

## [Kamphoff: Parents play a crucial role in a child's athletic development](#)



By Cindra Kamphoff, Ph.D. [Special to The Free Press](#)

— Happy Father's Day to all dads. This seems like an appropriate time to discuss the role that fathers — and parents, in general — play in their children's athletic endeavors.

My father was a crucial part of my athletic development. He and mom attended all of my cross-country and track meets in high school and were my biggest fans and supporters. He was the first person to greet me after I finished, no matter how I placed in the race.

I remember the exact words he used in a pep talk before my final race at the state meet, and I remember the enormous bear hug he gave me after the conference meet my junior year.

But the most impactful thing my dad did was to debrief each race with me — something I do with the athletes I work with today. After each meet, we would sit down at dinner and talk about my race. He would ask me what went well and helped set goals for the next meet.

When I complained about teammates or coaches, he put a stop to that immediately. He kept me positive and focused on myself — which is essential for us to perform up to potential.

During those discussions, my dad was using sport psychology techniques without knowing it. It was second nature to him. His positive attitude and goal-oriented behavior are things that I emulate today.

He led me in the direction of my dreams by asking me about them and believing that I could accomplish anything. He supported me when I was successful, as well as when I felt like I had failed.

In sports, parents impact their children in at least three ways.

First, they influence the type of sports they play by creating opportunities to try different sports. Second, they provide financial support by purchasing equipment and driving them to and from practice and games.

But probably the least recognized way that parents influence their children is how they “interpret” the event.

What parents do or say — and what they don't do or say — impacts how invested and involved their children will be in sport.

Dr. Jim Taylor, a sport psychologist in the San Francisco area, writes that we should support our children through “positive pushing,” his book by that name.

At its core, positive pushing is about being positive, supportive and encouraging.

It takes thought and sensitivity. Positive pushing is a fine balancing act; failing to push your child at all can be disastrous, but so can pushing your child too much.

The key is to know your child, to watch intently and to listen to their reactions.

This approach should be balanced — supportive but not overbearing.

Most parents don't intend to interfere with their child's development or athletic involvement. Sometimes we put pressure on our children without recognizing it.

*Here are a few tips that you can use to be the best parent you can be:*

1. Focus on your child's effort, hard work and preparation, regardless of the outcome.

Kids like to win, but focusing on winning adds pressure that doesn't allow us to perform up to potential.

2. Emphasize the life skills learned in sports — confidence, teamwork, responsibility and handling pressure and adversity. These skills can have a much longer impact than winning.

3. Show interest in your child's activities and performances.

Show up, provide the resources that you can and look like you are enjoying yourself. Try to be calm, relaxed and positive to model how your child should act.

4. Provide healthy encouragement that is sincere.

Help your child stay focused on giving their best effort and give specific praise.

“That was a great throw to second base” is better than “Nice job out there.” It helps them understand what they should continue.

5. Avoid disciplining your child for mistakes made during a game, but do discipline them for poor behavior and bad sportsmanship — throwing a bat or helmet in anger, for example, or disrespecting a coach. In doing so, emphasize the expected behaviors that will allow them to be successful.

6. Avoid comparing your child to other children.

We perform our best when we focus on ourselves and our improvement; help your child do just that.

Choose words carefully and describe the improvement you see: “I noticed that you have really improved your speed compared to last season.”

7. Separate your ego from your child’s performance. We can set them up for success by using these tips, but in the end, it’s up to them. We don’t have control over how they will do. We can’t live through our children.

Implementing these tips will allow your child to be a better person, athlete and performer.

It will help them take a grounded perspective that allows them to be successful in sports and life.

And it allows them to have a positive experience and develop friendships.

As my two boys grow, I plan to follow my dad’s lead by providing unconditional love and support. I am sure I will mess up — what parent doesn’t?

But I will do my best to emphasize effort and improvement, to help them develop into confident athletes who work well with others, performers who can handle adversity and failure, and people who put winning in perspective.

I will work to provide them with opportunities in sport so I know they can be successful.

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