

## **Assessing Your Role As A Tennis Parent**

Junior tennis today is a complex tapestry shaped by positive and rewarding experiences, and at times, challenging and difficult lessons. With players starting at a young age, the parent plays the role of the steward of his/her child's development and tennis experiences. Often times this is the parents first foray into youth sports. Unlike team sports where there is a "community" of parents supporting the whole team, tennis, being an individual sport, often times can be isolating for a parent, leaving them to "figure it out" on their own. This can lead to a parent imparting their own experience with sports as a youth or young adult, which can be flawed with all the changes that have taken place in society and sports.

However, regardless of a parents depth of tennis knowledge or practical experience, one thing we do know is there are behaviors that support and foster a positive and healthy environment for all parties involved in supporting the goals of the young athlete. As parents, we all want what is best for our children, in life, school and sports. There are many common denominators in these pillars of a child's life. In this article I will explore and share sage advice from parents, coaches and players.

When it comes to competition, tennis can be a nomadic sport, creating a fluid emotional dynamic between the attending parent, coach and child. Ideally, the parents role should be one that is supporting, nurturing, encouraging player accountability, unconditional love and support, creating player autonomy, and financial support. Unfortunately, we also see parental behaviors that are conditional, lack emotional support, and are critical of the athlete, their effort, and even that of their opponent. There can be many reasons for these actions, ranging from lack of experience and understanding, to unique family dynamics.

If we are to do what is best for our child in tennis, what does appropriate parental support and behavior look like? There was a study conducted by Dan Gould, Larry Lauer, Nathan Roman and Marguerite Pierce at Michigan State University at "Institute for the Study of Youth Sports, 2005" through a grant funded by USTA Sports Science, titled "Understanding The Role Parents Play In Junior Tennis Success". In this article, I have included some excerpts from the study. The following information will give you the synopsis of the study and findings from the interviews.

### **Understanding the Roles Parents Play In Junior Tennis Success**

Bloom (1985) conceptualized talent development in youth as occurring in three stages (early, middle, and elite) that the USTA has adapted these findings to tennis – the introduction/ foundation years; the refinement/transitional years; and the world-class performance years.

The figure below shows the ages at which participants in the study entered each phase and subsequently left. The mean age for the elite years is not provided because players are still in this phase.

### **Bloom (1985) Progressive Phases of Talent Development**

#### **Phase 1: (Introduction/Foundation years)**

The Early Years M Age Began = 4.6 Range = 2-8.5 M Age Left = 9.4 Range = 8-11

#### **Phase 2: (Refinement/Transitional Years)**

The Middle Years M Age Began = 10.1 Range = 8-12 M Age Left = 14.5 Range = 13-17

#### **Phase 3: (World Class Performance yYears)**

The Elite Years M Age Began = 15.0 Range = 14 -18 M Age Left = NA

## **PATTERNS OF POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE PARENTAL BEHAVIORS ACROSS THE CASES**

**Early Years.** The early years are the beginning phase of a child's tennis development where he or she develops a strong liking of the game. Participation is often recreational with very little systematic training.

### **Eight Important Positive Parental Behaviors in the Early Years**

Provided Transportation

Provided Emotional, Logistical, and Financial Support

Provided the Opportunity and Resources

Provided Push to Play, but Did Not Pressure

Exhibited Emotional Control

Emphasized Fun

Stressed Good On-court Conduct

Helped Develop Child's Talents by Hitting with Child (and sometimes coaching)

"I think one of the reasons I ended up being successful professionally was because it was fun (in those early years)... I wasn't starting like a lot of players, parents got involved with their kids...dragging them out there. The initial, whatever, spark, was that it was just fun..."  
(Elite female tennis player)

### Three Important Negative Parental Behaviors in the Early Years

Were Negative, Yelled, or Angry

Placed Too Much Pressure on Child, Over Pushed

Lost Healthy Perspective (sometimes over involved)

**Middle Years.** The middle years are the developmental phase where a player begins systematic training multiple times per week and travels for competition. Players in this phase receive a great deal of coaching.

### Ten Important Positive Parental Behaviors in the Middle Years

Provided Transportation

Provided Emotional, Logistical, and Financial Support

Provided the Opportunity for Involvement and Resources

Provided the Right Amount of Push to Practice/Held High Expectations

Provided Push to Play, but Did Not Pressure Child

Exhibited Emotional Control

Stressed Good On-court Conduct

Provided Supplemental Coaching/Instruction

Kept Tennis in Perspective

Ensured/Facilitated Good Coaching

Stressed/Instilled Hard Work

“There were times that (the player) did not want to go to practice as he got older and we said no you are going. This is a commitment. You made a commitment. And if you don’t want to commit to something then you don’t do it. But we told him, life is full of commitments. So I mean if you got out of this commitment, what else are you going to get out of?”  
(Parent of a successful male tennis player)

### **Eight Important Negative Parental Behaviors in the Middle Years**

Too Much Tennis Talk

Emphasized Winning/Results

Pressured Child (often perceived by the child, but not the parent)

Reacted Emotionally at Matches

Restricted Player's Social Life

Were Negative/Critical

Were Over-involved (Didn't give enough space to player)

Moved for Player's Tennis Development which Negatively Affected Him/Her and the Family

**Elite Years.** The elite years phase of development involves the player training with a master coach. Tennis takes a central role in the life of the player and he or she competes national and/or internationally.

### **Nine Important Positive Parental Behaviors in the Elite Years**

Provided Emotional, Logistical, Managerial, and Financial Support

Provided the Opportunity and Resources

Exhibited Emotional Control

Stressed Good On-court Conduct

Lessened Involvement/Pulled Back Purposefully

Allowed Child Independence

Kept Tennis in Perspective

Provided Consistent and Stable Parenting

Helped with Professional Career Decisions

Helped to Make Good Decisions (Gave Advice)

**“A top-level coach should know how to motivate, encourage, discipline, they need to be the parent of their (the player's) tennis. And the parent needs to be more love, support, and backbone and friend. And finding those (boundaries) is the key and never crossing, never crossing...and knowing what your role is and doing it.”**  
(Elite male tennis player)

## Six Important Negative Parental Behaviors in the Elite Years

Emphasized Winning

Were Negative/Critical or Lacked Communication with Child

Did Not Allow Player to be Independent

Over-involved with Player's Tennis

Controlling of Player

Had Problems with Coach

“...I feel very strongly about the pursuit of excellence in something...I think it is a tough world we live in, a tough world for children, to be excellent in something is like wearing a suit of armor, it protects you against so many things going on in the world that tear you down and make you feel less than good about yourself. And so in that sense, since it appears tennis was the thing (that his daughter was motivated to pursue), I did believe and I encouraged her to feel that it was a worthwhile pursuit to pursue excellence in her tennis, but it wasn't that it had to be tennis.”  
(Parent of a successful female tennis player)

## Synopsis of the Development of Talented Tennis Players and their Parents' Roles in the Talent Development Process

In this section of the results we attempted to identify effective and ineffective parental attitudes and behaviors that influenced the talent development process. Again, we urge parents, players, and coaches to realize that no parent can espouse all of these positive attitudes and exhibit all of these effective behaviors all of the time! Each and every parent and child has a unique history with unique personalities that make it impossible to provide a 'recipe' to parenting one's child successfully. Thus, *there is no one correct way to parent one's child in junior tennis*. However, it is clear that the parents who had good relationships with their child at the end of the developmental years, possessed a few core characteristics that made them successful. This includes a healthy perspective of tennis where developing the child and having fun was always more important than winning, the use of many types of support and a great deal of it, and the ability to understand their shifting parenting role. Parenting a child in junior tennis is a very difficult and complex process requiring the parent to make sound decisions based on what is best for the child, even when there is pressure to win or to keep up with the rest of the tennis world. The previous charts summarize positive and negative parent-player interactions across the three phases of development. It is hoped that this depiction will provide a user-friendly way of remembering attitudes and behaviors to emphasize and to avoid. In this next section we will provide a temporal description of how players and parents may proceed through the developmental years.

## Successful Behaviors

<b>POSITIVE BEHAVIORS INTRODUCTION/ FOUNDATION Phase One</b> Age of Player: 4.6-9.4 Years in Phase: 4.8	<b>REFINEMENT/ TRANSITIONAL Phase Two</b> Age of Player: 10.1-14.5 Years in Phase: 4.4	<b>WORLD CLASS/ELITE PERFORMANCE Phase Three</b> Age of Player: 15.0+ Years in Phase: NA
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provided Transportation</li> <li>• Held Emotionally Intelligent Tennis Discussions</li> <li>• Provided General Support</li> <li>• Were Involved with Child In Tennis</li> <li>• Provided Emotional Support</li> <li>• Provided Logistical/ Financial Assistance</li> <li>• Provided Opportunities/ Resources</li> <li>• Emphasized Multiple Sports</li> <li>• Exhibited Emotional Control</li> <li>• Provided Encouragement</li> <li>• Didn't Pressure/Over-push</li> <li>• Pushed Optimally</li> <li>• Hit with Child</li> <li>• Provided Basic Instruction</li> <li>• Did Not Try to Coach</li> <li>• Served as Match Coach</li> <li>• Developed Child Athletically &amp; Physically</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pushed Optimally</li> <li>• Conditional Push</li> <li>• Didn't Pressure/OverPush</li> <li>• Exhibited Emotional Control</li> <li>• Were Positive and Stayed Positive</li> <li>• Provided Opportunities/ Resources</li> <li>• Stressed Good On-Court Conduct</li> <li>• Parents Believed in Child</li> <li>• Provided General Support</li> <li>• Provided Logistical Support</li> <li>• Provided Emotional Support at Matches</li> <li>• Provided Transportation</li> <li>• Provided Encouragement</li> <li>• Negative Actions Motivate Child</li> <li>• Parent Sacrifice/Effort</li> <li>• Provided Supplemental Coaching/Instruction at Matches</li> <li>• Held Emotionally</li> <li>• Intelligent Tennis Discussions With Child</li> <li>• Picked up Balls</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provided General Support</li> <li>• Provided Logistical Support</li> <li>• Provided Managerial Assistance</li> <li>• Provided Financial Assistance</li> <li>• Parents Believed in Child</li> <li>• Provided Emotional Support</li> <li>• Provided Transportation</li> <li>• Exhibited Emotional Control</li> <li>• Became Less Involved/ Pulled Back</li> <li>• Allowed Independence</li> <li>• Provided Opportunities/ Resources</li> <li>• Stayed Positive</li> <li>• Provided Encouragement</li> <li>• Stressed On-Court Conduct</li> <li>• Stressed Education</li> <li>• Consistent/Stable Parenting</li> <li>• Helped with Education Plans</li> <li>• Helped to Make Good Decisions</li> <li>• Helped with Pro Career Decisions</li> <li>• Emphasized Work Ethic</li> <li>• Emphasized Fun</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focused on Hard Work And Development</li> <li>• Developed Player While Having Fun</li> <li>• Kept Tennis in Perspective And Balanced Life</li> <li>• Stressed Good On-Court Conduct</li> <li>• Taught Life Lessons Through Tennis</li> <li>• Made Tennis a Family Experience</li> <li>• Created and Maintained a Stable/Secure Home Life</li> <li>• Taught Sport Psychology Skills</li> <li>• Made Sacrifices/Effort</li> <li>• Emphasized Fun</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Kept Tennis in Perspective</li> <li>• Stressed Education</li> <li>• Stressed/Instilled Hard Work</li> <li>• Ensured/Facilitated Good Coaching</li> <li>• Emphasized Fun</li> <li>• Winning Not Overemphasizes (performance focus)</li> <li>• Created and Maintained a Stable Home Environment</li> <li>• Taught Sport Psychology Skills</li> <li>• Helped Set Goals</li> <li>• Instilled Competitiveness</li> <li>• Taught Values/Life Lessons</li> <li>• One Parent Tennis Focused, The Other One Not</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Had Positive Interactions With Coaches</li> <li>• Communicated Effectively With Child</li> <li>• Didn't Pressure</li> <li>• Kept Tennis In Perspective/ Balance</li> <li>• Gave Advice to Child</li> </ul>
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## Negative Behaviors

<b>NEGATIVE BEHAVIORS INTRODUCTION/ FOUNDATION</b> <b>Phase One</b> <i>Age of Player: 4.6-9.4</i> <i>Years in Phase: 4.8</i>	<b>REFINEMENT/ TRANSITIONAL</b> <b>Phase Two</b> <i>Age of Player: 10.1-14.5</i> <i>Years in Phase: 4.4</i>	<b>WORLD CLASS/ELITE PERFORMANCE</b> <b>Phase Three</b> <i>Age of Player: 15.0+</i> <i>Years in Phase: NA</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Did Too Much for Child/ Not Making Independent</li> <li>• Negative/Yelled/Angry</li> <li>• Placed Too Much Pressure/Over Pushed</li> <li>• Tennis Not in Perspective</li> <li>• Struggled with Parent-</li> <li>• Coach Dual Role</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Too Much Tennis Talk</li> <li>• Did Not Develop Independence, Doing Too Much For Child</li> <li>• Emphasis on Winning/ Results</li> <li>• Parent Approval Tied to Tennis Performance</li> <li>• Parent Pressured/Player Perceived Pressure</li> <li>• Parent Emotional Match Reactions</li> <li>• Parents Restricted Social Life</li> <li>• Parent Negative/Critical</li> <li>• Over-involved</li> <li>• Didn't Give Enough Space</li> <li>• Lack of Encouragement</li> <li>• Move for Tennis Negatively Affected Player</li> <li>• Move for Tennis Negatively Affected Family</li> <li>• Parent Embarrassed Child</li> <li>• Restricted Match Play</li> <li>• Misguided Tennis Developmental Decisions</li> <li>• Dual Role (parent-coach) Struggles</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Pressured to Play Tennis</li> <li>• Reminded of Sacrifices</li> <li>• Emphasis on Winning</li> <li>• Did Not Allow to Be Independent</li> <li>• Over-involved</li> <li>• Bragged About Child</li> <li>• Parental Actions Led to Over Training And Playing Too Much</li> <li>• Negative Reactions to Child's Tennis</li> <li>• Unrealistic Expectations</li> <li>• Restricted Social Life</li> <li>• Controlling</li> <li>• Concerned with money</li> <li>• Parent-Coach Problems</li> <li>• Gave Unwanted Advice to Child</li> <li>• Lack of Communication</li> <li>• Negative/Critical Communication</li> </ul>

As a tennis parent, what character traits and best practices from above are part of the culture you strive to create for your child? As noted above, there are a variety of support mechanisms to create a healthy and fun tennis experience for your child. Besides the character you model and advocate for your child, it's also important that your child's coach be on the same page as you regarding behavior, character and the definition of success.

Your child's tennis coach's teaching philosophy and personal character should align with your families. Your child's coach can be a wealth of information for you in navigating the stages of your child's tennis development. If you are unsure of what to do in situations or how to handle the emotions you as a parent experience with your child and their tennis, ask him or her for their advice. I can assure you your question won't be the first time they have heard it.

Located below are a couple of resources that you may find valuable in your quest to do the best for your child as they develop as a tennis player. In next month's article, we will review the danger of comparing your child's tennis success with that of his/her peers. If you have any questions regarding junior tennis or best practices for parenting in junior tennis, please contact Crosscourt Consulting at [crosscourtconsulting1@gmail.com](mailto:crosscourtconsulting1@gmail.com).



[Tennis Parents Guide](#)  
[Growing Champions For Life](#)