



SUCCESSFUL SPORTS PARENTING

Mental Training for Young Athletes

Daniel Gould, PhD
Institute for the Study of Youth Sports
Michigan State University

Mental training has positive effects for young athletes, just as it does for adult competitors. Research has shown that children can learn emotional control strategies, ways of managing stress, positive thinking, and how to use imagery to enhance their performance.

Although mental training can be effective with both children and adults, we do not conduct mental training programs for these two groups in the same way. An important principle of sport psychology is that “young athletes are not miniature adults” (even when some teenagers physically look like adults). They are mentally, emotionally, and physically different. Thus, they should not be taught or coached in the same ways as adults (e.g., the way pro coaches work with their athletes is not necessarily the best way for youth coaches to coach children).

Let's take the example of teaching a very young child athlete to relax. A common technique for teaching adult athletes to relax is progressive muscle relaxation--to teach them to systematically tense various muscles groups and then relax them. When learned this allows the athlete to identify what it feels like to be relaxed versus tensed and how to relax on command. When we do this with very young child athletes we need to instruct them in terms they can understand. It must also be fun. Hence, instead of saying “feel the tension leave your leg” one might say let your leg go from being hard like a rock to “feeling like a warm piece of spaghetti” or turn your stomach steel to “soft Jell-O”.

We also need to make things concrete when working with younger athletes. For example, when teaching them to control their thoughts a common technique is to have the youngster envision a television channel changer and practice switching from a negative or frustrating channel (negative thoughts) to a more positive one (positive thoughts). It is also critical that adults involved in children's sport to create a positive environment, foster a constructive attitude toward mistakes, and to alleviate stress by reducing social evaluation.

Your second question (who benefits from mental training more: children or adults?) is more difficult to answer. Because adults typically have longer attention spans, more education and greater mental capacity when compared to children, mental training information can be presented to them at a faster pace and in more depth. At the same time, any mental problems or bad habits adult athletes have developed tend to be more permanently engrained. Moreover, personality characteristics are relatively fixed and harder to change in adults. Hence, the old adage it's harder to teach older dogs new tricks applies.

Young athletes, on the other hand, while less mentally developed are more impressionable and easier to change. Coaches and parents can also help develop the young athlete's personality because it is less fixed. So while you cannot present as much mental training information to child as compared to adult athletes, they are more malleable. This, its easier to teach young dogs new tricks.

In the end, all athletes (young or old, novice or highly skilled) can benefit from mental skills training. Developing mental skills cannot only help them perform better, but enjoy their sports experience more! So the key is for all athletes to develop their mental as well as physical games.