

The Mental Game: Empower Your Kids

Welcome to The Mental Game, a feature with Rob Polishook, MA, CPC. Rob, a mental training coach who founded and directs Inside the Zone Sports Performance Group, helps athletes compete with confidence, calm, and concentration, often the difference between winning and losing.

Rob is no stranger to tennis. He works directly with tennis players, coaches, parents and teams at all levels. He is a regular speaker for the USPTA and has spoken internationally in Israel and India.

In this installment, Rob Polishook teaches how to stay calm and empower your kids while watching.

Imagine the scenario: You are watching your child play, and it feels like you're the one playing. Your palms are sweaty and your feet are tapping with the immediacy of how Rafael Nadal awaits the coin toss. You look across the way and see your opponent's parents pacing up and down, burning a hole in the ground. Now think about the emotions you have while watching the match, anything from happiness to helplessness, enthusiasm to embarrassment, poise to protectionism, and everything else in between. You might even wonder why you put yourself through this emotional roller coaster tournament after each tournament.

We all have immediate reactions when watching a loved one play a match. Think about the time your daughter's opponent made what you perceived to be a bad call, and then it happened again, and again. What was going through your head? Possibly something like, "How could that kid make a call like that?" or "My daughter works so hard, this isn't right." Then your thoughts may change to ways to rectify the situation: "When is she going to call a line judge?" and "Why doesn't she stand up for herself?" Ultimately, you may feel a bit helpless because behind the fence you're unable to change, do, or fix anything. These are all natural reactions, but remember, it's not about *how you are* experiencing the situation, but about *how your child is*.

Often young players will look over toward their parents during the match and may detect general displeasure from their parents body language about how things are playing out on the court. They may feel judged or that they are not living up the parent's expectations. Other times it's not a matter of even needing to detect that something is wrong, because the parent is outwardly waving their hands and mouthing instructions in the direction of their child. How can this be helpful to the child? Obviously it can't. The immediate reaction of the child is for their focus to leave the court and focus on the parent's reactions. Once the player begins to think about what the parent is thinking, they are no longer focused on the match.

What's important is to become aware of your reaction, stay calm, and then choose the appropriate response that will be helpful to your child. Certainly this is easy to say, the bigger question becomes: How can you stay calm? What actions are appropriate? And most importantly, how can you be most helpful to your child?

The following is a self- reflection questioning technique that parents can use when watching a match. These questions will help you examine your emotions, stay calm, and most importantly, empower your children.

Question #1: *What happened and how are you thinking about it?*

Simply, replay what happened, only the facts: maybe your child got a bad call, or someone threw a racket. Then just be curious to the story you are telling yourself aside from the event. For example, "the opponent made a bad call! My child is being taken advantage of; I wish he/she would do something."

Question #2: *What thoughts or feelings does the situation bring up for you?* Be aware of your thoughts without reacting to them or judging them. Thoughts and feelings like anger, helplessness, and frustration. Or even, I need to do something...Notice where in your body you're holding the tension. Take a few deep breaths.

Question #3: *How do you think your child sees the situation?*

Be aware that what you see and feel from watching off the court is probably NOT the same as what your child is experiencing. They will usually have a different view and perspective. They are on the court, on the front line. Their story is NOT the same as yours.

Question #4: *How can you help yourself, honor their process, and best deal with the situation?*

Since you are not the one playing, you can't do anything to help your child while they are on the court. So what is your best option? How about trusting that what your child does at this time is the right thing for them in their development, and in their journey at this moment?

While these questions can't change or fix a situation, they will hopefully help you stay calm instead of quickly reacting to a situation. In return, your child will feel your trust in allowing them to work through a difficult on-court situation, and be able to focus on the match instead of getting distracted by concerns of what you or others might be thinking. In fact, demonstrating trust in your child despite difficult circumstances will only inspire them to increased confidence in themselves on the court. Let your child process these situations in their own way, provide your support, and you may be surprised at how much your child may grow from even a negative on-court situation.

For more information about how to help you or your child achieve peak performance visit www.insidethezone.com.

Don't forget to mention that you read about Rob Polishook on USTA Eastern's website!