

BLOG #XX: The Effect of Parents on Young Athletes' Mental Health

"Get up now, we're leaving for the pool in 15 minutes."

Those are the words that the mother of one of my patients, who is a competitive swimmer, would say to him every morning back when he was in high school. When he said "morning", he didn't mean 6:00 or 7:00. He meant 4:30 in the morning, in the middle of December. Where I was practicing at the time in Baltimore, at that time of the morning it's pitch black outside, and the wind chill is below zero. For many student athletes like this young man, this was the harsh reality of everyday life.

Of course, there was plenty of satisfaction that my patient gained out of these morning swims. Being awake and active before the rest of the world has even opened their eyes yet can be incredibly fulfilling, as I've written about quite a bit, I can imagine. He talked of the cold water hitting his skin, the smooth, dreamlike feeling of gliding through the water like a boat, that rush of energy and focus you get into the flow state in the pool...these have got to be some of the greatest aspects of being a swimmer. And I envied my patient for those experiences, especially because I myself feel so uncomfortable swimming at speed. Yet for many child athletes, when something you love doing is morphed into a rigid, overly competitive, and completely overwhelming chore, especially by one's own parents, it can crush a young athlete's desire to play that sport very quickly. As a pediatrician and parent, I've seen this occur in many child athletes and in all the sports these children play: soccer, baseball, football, tennis, golf...the list goes on.

A Parent's Positivity Can Go a Long Way

This is not to diminish or ignore the contributions that parents make to their child's success, though. In fact, without parents, many of the world's most accomplished athletes wouldn't have achieved the success that they had. Beyond providing the basics (food, fluids, clothing and shelter, and educational and emotional support, parents are the backbone of the early stages of a child's athletic career. Driving them to practice, buying them equipment, signing them up for the right team, and helping, if able, to teach the basics of the sport...these are all ways that parents are essential to a young athlete's growth and development.

Furthermore, in most cases, parents are one of the few people who will be fully in an athlete's corner. Coaches, friends, and other family members can be included in this group too. However, some sports can be very, very competitive and toxic at higher levels, including swimming, which is a much more individualized sport when compared to basketball, baseball, or football. Having the right people in your ear to tell you how to achieve maximum success and optimal performance is a fundamental part of reaching your goals.

The Darker Side of Parental Influence on Young Athletes

The young man I spoke to said that while his mother gave him the world and sacrificed so much for him, there were also many times where he felt immense undue pressure from her. He said that she would push him to go to every single swim practice, even those optional ones that made him have to wake up at 4:30 in the morning. When he didn't want to go, she would sometimes just turn on the lights or yank the blanket off his bed. If he didn't perform well in swim meets, she would get mad and yell at him, or sometimes she wouldn't speak to him at all.

There was even one time in middle school in which my patient caught a stomach bug. He described that right as he was about to leave for swim practice, he threw up several times and was sobbing on the bathroom floor, unable to move. His mother was initially annoyed that he was missing a swim practice and stormed to her room. Luckily, his dad was home that day and was able to bring my patient into the office to be evaluated.

Needless to say, this placed a lot of unnecessary stress and pressure on this young man, who was simply doing the best he could, trying to balance school, swimming, weightlifting, acting auditions, and whatever semblance of a social life he could possibly have. By the time his senior year of high school came around, he eventually viewed swimming as something he was forced to do just because of his mother, and his fear of disappointing her. His love for the sport had devolved into a hatred of it. He merely saw it as a chore that he could no longer get enjoyment out of, since his performance was directly tied to his mother's treatment of him.

These encounters reminded me of the opening sections of Andre Agassi's autobiography, *Open*, which is a must read for parents of athletes, if you haven't already. As the famed pro tennis player recounts his experience with the sport that came to define his life's work he writes: "I play tennis for a living, even though I hate tennis, hate it with a dark and secret passion, and always have." The hatred, you go on to learn, stemmed chiefly from early interactions with his father who trained him relentlessly from the time he was a young boy.

The Importance of Realistic Goals for Young Athletes

Positive or negative reinforcement from parents has been proven to have significant consequences on a child's thinking and personal development. Children and teenagers, and even young adults, can be deeply affected mentally and emotionally by their parents, especially in their words and behavior. An article featured by the Baylor College of Medicine highlights that when kids see their parents acting or speaking disrespectfully to other people, whether it be a coach, the opposing team, or other parents, then kids think it's acceptable to emulate that behavior.

Parents setting unrealistic expectations for their children and forcing them to overexert themselves can hamper their ability to interact with others, perform effectively in their sport and reach the flow state, and ultimately enjoy the sport that they've loved for so long. Furthermore, kids who face extremely high and unreasonable expectations from their parents may equate their self-worth with the performance of perfection.

Another interesting thing that my patient discussed with me was the projection of a parent's goals onto their child. For example, if his mother didn't like a certain parent on the team, then she would demand that the young man beat that parent's kid in a race at an upcoming meet. If my patient lost to the other kid, then his mother would get very unhappy, and even shame him for losing, especially if the other kid was slower.

This feels like some twisted parental psychology, right? And it's certainly unfair to a developing youth athlete. And, yet, even as I'm judging, I can remember times I've put unnecessary pressure on my children to perform better in order to help my own mind and ego. I remember coaching Wyatt in skiing when he was a young boy learning to race gates. I had seen him free ski and had a vision of how he could perform while racing. During a training session I became frustrated with how he was performing and, in a state of over-exhaustion he flopped onto the ski hill as if dead. My mind went red. And I found myself screaming at him to "get up!" and "stop being lazy!" I likely cited some trite family values, like, "Heugel's are hard workers" during this state of belligerence. I distinctly remember a parent from across the slopes looking me in my eyes with pity and confusion as if to say, "what are you doing to your son?" What was I doing to my son? I was making sure he might MY expectations in terms of how well and how fast he skied. I hurt my son out on the hill that day, deeply. I wish I could say that was the only time.

For my patient, that took all the fun and joy out of a sport he loved so much. His mother had put her own personal wishes and desires directly onto his back and forced him to

carry that burden, just as I have done occasionally with my own children as they have grown and developed as athletes. This is a recipe for athlete fatigue and burnout, especially when combined with overtraining.

How Can Parents Learn Not to Put Too Much Pressure on their Child Athletes?

A little bit of gentle encouragement is healthy for athletes of all ages, primarily from their parents. Again, positive feedback and reinforcement from parents can improve one's mental health, and help them achieve better focus, efficiency, and enjoyment in their sport. According to a study in an international public health journal, kids in sports such as soccer respond the best to higher levels of praise and understanding from parents, along with a lower amount of parental pressure and directive behavior. As a result, this will more effectively help younger athletes get "into the zone" before tough practices or big competitions, and ultimately reach the flow state for maximum success. As Flow researcher and writer Steven Kotler has definitely shown, the flow state can only be reached in a state of positivity.

No matter how old your child is, it's essential to **communicate** with them. Ask them what **their** goals are. Check in on them and make sure they aren't being overwhelmed or facing too much pressure. Try to see where they are coming from, and understand their feelings. Put yourself in their shoes. They may not feel comfortable talking about the other things in their sport or personal life that can be affecting their mental health and performance. That is ok. Give it time.

Sometimes it may be your athlete's coach or teammates who may be making your athlete feel stress or anxiety. By carefully communicating with your child to combat this external stress and wield it in a healthy, productive manner. As a parent, you can help your child enjoy their sport more and ultimately perform at their best.

Parents and their athletes can work together to use that pressure and stress as a tool for greatness, no matter what sport is being played. There are few influences bigger on a child's development than their parents. You have this gift, and this responsibility. Remember, whether you like it or not you are one of their coaches. Likely their "first coach" of the sport.

Crafting a Balanced and Healthy Understanding Between Parents and Athletes

Here at The Balanced Athlete, we will help you work **with** your athlete rather than **against** them, so that they can perform optimally, and so you can feel confident that you are steering your athlete down the right path. With a healthy support system and a clear mind, your athlete can take control of both their mind and body for enhanced happiness and sport performance.

That is what all of us, including myself and my patient, should be swimming toward, each and every day.

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