

## Dealing with the Worried Child

In today's society children seem to have many things to worry about. Young athletes have all these plus their worries coming from participating in youth sports.

Most children approach their youth sports experience expecting to have fun, learn skills, enjoy competition, and maybe even improve their physical fitness. And, most children achieve these goals to one degree or another. Most children also suffer some level of distress during their youth sport experience. Much of it is self-produced as they worry about playing well and not making serious mistakes.

To many people's surprise, children do not rank parents very high on their lists of sources of stress. Why is this such a surprise? Probably because the parents who are the exceptions to this statement are often the most visible parents at youth sport practices and competitions. They are the sports equivalents of the "stage mom". Somehow, parents have to figure out how to walk the line between being supportive of their child's efforts in sports, and interfering, or worse, controlling, their child's participation in sports. During the past several weeks there has been a discussion on the Exercise and Sport Psychology listserv about the proper role of parents of youth sport athletes. Fundamentally, the discussion has revolved around who knows what's best for the child, the parents or the child. Although the specific issue that led to this discussion was when to start a child in sports, the discussion expanded to the larger issue. One of the conclusions reached is that there is no absolute answer because every child is different. Dealing with your worried athlete requires the same understanding. You need to determine specifically what it is that the child is worried about. We have also found that children worry about many different things when they participate, they do not necessarily feel that their level of distress is so high that it is affecting their performance. One difficulty parents may have is determining when their child is distressed to the point that they should try to help. The most obvious signs are behavioral changes just before competitions, changes like inability to sleep, changes in eating habits, and so on. Do not be tempted to excuse these as "just being excited" although that may be the case, particularly if they only occur occasionally.

There are several strategies parents might employ to help reduce distress. Help the child keep sports in perspective with the other activities in their life. Be honest with your child about what you expect of them in sports. There is probably nothing worse than a child worrying constantly about not living up to his or her parents' expectations in sports only to find out later that all the parents wanted was for the child to have fun. Make sure that the child has realistic expectations for themselves. Be supportive but in moderation. Remember your actions at practices and competitions reflect on your child. Make them proud of you, don't embarrass them.

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