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Golden Rules, to establishing rapport with your athletic child

1. Make sure that your child knows that win or lose, scared or heroic, you love them, appreciate their efforts and that they are aware that you are not disappointed in them. This will allow them to do their best, and to avoid developing a fear of failure based on the specter of disapproval and family disappointment if they mess up. Be the person in their life that he or she can look to for constant positive enforcement. Learn to hide your feelings if they disappoint you. Try your best to be completely honest about your child's athletic capability, her competitive attitude, her sportsmanship and her actual skill level.
2. Be helpful but don't "coach" her on the way to the track, diamond or court. . . on the way back. . . . at breakfast . . . and so on. It may be tough but it's a lot tougher for the child to be inundated with advice, pep talks and often critical instruction. Teach them to enjoy the thrill of competition, to be "out there trying" to be working to improve their skills and attitudes . . . to take the physical bumps and come back for more. Don't say "winning doesn't count" because it does. Instead, help them develop the feel for competing, for trying hard, and for having fun.
3. Try not to re-live your athletic life through your child in a way that creates pressure; you fumbled, too, you lost as well as won. You were frightened, you backed off at times, you were not always heroic. Don't pressure them because of your pride. They may be an extension of you, but let them make their own voyage of discovery into the world of sport. . . Let them sail into it without interference. Help to calm the water when things get stormy, but let them handle their own navigational problems.
4. Find out what your child is all about and don't assume they feel the way you did, or that they want the same things or have the same attitudes. You gave them life, but now let them learn to handle it and enjoy it. Athletic children need their parents, so you must not withdraw, however, let your child need you on their terms. Just remember there is a thinking, feeling, sensitive, free spirit out there in that uniform who needs a lot of understanding, especially when their world turns bad on them. If he or she is comfortable with you-win or lose- they will be on their way to maximum achievement and enjoyment-and you will get your kicks too! In the meantime, start to think of your child as a child, not as "my son or daughter, the athlete!" If you do, the morale of the family will greatly improve.

5. Don't compete with the coach. The young athlete often comes home and chatters on about "coach says this, coach says that" ad nauseam. This, I realize, is often hard to take-especially for the father who has had some sports experience or for the mother if what the "coach says" refers to the youngster's eating pattern. When a certain degree of disenchantment about the coach sets in, some parents side with the youngster and are happy to see the coach shot down. This is a mistake. It should provide a chance to discuss (not lecture) with the youngster the importance of learning how to handle problems, react to criticism, and understand the necessity for discipline, rules, regulations and so on.

6. Don't compare the skill, courage or attitudes of your child with that of other members of the squad or team, at least not where they can hear you. If your child starts showing a tendency to resent the treatment that they are getting from their coach, or the approval that other team members are getting, be careful to talk over the facts quietly and try to provide a fair and honest counsel. If you play the role of the overly-protective parent who is blinded to the relative merits of your youngster and her actual status as an athlete and individual, you will merely perpetuate the problem. Your youngster could become a problem athlete.

7. You should also get to know the coach so that you can be assured that his/her philosophy, attitudes, ethics and knowledge are such that you are happy to expose your child to that coach. The coach has a tremendous potential influence.

8. Always remember that children tend to exaggerate, both when they are praised and when they are criticized. Temper your reactions to the tales of woe or heroics that they bring home. Don't cut your youngster down if you feel she is exaggerating-just take a look at the situation and gradually try to develop an even level. Above all, don't over-react and rush off to the coach if you feel an injustice has been done. Investigate, but anticipate that the problem is not as it might appear.

9. Make a point of understanding courage, and the fact that it is relative, there are different kinds of courage. Some of us can climb mountains but are frightened to get into a fight; others can fight without fear but turn to jelly if a bee approaches. Everyone is frightened in certain areas nobody escapes fear and that is just as well since it often helps us avoid disaster. Explain to your youngster that courage does not mean an absence of fear but rather means doing something in spite of fear or discomfort.

In a way, the parents are the primary coaches. I have talked with many great athletes who, in evaluating the reasons for their success, have said: "My parents really helped-I was lucky in this respect"

To me the coaching job the parent has is the toughest one of all and it takes a lot of effort to do it well. It is worth all the effort when you hear your youngster boast (now or later on) that you played a key role in their success.