How to Be A Successful Youth Sports Parent

**Escaping the Parent Trap**

By [Shane Murphy, Ph.D.](https://www.momsteam.com/users/shane-murphy)

* [**Youth Sports Parenting**](https://www.momsteam.com/team-of-experts/shane-murphy-phd/youth-sports-parenting)

**The Way Out**

All too often, parents feel justified in acting in ways that their child and others perceive as controlling, negative, or confrontational. It is indeed a paradox. The question is, is there any way out of it?

To begin with, I don’t believe that there is any way to avoid the emotional pressure that parents feel when they support their young athlete. As your child moves up the competitive ladder, this pressure naturally increases. You will always be tempted to step over the fine line between providing encouragement, constructive criticism and being a role model and becoming an over-involved, pushy and emotionally, and worse yet, physically abusive parent.

But I do believe that parents can *learn* to change their behavior, so that they do not give in to the emotional pressure they feel, but choose instead to act in a mature and responsible manner, to develop the skills to deal with the pressure and learn to pass those skills on to their child.

Over the course of more than a decade in youth sports, I have observed that some parents have broken the mold and managed to escape the clutches of the youth sports parent trap. These parents typically display the following behavior:

* **They talk with their child.** What motivates parents to have their child participate in sports, and what motivates their child to participate, are sometimes very different. Parents need to examine which of the twenty-eight [possible reasons](http://www.momsteam.com/alpha/features/cheersandtears/questionnaire_parent.shtml) they may have for encouraging their child to participate in a sports program, have their child complete a similar [survey](http://www.momsteam.com/alpha/features/cheersandtears/questionnaire_children.shtml) listing the reasons that children give for playing sports, and then sit down and compare their answers. Often there are some surprising differences, as well as some reassuring similarities. Once good communication has been established, it is easier to identify where potential problems might lie, and what to do about them.
* **They periodically look at themselves, and get feedback about their behavior from others.** When parents are devoting a great deal of time and energy to their child, they periodically need to look at themselves in the mirror, be honest and ask themselves the tough questions: Am I over-identifying with my child? Am I placing her needs first? Am I really listening to her? Am I getting feedback from others that I am out of control, over-controlling, pushy or driving others crazy? Often, talking to a spouse or a good friend can help give perspective and feedback that is difficult to come by otherwise when you are intensely involved in your child’s athletic career.
* **They cheer for the other children.** Parents who focus obsessively on their own child at athletic competitions clearly signal that they don’t really care about the team or the event - they just care about their son or daughter. Parents who shout and cheer for all the children on the team show that they have not fallen prey to the seductive self-centeredness of youth sports. All parents should try to be role models, not only for their children, but *other parents*, who are struggling with the same pressures and emotions they are experiences.
* **They take time to compliment the officials.** Many parents feel they have the absolute right - perhaps even obligation - to criticize the officials at their son or daughter’s sports contest. The officials don’t feel the same way. Many youth sports officials to whom I speak regard parent abuse as the most stressful and negative aspect of officiating. (A [recent survey](http://www.momsteam.com/alpha/news/survey_finds_spectator_abuse.shtml) confirms my anecdotal findings). Parents who can somehow resist the urge to criticize a bad call, who can even compliment the officials for their hard work after a game (especially if their child’s team loses), are rewarded with the pleasure of seeing a surprised smile on the face of the referee or umpire.
* **They talk to parents of the other team.** Several years ago I attended a state championship baseball playoff game for boys under eleven. The winner would play in the league’s state final. After seven innings the game was tied and moved into extra innings. The tension in the stands among the parents I was sitting with kept rising as each extra inning passed. Mothers would cover their eyes as their son came to the plate, or hold hands tightly with the parents next to them. Finally, after ten innings one team broke through and scored the winning run. There was more relief than jubilation from the parents of the winning team, but the parents of the losing team sat in silence. Then one of the parents of the winning side went over to the parents of the other team and began shaking their hands, telling them what an exceptional and competitive game their sons had played. I watched closely and noticed the smiles on the faces of these parents, saw their shoulders lift and their energy return at this simple gesture from a member of the “opposition.” It is actions such as these from parents that give me hope that we can learn ways to overcome the behavioral excesses associated with youth sports today.
* **They resist the urge to critique their child’s performance.** The urge to critique a child’s performance is very natural for parents. You may think that spending the time in the car on the way back from a competition pointing out your child’s mistakes will help her improve, but it usually ends up backfiring. Most kids already know the mistakes they have made and don’t need you to point out the obvious. Mistaking their quiet stoicism in the face of a bad performance for a lack of caring when, in fact, your child cares a great deal and hates to do poorly, can lead to miscommunication and conflict. I have found that many of the successful athletes I work with remark on their parents’ lack of criticism of their sporting performance. “They just wanted me to play and have fun” is a typical comment from an Olympic basketball player. “Mom and Dad never had much say in how I played. They left that to the coach. But I knew they were always there for me, no matter how I did.

Parents need to learn ways to express their support for their child without detailing their shortcomings. Change is sometimes very hard, especially for a parent who grew up in a family where pointing out the mistakes of others was a common approach. Remain silent if it is the only way you can overcome a tendency to criticize. Better yet, learn to leave your child’s performance completely behind and discuss the social aspects of the experience with your child. Chances are that these social experiences and friendships are what your child wants to talk about with you after a tough competition.

Instead of behaving in the expected way, the parents who exhibit these behaviors act in way unexpected and surprising. The results? More fun at games, more friendships among other parents, and respect from coaches and officials.