

The Mental Game: Oh, No- My Child Lost!

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 Five Steps to Take After a Loss to Ease the Pain.

How many times have you watched the following at a tournament? Both players are competing in a long, hard-fought match. There are many turning points—opportunities for each player to take control. However, as always happens, only one player can win. The final score is 2-6, 7-5, 6-7 (5), and the losing player is devastated, often sitting by the net post in tears. Seemingly out of nowhere comes that player's parent, trying to offer quick advice or corrections on what the player could have and should have done differently. Some of the comments might sound like, "You shouldn't have played scared" or, "Your opponent was a pusher—how could you lose to her?" You might also hear something like, "I would think you would play differently after all those lessons." You can imagine how this affects an aspiring junior athlete's ego, confidence, and ability to bounce back. In short, not too well!

Another scenario is one in which a parent is driving his losing child home. Mind you, the child experiences this car ride much like confinement to a "prison cell", with nowhere to escape and a barrage of suggestions directed right at them, "would haves," and "should haves" to listen to. The conversation is usually one-sided, and the despondent player hears remarks such as, "How could you miss that overhead?" or, "We may have to rethink your training program if your results are going to be like this" or, "You have to do better than that." Once again, the losing player internalizes these words, not only does this negative feedback hurt when children receive it, it often stays with them for years to come.

As a mental training coach, I have heard from kids of all levels about what it was like to hear their parents' infamous post-match recaps. It usually wasn't helpful! In light of this, I offer below five *helpful* steps—to be followed sequentially—that parents might follow after a child experiences a heartbreaking loss:

1. **Say nothing.** The premise here is that, through all their practice and hard work, children have earned the right to play- that is, to win or to lose. By extension, they also effectively earn the right to feel disappointed, or even heartbroken, after a tough loss; in fact, they *should* feel this way. Players must be given the time to mourn losses and process their emotions without the interference of parent comments. By allowing children to undergo this process without commentary, you are providing them a safe place and time in which they can let go of the emotions and begin to figure out what they can learn from it. Remember, a loss can be just as important as a win, in fact sometimes more so. A loss provides feedback, it teaches the athlete to evaluate themselves and make changes in sport, personal development and individual coping skills. Do, however, give them a hug or a pat on the back, or even an "I love you" to let them know that you support them, win or lose.
2. **Just listen.** Again, because children will be disappointed after a devastating loss, it's important for parents to understand that they are not looking for you to fix the problem. Rather, children would just like a compassionate ear to listen to them which will help them get through their disappointment. Therefore, while saying nothing is good, taking the next step—listening to your child—is even better.
3. **Acknowledge and validate.** We all have feelings, and you can imagine how bruised your children's may be after a tough loss. When you acknowledge and validate their feelings, you are letting them know that they have a right to feel the way they do, that you are not judging them, that feeling this way is understandable, and that you can simply see things from their perspective. After your child expresses how disappointed he is, you might say, "I can understand

why you would feel that way after playing so hard” or, “It makes perfect sense that you feel this way—it’s truly disappointing when you lose a close match like that.” This will provide your child the safety and space to process through their emotions.

4. **Let them bring up the match themselves.** All parents have a natural inclination to want to fix things or make them better. Understandable, parents want their children to be happy. Once again, however, it’s best to restrain yourself and let children bring issues up themselves. Give them the space in which to process their feelings, and when they are ready they will discuss the match. If they still don’t raise the issue, allow them more space. By doing so, you are telling them that it’s OK to feel what they feel and you respect their privacy. I have heard parents say, “If she doesn’t talk about the match, that means she doesn’t care.” Quite the contrary: children care, but also need the freedom to solve problems on their own or maybe with their coach. Your job as a parent is to provide unconditional support, not to try to fix your child’s problems. In fact, nothing is broken. As one parent said to me, “My job is to show up, say I love you, I’m proud of you and ask what you want for dinner,”- basically express that life moves on and I love you no matter what.
5. **Ask them if they want to talk.** Here again, you are being respectful of your child’s right to talk or not talk about the match. The key here is to allow an ample amount of time to elapse before asking this question. Exactly how long to wait depends on the child and how long it takes him or her to work through a negative event. In my experience, the range is a few hours to a full day. If children want to talk, first try steps 1, 2, and 3 above. If you say nothing, listen, and acknowledge and validate, children will feel safe and unafraid of criticism. Consequently, they may feel more open to the possibility of discussing how they were feeling at the time, and how they could handle matters differently if they were faced with the same situation again. Then, if children seem ready for feedback, you can take the step of asking them if they are interested in some thoughts you had about the match. If the answer is “yes,” you can express yourself and ask empowering questions such as, “What would be another way to look at that?” or, “What else might you have done in that situation?” or the broader question, “What did you learn from that match that you can apply to future matches?” Be aware, though, that if they say “no,” accept this. They do not wish to talk about the match, and it’s important that you do not impose your views.

To sum up, the underlying principal is to let children work through their understandable disappointment over losing a match. Remember, they have earned the right to be disappointed. As a parent, understand that by saying nothing, listening, and then acknowledging and validating your children’s feelings, you will help them to feel better about a tough situation, while providing the confidence to feel safe enough to possibly open up. If they don’t open up, be respectful of this choice. After an appropriate amount of time, you may ask them if they want to talk. Be sure to really listen to their answer; it may be “no!” In that case, remember that this is why you have hired a coach that you and your child trust. The coach and your child will certainly discuss and work through the issues and challenges that all children face in their tournament matches. If the answer is “yes,” remember while expressing yourself to also include empowering questions, which allow your child to feel a sense of control over their own improvement. Remember, above all, your job is to continue to love and support them unconditionally as the person, not the athlete.

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!