

Dr. D'Arienzo's commentary on The Role of Parents in Sports

Parents do you realize that your presence at your child's sporting event can improve their academic performance and success? Parents did you know your role at your child's sporting event can make their experience either positive or negative? Your positive support at your child's sporting event can build a lifelong positive impact! *The Best of Jacksonville* Magazine interviewed Jacksonville's top Psychologist, Dr. Justin D'Arienzo, so we can learn how to make our children's sporting experience a lifelong positive learning event as well as teach us how to be positive and supportive parents.

I am aware of all the work being done to educate parents in sports. Would you discuss the position of most experts regarding the parents' role in a child's sports development?

I have four children involved in athletics, and I've coached soccer for my son. In addition, my children participate in basketball, karate, cheer, dance, and ballet. I can certainly speak of this issue as a parent and psychologist and I understand the challenges parents face. Despite knowing what I know, it is not always easy to follow what the experts recommend.

Over the last decade, sport associations have better recognized the positive and negative impact parents have on their children's experience playing sports as well as on their development. Parents play a vital role in youth sports. They coach, volunteer, participate as a spectator, and prepare and debrief the young athlete. Parents absolutely impact the child's sporting experience, performance, and memory of events. All three are related to the child's development.

Let's first look at the importance of positive coaching. There is a great overlap between positive coaching and positive parenting in relation to their child's sport. A recent survey from the UCLA Sports Laboratory asked kids about the main reason why they continue to participate in sports – the number one reason given was positive coach support.

Similar studies show that one of the greatest sources of enjoyment for young athletes is positive parental involvement. As adults we often remember a childhood great play we had and whether mom or dad was there to witness the event in the stands. The memory of a parent there, as long as the experience was positive, certainly heightened the experience.

A 2011 study in the *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, found that supportive or positive coaching led to increased performance. Athletes exposed to supportive coaching were more likely to think logically about their strengths and weaknesses, be relaxed and focused, and seek feedback and support about their performance. When athletes are able to internalize their thoughts and emotions and feedback from others, their self-awareness improves, which is the key to them improving their performance.

The study also found that players exposed to unsupportive coaching were more likely to disengage from their performance, blame others for their failures, and express themselves in negative ways often toward other players. The bottom line is that if you support the players, performance will follow.

What are some benefits of a child playing sports? There have been a multitude of studies linking physical activity to positive outcomes in a multitude of areas. Children less sedentary and involved in routine vigorous activity perform better academically. Family involvement in physical activity with children outside of school fosters life-long fitness habits. Ensuring the next generation is healthy both in mind and body begins with physical education at school as well as with structured sports.

What do parents need to remember? First a parent may want to participate in an online training program about parent's positive role in sports. There are many free ones on the internet offered by various sport associations. Many sport associations also have coaches, parents, and player's bill of rights and expectations. There are also several books available regarding the subject.

I suggest to parents I see in my psychology practice to remember the acronym **TEAMS** to help them manage their own behavior with their young athlete.

1. **Teach** (Teach important skills that will transfer to life's situations)
2. **Encourage** (Encourage practice, process, and fun)
3. **Aware** (Be aware of your own behavior and teach awareness to the athlete)
4. **Model** (Model good sportsmanship)
5. **Support** (Show positive support)

Remember these 10 Rules:

1. Teach the child to compete against themselves rather than others.
2. Success should not be defined as success or failure or winning or losing but as a process.
3. Let the coach lead. This will eliminate any potential confusion for the child.
4. Do not bribe your child. Winning should be about having fun, developing skills, and playing your best based on your commitment to your team.
5. Your child is not their performance or a reflection of you. Love them unconditionally.
6. Self-esteem, self-esteem, self-esteem. It's important in all interactions. Sport events are short lived. Self-esteems are not.
7. Challenge your child to perform and never threaten.
8. Avoid comparisons and respect developmental differences of athletes.
9. Sports are supposed to be fun regardless of the level of athletics and competition.
10. When debriefing after a game on the ride home, wrap up the conversation and emphasize how you enjoyed watching them play rather than offering a final critique.

Being a parent is a full time job. You are never off the clock. Some parents need to get a real grip, better manage themselves, and fully understand that children exposed to their parent's emotional fits perform worse under negative pressure. These kids disengage, blame others for their failure, have an injured self-esteem, and act out against other kids or themselves. These kids stop having fun. Athletics are supposed to be fun, and when they are not, kids burn out, quit, and become another statistic.

Justin D'Arienzo, Psy.D., ABPP, a Board Certified Clinical Psychologist and Forensic Psychologist, is the CEO and Founder of D'Arienzo Psychological Group (DPG), a Jacksonville, Florida-based psychological firm with mental health providers from multiple disciplines. Dr. D'Arienzo received his doctorate degree in Clinical Psychology from Nova Southeastern University and completed his psychology internship and residency in the United States Navy.

Dr. D'Arienzo provides clinical and forensic psychological assessment and therapeutic services to adolescents and adults, and specializes in couples therapy and family therapy. He is also a certified Florida Supreme Court Family Mediator, parenting coordinator, social investigator, custody evaluator, expert witness, and attorney consultant. Dr. D'Arienzo has published book chapters and articles in peer-reviewed literature on such topics as group therapy, post-traumatic stress disorder, social psychology, and internet-related behavior. He has been recognized by the American Psychological Association, the National Association of Professional Psychology Providers, and Florida Doctor magazine for his commitment to military mental health. Dr. D'Arienzo has been featured on TLC's *My Strange Addiction* as the treating psychologist and is scheduled to appear on A&E Biography Channel as a forensic psychology expert airing in winter 2014. Dr. D'Arienzo was also selected to the Jacksonville Business Journal's 40 under 40 Class of 2012.

