

David Benzel's GROWING CHAMPIONS FOR LIFE



How to Improve Your Hero Style *Strategies for Becoming a True Hero Parent* *By David Benzel*

The Sport-Parent quiz on our web site provides you with a score for your most common reactions and behaviors to your child's athletic performance. The higher your Hero score the easier it is to have a healthy, long-lasting, and loving relationship with your child, and the easier it will be for your child to perform well. Your score was derived from your answers to questions that reflect your behaviors regarding two variables: 1) How much emphasis you place on performance achievement (pressure applied); and 2) How much emphasis you place on character development (life-lessons taught). We believe sport mastery reached at the expense of self-mastery has only short-term benefits for athletes in our society, and can have disastrous long-term effects. There are many athletes in the world who win at sports and lose at life for this reason.

This article addresses the specific tendencies that keep you from a higher Hero score. It will provide you with practical suggestions for becoming a Hero-Parent to your child.

The Agent

The Agent-Parent acts as though a child is a commodity to be developed and promoted. This parent tends to over-emphasize the destination (scholarship or pro contract) more than the journey. Therefore most performances get evaluated and compared to some standard that must be met to stay on track to reach a goal. Life lessons and the value of the experience are over-looked. A sub-par performance produces a mood swing for the Agent-Parent because he/she identifies with it personally.

Here are some suggestions:

- Focus on your child's experience rather than the outcome.
- Avoid making performance comparisons about other children and talking about it.
- Remember, the game and your child's performance belongs to him.
- Before a game say, "I love you" or "Enjoy the game" rather than "Play your best" or "Don't let me down".
- Separate your emotions from your child's performance so your mood is supportive no matter what happens.
- Listen more and talk less after a competition to hear about feelings.
- Talk more about lessons learned than rankings and percentages.

Agent Vulnerabilities

When:

- Right after a game or practice is when you're most likely to show too much concern for performance excellence and winning.
- At mealtime you are most likely to be the one to initiate conversations about technique or work ethic issues and push for agreement.
- Car rides – your obsession with your child's sport and performance means you're likely to bring it up too often, as if your child is one dimensional.

Why:

- Agents tend to see their child as a commodity to be developed rather than a child to be loved and accepted. Agents fear things won't work out according to their plan if they don't push it along.

Agent Opportunity

Players often fire their Agents! Play the role of Hero to your child. No one ever fires their Hero.

The Manager

The Manager-Parent has a lot in common with the Agent-Parent when it comes to applying performance pressure to their child in the hopes of making him/her better. The main difference is that the Manager focuses on progress, rather than outcome. This parent will manipulate every circumstance (coaches, schedules, equipment) to gain an advantage. On the surface, focusing on today's progress sounds like a good thing, and it is better than dwelling on tomorrow's scholarship. However, when technique and strategy takes precedence over life-lessons and character building, the wrong message is sent. Through their constant evaluating and analysis Managers communicate their joy about improvement and their disappointment about sub-par performances. Therefore children start to assume that love given is determined by performance delivered. The message received by the child is, "I'm only as good as I do."

Here are some suggestions:

- Avoid sounding like a boss. Ask your child to make decisions about when to practice and how much to practice. Make her responsible for making choices.
- Be educated about the sport, but be equally devoted to teaching life lessons, not just sport lessons. Focus on self-mastery over sport mastery.
- Ask your child about his dreams and goals rather than assume or dictate where he wants to go with his sport.
- Be as positive and supportive after a loss as you are after a win by focusing on what went well, the lessons learned, and the overall experience gained.

- Live a balanced life by giving equal attention to your other relationships, activities, and commitments. Your child's sport is not the center of the universe.

Manager Vulnerabilities

When:

- During a game or practice is when you're most likely to show too much concern for technique, style, and performance.
- At mealtime you are most likely to be the one to initiate conversations about practice schedules and your plan of attack.
- Car rides – your obsession with your child's progress means you're likely to bring it up too often with family and with others.

Why:

- Managers have a master plan in their head about progress and performance. They are often embarrassed by a poor performance as if their reputation was on the line.

Manager Opportunity

You can manage time, machinery, budgets, and deadlines, but people want to be led. You've never heard of a world *manager*, have you? Your child wants a leader, not manager. The sport and their performance belong to them, not you.

The Sponsor

The Sponsor-Parent has the least in common with any of the other two styles. This parent tends not to be involved in a child's sport experience, but sees it as something to pay for. Hearing about the results of a game afterwards is the norm. This happens due to a work schedule, or a lack of interest in participating in this aspect of a child's life. Other responsibilities or other interests dominate this parent's lifestyle and they find it difficult to move youth sports up the priority list.

While the Sponsor is not guilty of applying any performance pressure, their absence means they also miss opportunities to teach the life-lessons that expose themselves through sports. A child may easily get the impression that the Sponsor-Parent doesn't care about their development. Unfortunately, the metaphors for living found in sports don't get discussed. Here are some suggestions:

- Enter your child's sport events on your personal calendar so you are aware of when and where they take place.
- Ask your child which practices or games are most important to her.
- Make a commitment to attend a minimum of one event per week.
- Be the first person to call your child after a game you can't attend and say that you want to hear all about it.
- If you feel uneducated about the sport, get a book or Google it.

- Find at least one aspect of your child’s activity with which you can help (practice, equipment repair, watching video together, etc.).
- Cultivate an interest in what’s happening and show it sincerely.

Sponsor Vulnerabilities

When:

- During a game or practice when you’re most likely to show little concern about performance or appear bored.
- At mealtime you are most likely to be the one to tune-out during a conversation about the last game or issues concerning the team.
- Car rides – your pre-occupation with other priorities (work) may mean you’re on your cell phone and missing a chance to chat about important character building events in your child’s life.

Why:

- Sponsors have other activities, commitments, or people on their mind during the exact moments their children need their attention regarding sports & life.

Sponsor Opportunity

The opinion that matters most to children is what they think you think of them. Giving your attention to them and caring about what they care about is an opportunity that disappears in a few short years. Take advantage of that window of opportunity.

The Hero

The Hero-Parent purposefully avoids adding performance pressure to a child’s athletic world. While this parent is deeply interested in how his child performs, he’s more interested in how she lives and how she feels about herself – win or lose. For that reason more conversations are directed at the bigger life-lessons than at sport techniques and strategies. It’s not that sport issues are ignored. They are left primarily to the coach to fulfill. Sport specific conversations are still important for parents to have with their children, but they consist of more questions and discussion than lecture and directing.

After a game in which a child makes a costly error and feels embarrassed by it, the Hero-Parent is more likely to focus on “how to handle embarrassment” and “why we feel embarrassed in front of others”, than on the mechanics of the error. When a child is in a performance slump, the Hero-Parent will focus more attention on the emotional and mental aspects of rebuilding self-confidence, rather than on changing a technique. In short, a child’s overall *swagger* is more important than their *swing* in the grand scheme of things to the Hero-Parent.

Here are some of the behaviors found in Hero-Parents:

- They wait to speak about game performance issues until asked by their child.
- They avoid delivering coaching lessons right before a competition.
- They frequently share the life-lessons they’re learning and tie them to similar situations found in the sports arena (i.e. teamwork, patience, empathy, hard work).

- They respond in a non-judgmental and supportive way to the disappointments experienced by their children.
- They have an equally optimistic and hopeful attitude about the future regardless of performance levels on any given day.
- They are constantly looking for and reading books or articles that help them communicate important life concepts to their children.

The evidence of the success of this approach is that Hero-Parents report that their children come to them often with questions, asking for input on key decisions, and seeking their wisdom on a variety of topics. Beyond the issues of improving a corner kick, jump shot, or curve ball, the children of Hero-Parents include them in discussions about school, romantic relationships, spirituality, careers, and marriage. Their relationships are built to last a lifetime.