the goals for this competition? What has your child been practicing? What could you hope your child might achieve this year? The better your relationship with your child's coach, the easier it is for you to learn about the intricacies of your child's sporting journey.

However, given the extensive demands coaches face it is important to develop appropriate methods of communication (e.g., e-mail rather than in person during training) and times to communicate (e.g., schedule meetings rather than approaching coaches during training) so meetings can be as effective as possible.

3. Your ability to keep sport in perspective:

Sport is likely to be an extremely important part of your child's life (and as a result your life). But it is only one part of their life. Getting caught up in winning and losing, the competitions your child plays, the teams they are selected for, or being disappointed if your child doesn't play well can prevent enjoyment and success in sport.

Focusing on the multiple benefits your child is gaining from playing sport, identifying the different opportunities they could gain through their involvement, and understanding the varying outcomes that can come from sport might help you to keep your child's participation in perspective.

Individual and Flexible Parenting Practices of Competitive Sport:

- Not all children need the same involvement from their parents. What works for one child might not work for another.
- The specific behaviours children need from their parents are both person and sport dependent. So, as a parent it is useful if you strive to display behaviours that are most helpful for your child and applicable to their chosen sport.
- There are two things to focus on:

1. Help children develop the skills to cope with competition:

Competitive sport is psychologically demanding and children need the skills to cope with this. As a parent, the way in which you interact with your child can substantially influence their ability to cope with competition.

To succeed in most sports, children need to be independent thinkers, able to adapt to different situations and tactics; they need to be able to account for their performance, recognising when and why they are making mistakes so they can change them; they need to be flexible, understanding that opponents play differently and might employ different tactics; children also need to be able to cope with the range of emotions they will experience and use these to their advantage.

As a parent, if you do too much for your child, explain away mistakes, criticise coaching decisions, or underplay the importance of different situations you might be limiting the opportunities for your child to learn and develop as an individual and an athlete.

2. Address individual child's needs at competitions:

Do you know what your child wants from you at competitions? Some children need a pep-talk before a game, others want to listen to music, while others want to talk about something entirely different. What does your child prefer?

During games some children want their parents to provide a lot of encouragement; others want their parents to be silent. Some do not even want their parents to watch. What works for your child?

After games, the feedback children want is likely to depend on their performance, the game outcome, and their personality. Engage in frequent discussions with your child about what he or she wants from you.

Child recommended parental do's and do not's

NB. These are general guidelines and may need to be altered to your child.

DO	DO NOT
<p>Pre-Match</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SUGGEST match tactics IF your child asks for them • Give your child time and space to be alone • Recommend and reinforce good pre-match habits BUT do not try and do everything for your child • Remind your child you will be proud of them whatever the outcome • Emphasise effort, attitude, and enjoyment • Keep relaxed and calm before the match 	<p>Pre-Match</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talk extensively about the upcoming match • Repeatedly tell your child to warm-up or get ready for their match • Encourage your child by saying, "You can/should win" because this makes players nervous • Place excessive emphasis upon the outcome • Express any expectations for the match
<p>During Match</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attend matches to demonstrate your interest • Be attentive to the match throughout • Show your support by clapping and cheering (e.g., "come-on") appropriately during the match • Have a positive and happy attitude • Keep a neutral or happy expression throughout the match • Keep calm • Be respectful towards your child's opponent 	<p>During Match</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Walk away from the game if your child starts losing • Embarrass your child by providing over the top support • Give players angry glares during the match • Be negative or show emotions (don't get too tense) • Change your behaviour if the match is close or your child starts losing • Make negative comments to your child if they start losing (e.g., "You should be winning this") • Talk badly about or intimidate your child's opponent • Coach your child or give them signals • Argue with the referee, other parents, or opponent's calls
<p>Post Match</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comment on effort and attitude rather than the result • Support your child and keep your behaviour consistent whether they won or lost • Encourage your child for the next match and boost their confidence if they have lost • Be realistic about the outcome rather than finding excuses for the result • Give positive feedback first • Keep feedback is simple and keep it to a minimum after a loss • Ensure your child has food after a match • Talk about the match IF your child wants to • Give your child space after a loss 	<p>Post Match</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have a negative attitude after your child has lost • Get angry if your child has lost or hit anything out of anger • Worry if your child has lost • Embarrass your child by giving them hugs & kisses when they finish • Point out or continually discuss your child's mistakes • Tell players they did something well when they didn't • Talk about your child's opponent cheating to try and make your child feel better (players know if they "should" have won) • Talk about the match UNTIL your child wants to

Drawn from: Holt, N. L., & Knight, C. J. (2014). *Parenting in Youth Sport: From Research to Practice*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.

Important questions to ask regarding involvement

Questions to ask yourself:

- Why do I support my child's involvement in sport?
- What would I see as "success" for my child?
- Do I know what my child wants to achieve in sport?
- Do I strive to understand my child's sporting experience?
- Do I behave in ways that help my child to be most successful?
- Have I talked to my child about what he/she wants from me?

Questions to ask your child:

- What would you like to achieve in sport?
- What do you need from me to be able to achieve this?
- What do you think I want you to achieve?
- What are your goals for this year?
- Is there anything I can do to help you achieve these goals?
- Are there any things that I do at competitions that you really like?
- Are there any things that I do at competitions that you don't like?
- How can I help you more?

Questions to ask the coach:

- What are your expectations of parents?
- What can I expect from you?
- What do you hope to achieve with my child this year?
- When is an appropriate time to talk to you?
- What is the best way to contact you?
- What goals do you have for my child this season?
- What does my child need to achieve these goals?

Further Information

The information provided in this article is drawn from a variety of sources including the following. This list is by no means exhaustive. If you would like any further information please contact me at c.j.knight@swansea.ac.uk.

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