

Children Become the Messages they Hear the Most

by John O'Sullivan

Picture the young swimmer stepping up to the starting blocks in a championship race. What is he thinking in that moment?

Visualize the soccer player, stepping up to take the deciding penalty kick. What is going through her head?

Think of the basketball player, standing on the free throw line needing to make two free throws to send the game into overtime. Is he thinking about making the shots, or worried about missing them?

Each of these athletes has a voice in her head, a voice telling her she is strong enough, she is calm enough, she is brave enough, you ARE enough for this moment.

Or, that voice may be saying something completely different. That he is not enough. That he is not prepared. That he chokes in big moments. Who determines what that voice is saying?

We do.

In a recent podcast interview with us, Dr. Jim Taylor, world-renowned sports psychologist and author of the fantastic new book [*Raising Young Athletes: Parenting Your Children to Victory in Sports and Life*](#), gave us some great advice. In decades of working with world champion and Olympic athletes and their parents, Taylor has found that the voice in their head is often an echo of the messages they hear the most from the parents and coaches in their lives.

In other words, children become the messages they hear the most.

“So many of the messages that kids get in youth sports and popular culture are not healthy,” says Taylor. “Parents need to think ‘what kind of messages am I sending my kid?’ Because a lot of times we send messages that we know are not right but we do them anyway because we have our own baggage and our upbringing and we say ‘well my dad said that to me so I am going to say that to my kids.’ And a lot of this is unconscious. But the messages that so many kids are getting these days from youth sports are not healthy. One of the scariest things for me is to sit on the sideline of youth soccer or lacrosse or poolside and listen to the things parents say to their kids. I am sure if I videotaped them, they would be appalled.”

Taylor continued “I see kids heading to the starting line wearing a metaphorical 50lb weight vest because of the things their parents say, and then parents wonder why their kids can't perform.”

Did you know that according to research, the average person says between 300 and 1000 words a minute to himself? 300 to 1000 words a minute! Can you imagine how different an athlete may perform if those words are saying “I can do this, I just need to keep working” instead of “I am just going to disappoint everyone again?”

Our messages become the voice in their head that is either a positive, affirming message that allows them to breathe easier, relax, and perform up to the level of their training, or makes them tense and tells them that they are a disappointment and a failure.

There is a lot of research emerging about the importance and performance enhancement caused by positive self-talk. In his book *Barking Up the Wrong Tree: The Surprising Science of Why Everything*

You Know About Success is Wrong, Eric Barker talks about the dilemma facing the US Navy Seals at the turn of the century. Each year, more Seals were needed for conflicts across the globe, yet the attrition rates from BUDs training approached 80-90%. The Seals recognized that they could not lower the standards, given the difficulties faced by Seals in combat, but they also needed to graduate more Seals. That was when they happened upon the importance of positive self-talk. By teaching their candidates how to be mindful, how to breathe in high stress situations, and techniques to change their inner voice from a negative one (I can't do this, I am ringing the bell and going home) to a positive one (I can do this, I will not quit on my team) they nearly doubled the number of candidates who made it through each class.

Same standards, twice the graduates, all by changing the inner voice.

We can do that for our own children, simply by being aware of the messages we are sending them, and being intentional about sending the right ones. As Taylor discusses in his book, those messages should reinforce four core areas: healthy values, sense of self, ownership of the experience, and a sense of perspective. How can we do that?

Here are Five Great Messages That Athletes Need to Hear the Most:

1. **I Love Watching You Play:** our children should never think that our love of them depends upon the outcome of a competition. If we get upset, sad or angry when they lose, our kids see that and perform worse. Regardless of whether they win or lose, whether they play well or poorly, after competition tell them "I love watching you play." That's it. These simple words help remove the fear of failure and expectations of success, which is a paralyzer for many young athletes. I spoke about this in my TEDx Talk in 2014, and I get more phone calls and emails about these words than any other. People usually say "I thought that was too simple, but it has changed my relationship with my kids." Others tell me it saved their relationship with their kids. I have had people stand up in public at our speaking events and share their story, often tearing up in the process. If you just tell your kids "I love watching you play," everything changes for the better.
2. **The Power of Yet:** this is the title Stanford Researcher Carol Dweck's TED talk on Mindset, and how individuals with a growth mindset consistently outperform those with what she calls a fixed mindset. Fixed mindset athletes believe their abilities are fixed, and that effort and application mean nothing. Dweck has found that athletes and students perform better with a growth mindset, for they know that their abilities can be changed with effort and practice. I may not be good YET, but I can be. In her research, Dweck has found that often a fixed mindset emerges when we praise children for outcomes (you are so talented, you are a winner, you are so beautiful) instead of praising the process (you are a hard worker.) Help keep the focus on the process of improvement by praising the process and the effort, and your athletes are more likely to perform better. (Click here to check out Dweck's book Mindset, one of the most important books a parent can ever read)
3. **Talk about the process, NOT results:** When we focus on results, and consistently critique mistakes, we create perfectionism in our kids. Perfectionism cripples performance, because perfectionists are focused only on outcomes, and they fear failure. Our kids know that results matter. Our society makes that abundantly clear. As Taylor says, this situation is a paradox. "Parents think that when they get their kids to focus on results, they are more likely to get those results, but it is just the opposite. By talking about results, it decreases the chance that they will get those results for two reasons. First, when does the outcome of a competition occur? After it is over. If they are focused on the end, they are not focused on what it takes to get that outcome. And second, what outcome are kids usually focused on? Failing. And this causes doubt, worry, stress, they get nervous and tense, they stop breathing, and they lose coordination, which most likely results in failure. If parents would just focus on the process and say 'what do you need to do today to be successful' our athletes will focus on those things and that gives them the best chance of success."

4. **Praise good behaviors and habits:** Early success in sport is usually a result of early maturity and winning the calendar lottery – the relative age effect – yet long-term success is highly dependent upon ownership, enjoyment, and the intrinsic motivation to do all the little things it takes to be great week after week, year after year. We too often focus on outcomes and ignore poor behaviors such as lack of effort (because they can still succeed at 80% effort), being uncoachable, lack of commitment, refusal to work on weaknesses, lack of resilience, and being a poor teammate. An athlete's habits today will be a far greater determinant of their outcomes in the future, for as we wrote about recently when it comes to youth sports, "Performance is a Behavior, Not an Outcome." Praise those behaviors which determine long-term success.
5. **Sports are what you do, not who you are:** Many athletes, especially those who join highly competitive and specialized sports experiences at a young age, end up with identity issues because of sports. Instead of soccer or swimming being something that they do, their entire identity becomes "I am a swimmer" or "I am a soccer player." We have had recent examples of top athletes such as Olympian Michael Phelps and NBA star Kevin Love battling depression during transitional moments in their careers. When they get injured, when they get cut from a team, when they age out of a sport or reach a level they can no longer compete at, children can lose their entire identity and sense of self, and develop severe psychological issues. This does not mean that an athlete cannot be very committed and competitive in a sport, but we must be sure if we want a healthy human being at the end of the sports journey, their sport cannot become their sole identity. Help them find and pursue other interests, find things outside of sports they do well and point those out, and remind them that sports NEVER defines them! They are always enough!

Next time your child steps on the field, what will the voice in their head be saying? Will it be a high-performance voice or one of self-doubt? Parents and coaches, we have a lot of input into that voice, if we are aware and intentional of the messages we send to our young athletes.

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Pass it on!