



Body Sports

By Debra Gassewitz

Thanks to my parents...



Alped Benedek/Stockphoto.com

Standing on the podium, watching the flag rise and listening to the national anthem, she can no longer hold back her emotions. Tears trickle softly down her cheek, and it dawns on her that the dream she cherished and strived for for years has just been realized. The medal is real, and it feels good to touch it...

Media flock to her side thrusting microphones towards the gold medalist. She announces to the world, "...I want to thank my parents..."

"I have to thank my family. My parents have been so supportive over the years. They have never pushed me, and that has been the most important thing in my continuing to skate and compete.

I have felt that regardless of any circumstance or result, they have been behind me 100%."

– Catriona Le May Doan (Olympic Gold medalist, speed skating)

To pursue a dream takes an immense amount of commitment from both the athlete and the parents. In sport, the parents play a critical role in determining the path and success of their children.

Different stages and support

The influence of a parent often varies according to the different stages of the athlete's development.

In the early years, parents may introduce to their children various sports, usually their own favourite ones. Parents often get involved as volunteer coaches or sport administrators. Many parents spend hours traveling, fundraising, volunteering, organizing tournaments, in addition to paying for the equipment and the registration of activities.

In the developmental years, both the parent and the child may become more attentive and committed to regular practice and the sport. The later years

often see the individual fully focused on improving their performance and the parents more fully committed to supporting the athlete financially and emotionally.

Constants in support

There are several constants that most athletes and researchers agree upon. Children play sport because it is fun. Parents are the role models and back bones that provide the emotional support to ensure their children flourish.

A father might introduce soccer or hockey because it is familiar and he participated in the sports during his youth. Taking his child to the arena for an early practice often evokes memories and kindles parent camaraderie with other parents.

Familiarity serves the purposes of providing motivation and allowing the parent to serve as a role model. The parent who is currently or was active in sport is a key role model.

"Who I need to introduce to you guys today are my role models...my Mom and Dad, who had the right infrastructure at home as parents to allow me to be a success at whatever I do."

– Donovan Bailey, (Olympic Gold medalist, 100m sprint, track & field)

Fun is key

Children want to please their parents and to follow in their footsteps, but they also love to play and share activities with their parents. The role of the parent is to ensure the child has positive experiences in sport. In other words, the parent is there to ensure the child is having fun.

"Don't force your kids into sports. I never was. To this day, my dad has never asked me to go play golf. I ask him.

It's the child's desire to play that matters, not the parent's desire to have the child play. Fun. Keep it fun."

– Tiger Woods (professional golfer)

Emotional support

Emotional support means accepting the athlete for the person they really are,



and not just the winning athlete. A high performance athlete or a child trying to win the regional track meet both want to excel. The pressure they place upon themselves is very high, and the parent can provide the necessary balance. Their message to the child should be that they are loved regardless of competition results.

"My parents loved me unconditionally no matter what. If I went out there and I gave it my best and I screwed up, it didn't matter. My parents always told me they loved me every night. ... I was never afraid to go out there and push myself to the limit. And if I failed, so what? I always had them to pick me up."

- Tiger Woods (professional golfer)

While the positive emotional support these professional athletes describe may seem obvious, parents do not always provide this. All too often, parents abuse their children or even act violently towards other adults.

In a recent survey of 3,300 parents, 84% said they had witnessed violent parental behaviour towards children, coaches, or officials. People sometimes forget that they are dealing with children and not professional athletes. When the focus is on winning, a parent may neglect the educational opportunity and purpose of the sport.

Parents can cause emotional abuse when they force a child to participate in sports, refuse to speak to a child after a poor performance in a game or practice, or question the child as to why they performed so poorly. In a survey by the Minnesota Amateur Sports Commission, 45.3% of children said their parents had called them names and yelled at them while they played in organized sport.

Parent's code of conduct

The problem with parents becoming too emotionally charged and out of control has forced several sport leagues to develop parental codes of conduct. Many parents and players are required to sign a "Code of Conduct" that outlines the good sportsmanship expectations of the league before the

child can play on the team.

Parents who do not adhere to the code will be asked to leave and/or not attend their child's games. Some sport leagues require parents to attend a seminar or watch an educational video on proper parent etiquette for youth sporting events.

Expectations

The source of much child/parental frustration during the developmental stage is a lack of communication and perhaps unexplained expectations. This is why some sports provide workshops to educate the parent of the future competitive athlete.

An example is a seminar given to the parents of 14 competitive figure skaters entitled "Extreme Talent" that highlighted the Role of the Parent. The key elements highlighted included:

1. Commitment
2. Unconditional acceptance of your child's abilities
3. Keep the child's home life separate from the rink life
4. Education
5. Keep an eye on the arena life, but don't be too involved
6. Competition Approach
7. Cost
8. Know when to stop

Sample of Code of Conduct for parents

- I will act in a manner that makes my child proud.
- I will present a behaviour that is appropriate for youth sports
- I will accept the responsibility of being a good role model for my child
- I will demonstrate good sportsmanship by cheering favourably for ALL players on both teams.
- I will demonstrate good sportsmanship by interacting in a positive manner at all times with parents, coaches, and officials.
- I will support the coach and the efforts of the youth sports league.

Youth First: A Parent Orientation Program for Youth Sports, by R.R. Apache, July/August 2004, Strategies, pp29-32.

Is it worth it?

The commitment to excel at any sport imposes difficult demands and sacrifices on both the athlete and parent. When the parents understand the expectations, they can make the choice early on whether they intend to encourage their child's growth in the sport.

The athlete triangle comprising the athlete, the coach, and the parent will evolve with the athlete's competitive commitment. The parent's relationship with the athlete and the coach has a direct impact on the happiness and success of the athlete.

In the later years, the athlete may need to make sacrifices as training time often compete with school, social time, and other schedule and aspects of life. The parents will also be faced with financial, scheduling, and family pressures in trying to help the athlete achieve performance goals.

The question that will inevitably arise becomes "Is it worth it?" To answer this difficult question, one needs to understand the purpose and the goal. If your children develop with confidence, respect people around them, learn to dream and set goals, and are determined to pursue the course to achieve success, then the answer is "yes, it is worth it".

And like many athletes who have won the medal of their dreams proclaimed, one day your child may just tell you and the world that "I've my parents to thank..."

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