

## How to Establish Rapport with your Athletic Child

First, I talked with the young athletes and found that though parents often present a problem, the youngsters appear anxious to solve it. They want their parents to be closely involved but without creating pressure and without causing either a super-critical or an over-protective environment.

Here are some golden rules,

**1. Make sure that your child knows that - win or lose, scared or heroic - you love him, appreciate his efforts and are not disappointed in him.** This will allow him to do his best, to avoid developing a fear of failure based on the specter of disapproval and family disappointment if he does mess up. Be the person in his life he can look to for constant positive enforcement. Learn to hide your feelings if he disappoints you.

**2. Try your best to be completely honest about your child's athletic capability, his competitive attitude, his sportsmanship and his actual skill level.**

**3. Be helpful but don't "coach" him on the way to the track, diamond or court...on the way back...at breakfast...and so on.** Sure, it's tough not to, but it's a lot tougher for the child to be inundated with advice, pep talks and often critical instruction.

**4. Teach him to enjoy the thrill of competition, to be "out there trying" to be working to improve his skills and attitudes...to take the physical bumps and come back for more.** Don't say "winning doesn't count" because it does. Instead, help him develop the feel for competing, for trying hard, for having fun.

**5. Try not to relive your athletic life through your child in a way that creates pressure; you fumbled too, you lost as well as won.** You were frightened, you backed off at times, you were not always heroic. Don't pressure him because of your pride. Sure, he is an extension of you, but let him make his own voyage of discovery into the world of sport...Let him sail into it without interference. Help to calm the water when things get stormy, but let him handle his own navigational problems. Find out what he is all about and don't assume he feels the way you did, wants the same things, has the same attitudes. You gave him life, now let him learn to handle it, enjoy it. Let him need you on his terms - don't help him to death.

Athletic children need their parents, so you must not withdraw. Just remember there is a thinking, feeling, sensitive, free spirit out there in that uniform who needs a lot of understanding, especially when his world turns bad on him.

If he is comfortable with you - win or lose - he's on his way to maximum achievement and enjoyment - and you will get your kicks too! In the meantime, start to think of your child as a child, not as "my son, the athlete!" If you do, the morale of the family will greatly improve.

**6. Don't compete with the coach.** The young athlete often comes home and chatters on about "coach says this, coach says that" ad nauseam. This, I realize, is often hard to take - especially for the father who has had some sports experience or for the mother if what the "coach says" refers to the youngster's eating pattern.

When a certain degree of disenchantment about the coach sets in, some parents side with the youngster and are happy to see him shot down. This is a mistake. It should provide a chance to discuss (not lecture) with the youngster the importance of learning how to handle problems, react to criticism and understand the necessity for discipline, rules, regulations and so on.

**7. Don't compare the skill, courage or attitudes of your child with that of other members of the squad or team, at least in his hearing.** And if your child shows a tendency to resent the treatment he gets from the coach, or the approval other team members get, be careful to talk over the facts quietly and try to provide fair and honest counsel. If you play the role of the overly-protective parent who is blinded to the relative merits of your youngster and his actual status as an athlete and individual, you will merely perpetuate the problem. Your youngster could become a problem athlete.

**8. You should also get to know the coach so that you can be assured that his philosophy, attitudes, ethics and knowledge are such that you are happy to expose your child to him.** The coach has a tremendous potential influence.

**9. Always remember that children tend to exaggerate, both when praised and when criticized.** Temper your reactions to the tales of woe or heroics they bring home. Don't cut your youngster down if you feel he is exaggerating - just take a look at the situation and gradually try to develop an even level. Above all, don't over-react and rush off to the coach if you feel an injustice has been done. Investigate, but anticipate that the problem is not as it might appear.

**10. Make a point of understanding courage, and the fact that is relative.** There are different kinds of courage. Some of us can climb mountains, but are frightened to get into a fight. Others can fight without fear but turn to jelly if a bee approaches. Everyone is frightened in certain areas - nobody escapes fear and that is just as well since it often helps us avoid disaster. Explain to your youngster that courage does not mean an absence of fear but rather means doing something in spite of fear or discomfort.

In a way, the parents are the primary coaches. I have talked with many great athletes who, in evaluating the reasons for their success, have said: "My parents really helped. I was lucky in this respect." To me the coaching job the parent has is the toughest one of all and it takes a lot of effort to do it well. It is worth all the effort when you hear your youngster boast (now or later on) that you played a key role in his success.