

The Mental Game: What's the Best Way to Encourage My Child?

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 praise your child's efforts by focusing on the process.

Growing up is tough! Certainly you remember what it was like? Well, maybe not... So let's go back in time: it was full of failures, successes, setbacks, discoveries, and obstacles. Most of all, it was a time of experimenting, trial and error. Usually, when left to our own devices, we managed to figure things out. Think about learning to walk: it usually necessitated many instances of falling, receiving encouragement and support from others, and then viola! Suddenly you were standing on your own two feet! Children thirst for approval. They also need to feel emotional safety and unconditional support. This emotional safety is like a free ticket which says, "Try it! If you fail it's ok we still love you."

There are two ways in which a child is usually encouraged after succeeding, or failing, at a project, test, sport or anything else. The first is to praise the result: "You're so smart Johnny" or "You're the best Mary!" The second way is to praise the process, that is, what it took to make the result happen. For example, "I'm proud of you for working so hard on this project Johnny" or "I admire how you stuck to it and bounced back in that match Mary."

Carol Dweck, author of Mindset and a professor at Stanford University, conducted research on the best ways to empower and motivate children. From her research, she discovered that kids who were praised on the result only, became afraid to try new things. If they failed, they viewed themselves as less than worthy. However, kids that received praise based on their process were much more likely to experiment with new tasks, and were not afraid to attempt more difficult ones. In fact, these kids reveled at the challenge, because they knew it wasn't about the end result only. Instead, they placed importance on the effort they put into the project or game. However, the kids that received feedback on results alone shied away from trying new challenges, especially if they were then presented with more difficult tasks.

So, how can we apply this to tennis? What's the best way to encourage your child? I suggest bringing the focus of your feedback toward how they accomplished the task, rather than simply that they completed it. Focus on the traits they used to complete their work. Refer to traits such as perseverance, focus, concentration, endurance, awareness, aptitude, and desire.

Here is an example of a conversation between a parent and her child during a tennis win based around providing process-driven feedback:

Child: Mom, Mom, I won today!

Mom: Congratulations! That's great! How did you do that?

Child: Um...I don't know..., I just played hard.

Mom: I'm proud of you. It's really impressive how hard you worked and never gave up, even when things got tough, I admire that in you.

Child: (big smile) wow...can we get some ice cream tonight?

Conversely, here is an example of a conversation between a parent and child providing process driven feedback when they lose a match.

Child: Mom, I lost! (sniffling)

Mom: Yes, we were watching, I can see you're really sad about it.

Child: I am, I hate losing!

Mom: You're right...It's disappointing. It's ok to feel like that.

Child: Yea, it hurts.

Mom: I understand...However, I want you to know that I'm really proud of how you competed and never gave up.

Child: Really? Thanks.

Mom: That's what succeeding is all about - competing as hard as you can. You did that. The scoreboard doesn't tell the whole picture. In order to improve and even win, a player needs to learn from matches. Improvement is a constant process. Remember - even Roger Federer loses sometimes.

Child: Yea I guess you're right.

Mom: Let's get some Pizza, tomorrow will be another day, and I trust you will make it a good one.

You will notice that in both scenarios the parent was acknowledging the child's feelings and even validating them. This helps the child to feel accepted and put them in a safe place. All the while there was a focus on providing feedback to the process rather than the outcome.

Remember, winning and losing is beyond a player's control. However, how a player prepares and competes is within their control. These are the things we should be reinforcing, behaviors and things which they can control. Strong preparation, providing a complete effort, never giving up are also skills that a child will use effectively for life both on and off the court.

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!