

# 13 Steps to Being a Winning Parent, Part 1

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*[SPN Editor's Note: This is part 1, which includes steps 1 – 6. Steps 7-13 will appear in the next issue of Swim Parents Newsletter.]*

**INTRODUCTION:** If you want your child to come out of his youth sports experience a winner (feeling good about himself and having a healthy attitude towards sports), then he needs your help! You are a vital and important part of the coach-athlete-parent team. If you do your job correctly and play your position well, then your child will learn the sport faster, perform better, really have fun and have his self-esteem enhanced as a result. His sport experience will serve as a positive model for him to follow as he approaches other challenges and obstacles throughout life. If you "drop the ball" or run the wrong way with it, your child will stop learning, experience performance difficulties and blocks, and begin to really hate the sport. And that's the good news! Further, your relationship with him will probably suffer significantly. As a result, he will come out of this experience burdened with feelings of failure, inadequacy and low self-esteem, feelings that will generalize to other areas in his life. Your child and his coach need you on the team. They can't win without you! The following are a list of useful facts, guidelines and strategies for you to use to make you more skilled in the youth sport game. Remember, no wins unless everyone wins. We need you on the team!

**STEP ONE:** When defined the right way, competition in youth sports is both good and healthy and teaches children a variety of important life skills. The word "compete" comes from the Latin words "com" and "petere" which mean together and seeking respectively. The true definition of competition is a seeking together where your opponent is your partner, not the enemy! The better he performs, the more chance you have of having a peak performance. Sports is about learning to deal with challenges and obstacles. Without a worthy opponent, without any challenges sports is not so much fun. The more the challenge the better the opportunity you have to go beyond your limits. World records are consistently broken and set at the Olympics because the best athletes in the world are "seeking together", challenging each other to enhanced performance. Your child should never be taught to view his opponent as the "bad guy", the enemy or someone to be hated and "destroyed". Do not model this attitude! Instead, talk to/make friends with parents of your child's opponent. Root for great performances, good plays, not just for the winner!

**STEP TWO: ENCOURAGE YOUR CHILD TO COMPETE AGAINST HIMSELF.** The ultimate goal of the sport experience is to challenge oneself and continually improve. Unfortunately, judging improvement by winning and losing is both an unfair and inaccurate measure. Winning in sports is about doing the best you can do, separate from the outcome or the play of your opponent. Children should be encouraged to compete against their own potential (i.e., Peter and Patty Potential). That is, the boys should focus on beating "Peter", competing against themselves, while the girls challenge "Patty". When your child has this focus and plays to better himself instead of beating someone else, he will be more relaxed, have more fun and therefore perform better.

**STEP THREE: DO NOT DEFINE SUCCESS AND FAILURE IN TERMS OF WINNING AND LOSING.** A corollary to TWO, one of the main purposes of the youth sports experience is skill acquisition and mastery. When a child performs to his potential and loses it is criminal to focus on the outcome and become critical. If a child plays his very best and loses, you need to help him feel like a winner! Similarly, when a child or team performs far below their potential but wins, this is not cause to feel like a winner. Help your child make this important separation between success and failure and winning and losing. Remember, if you define success and failure in terms of winning and losing, you're playing a losing game with your child!

**STEP FOUR: BE SUPPORTIVE, DO NOT COACH!** Your role on the parent-coach-athlete team is as a Support player with a capital S! You need to be your child's best fan. unconditionally! Leave the coaching and instruction to the coach. Provide encouragement, support, empathy, transportation, money, help with fund-raisers, etc., but... do not coach! Most parents that get into trouble with their children do so because they forget to remember the important position that they play. Coaching interferes with your role as

supporter and fan. The last thing your child needs and wants to hear from you after a disappointing performance or loss is what they did technically or strategically wrong. Keep your role as a parent on the team separate from that as coach, and, if by necessity you actually get stuck in the almost no-win position of having to coach your child, try to maintain this separation of roles (i.e. on the deck, field or court say, "Now I'm talking to you as a coach", at home say, "Now I'm talking to you as a parent"). Don't parent when you coach and don't coach at home when you're supposed to be parenting.

**STEP FIVE. HELP MAKE THE SPORT FUN FOR YOUR CHILD.** It's a time proven principle of peak performance that the more fun an athlete is having, the more they will learn and the better they will perform. Fun must be present for peak performance to happen at every level of sports from youth to world class competitor! When a child stops having fun and begins to dread practice or competition, it's time for you as a parent to become concerned! When the sport or game becomes too serious, athletes have a tendency to burn out and become susceptible to repetitive performance problems. An easy rule of thumb: If your child is not enjoying what they are doing, nor loving the heck out of it, investigate! What is going on that's preventing them from having fun? Is it the coaching? The pressure? Is it you?! Keep in mind that being in a highly competitive program does not mean that there is no room for fun. The child that continues to play long after the fun is going will soon become a drop out statistic.

**STEP SIX: WHOSE GOAL IS IT?** Step 5 leads us to a very important question! Why is your child participating in the sport? Are they doing it because they want to, for them, or because of you. When they have problems in their sport do you talk about them as "our" problems, "our jump isn't high enough", "we're having trouble with our flip turn", etc. Are they playing because they don't want to disappoint you, because they know how important the sport is to you? Are they playing for rewards and "bonuses" that you give out? Are their goals and aspirations yours or theirs? How invested are you in their success and failure? If they are competing to please you or for your vicarious glory they are in it for the wrong reasons! Further, if they stay involved for you, ultimately everyone will lose. It is quite normal and healthy to want your child to excel and be as successful as possible. But, you cannot make this happen by pressuring them with your expectations or by using guilt or bribery to keep them involved. If they have their own reasons and own goals for participating, they will be far more motivated to excel and therefore far more successful.

**STEP SEVEN: YOUR CHILD IS NOT HIS PERFORMANCE-LOVE HIM UNCONDITIONALLY.** Do not equate your child's self-worth and lovability with his performance. The most tragic and damaging mistake I see parents continually make is punishing a child for a bad performance by withdrawing emotionally from him. A child loses a race, strikes out or misses an easy shot on goal and the parent responds with disgust, anger and withdrawal of love and approval. CAUTION: Only use this strategy if you want to damage your child emotionally and ruin your relationship with him. In the 1988 Olympics, when Greg Louganis needed and got a perfect 10 on his last dive to overtake the Chinese diver for the gold medal, his last thought before he went was, "If I don't make it, my mother will still love me".

**STEP EIGHT: REMEMBER THE IMPORTANCE OF SELF-ESTEEM IN ALL OF YOUR INTERACTIONS WITH YOUR CHILD-ATHLETE.** Athletes of all ages and levels perform in direct relationship to how they feel about themselves. When your child is in an athletic environment that boosts his self-esteem, he will learn faster, enjoy himself more and perform better under competitive pressure. One thing we all want as children and never stop wanting is to be loved and accepted, and to have our parents feel good about what we do. This is how self-esteem gets established. When your interactions with your child make him feel good about himself, he will, in turn, learn to treat himself this very same way. This does not mean that you have to incongruently compliment your child for a great effort after they have just performed miserably. In this situation being empathic and sensitive to his feelings is what's called for. Self esteem makes the world go round. Make your child feel good about himself and you've given him a gift that lasts a lifetime. Do not interact with your child in a way that assaults his self-esteem by degrading, embarrassing or humiliating him. If you continually put your child down or minimize his accomplishments not only will he learn to do this to himself throughout his life, but he will also repeat your mistake with his children!

**STEP NINE: GIVE YOUR CHILD THE GIFT OF FAILURE.** If you really want your child to be as happy and as successful as possible in everything that he does, teach him how to fail! The most successful people in and out of sports do two things differently than everyone else. First,, they are more willing to take risks and therefore fail more frequently. Second, they use their failures in a positive way as a source of motivation and feedback to improve. Our society is generally negative and teaches us that failure is bad, a cause for humiliation and embarrassment, and something to be avoided at all costs. Fear of failure or humiliation causes one to be tentative and non-active. In fact, most performance blocks and poor performances are a direct result of the athlete being preoccupied with failing or messing up. You can't learn to walk without falling enough times. Each time that you fall your body gets valuable information on how to do it better. You can't be successful or have peak performances if you are concerned with losing or failing. Teach your child how to view setbacks, mistakes and risk-taking positively and you'll have given him the key to a lifetime of success. Failure is the perfect stepping stone to success.

**STEP TEN: CHALLENGE, DON'T THREATEN.** Many parents directly or indirectly use guilt and threats as a way to "motivate" their child to perform better. Performance studies clearly indicate that while threats may provide short term results, the long term costs in terms of psychological health and performance are devastating. Using fear as a motivator is probably one of the worst dynamics you could set up with your child. Threats take the fun out of performance and directly lead to your child performing terribly. implicit in a threat, (do this or else!) is your own anxiety that you do not believe the child is capable. Communicating this lack of belief, even indirectly is further devastating to the child's performance. A challenge does not entail loss or negative consequences should the athlete fail. Further, implicit in a challenge is the empowering belief, "I think that you can do it".

**STEP ELEVEN: STRESS PROCESS, NOT OUTCOME.** When athletes choke under pressure and perform far below their potential, a very common cause of this is a focus on the outcome of the performance (i.e., win/lose, instead of the process). In any peak performance, the athlete is totally oblivious to the outcome and instead is completely absorbed in the here and now of the actual performance. An outcome focus will almost always distract and tighten up the athlete insuring a bad performance. Furthermore focusing on the outcome, which is completely out of the athlete's control will raise his anxiety to a performance inhibiting level. So if you truly want your child to win, help get his focus away from how important the contest is and have them focus on the task at hand. Supportive parents de-emphasize winning and instead stress learning the skills and playing the game.

**STEP TWELVE: AVOID COMPARISONS AND RESPECT DEVELOPMENTAL DIFFERENCES.** Supportive parents do not use other athletes that their child competes against to compare and thus evaluate their child's progress. Comparisons are useless, inaccurate and destructive. Each child matures differently and the process of comparison ignores significant distorting effects of developmental differences. For example, two 12 year old boys may only have their age in common! One may physically have the build and perform like a 16 year old while the other, a late developer, may have the physical size and attribute of a 9 year old. Performance comparisons can prematurely turn off otherwise talented athletes on their sport. The only value of comparisons is in teaching. If one child demonstrates proper technique, that child can be used comparatively as a model only! For your child to do his very best he needs to learn to stay within himself. Worrying about how another athlete is doing interferes with him doing this.

**STEP THIRTEEN: TEACH YOUR CHILD TO HAVE A PERSPECTIVE ON THE SPORTS EXPERIENCE** The sports media in this country would like you to believe that sports and winning/losing is larger than life. The fact that it is just a game frequently gets lost in translation. This lack of perspective frequently trickles down to the youth sport level and young athletes often come away from competition with a distorted view of themselves and how they performed. Parents need to help their children develop realistic expectations about themselves, their abilities and how they played, without robbing the child of his dreams. Swimming a lifetime best time and coming in dead last is a cause for celebration, not depression. Similarly, losing the conference championships does not mean that the sun will not rise tomorrow.

Dr. Alan Goldberg is a nationally-known expert in the field of applied sport psychology and has a long history working with athletes, coaches and parents in the swimming community as well as just about every other sport on the planet. Dr. Goldberg works with athletes and teams at every level from developmental to elite and he is a frequent speaker at swimming clinics. You can visit his website at [www.competitivedge.com](http://www.competitivedge.com)