

“Start by doing what’s necessary; then do what’s possible; and suddenly you are doing the impossible.” St. Francis of Assisi

A Parent’s Role in Their Student-Athlete’s Development

Most successful student-athletes at the college level and those who go on to compete professionally in their sport, usually count on a few adult figures who have served important guidance roles in their athletic development.

In a 2004 study, Wylleman and Lavellee created a developmental model that frames athletes’ sports careers. They identified four different levels of development:

1. Athletic
2. Psychological
3. Psychosocial
4. Academic and Vocational

The model serves to highlight the importance of support networks in athletic development, showing that different social networks affect different stages of individual development. For example, it shows that parents and coaches are the main support networks during a teenager’s athletic development.



Surveys show that main support for student-athletes comes from: **#1 Parents and #2 Coaches**

Parent’s influence on enjoyment



A study by McCarthy, Jones and Clark-Carter (2008), investigated the sources of enjoyment experienced by youth athletes, finding that parental involvement was the most frequently identified factor by the athletes. In a study of teenage tennis players (Park & Kim, 2014), the athletes provided examples of the types of support they received from their parents which they reacted to positively:

- Tangible support - presence at training sessions and games and providing food and equipment
- Esteem support - confidence building words
- Information support - providing additional information on skill development from other credible sources
- Emotional support - cheering them up before games and providing positive, constructive feedback after training and games

- Network support - listening to what your teenage athlete says and making a real effort to understand their needs and desires in the sport

In a study of parental behavior, the top ten types of support that parents said they practiced included all of the above, as well as expressing vocal support during games when things are going well and maintaining open lines of communication with their children's coaches.

How parents can "Blow It!"



Enjoyment is a major factor in the continued interest and participation in sports during the teenage years. For most teenage athletes, their initiation to the sport from a young age was influenced by their parents. It is for this reason that their enjoyment of the sport is tied to how they perceive their parents actions and behaviors around their sport involvement.

One of the most common examples of the negative feelings parents can create is when they try to **take ownership** of their children's sporting careers, ratcheting up the pressure which their children feel. It is natural to want your child to reach their very best level, and while you may think it is their destiny to play at the college or professional level, that may not be what they want for themselves.

Pushy parents who place all emphasis on winning at all costs and who give negative feedback and criticism have been identified in studies as reasons for youth athlete's diminished enjoyment and participation in a sport. In a study of coaches at soccer academies in England, parents who were overly involved in their children's sporting careers, as well as those who unhealthily inflated their children's egos were frowned upon by the coaches. According to them, these parents had a negative impact on the success and sporting development of the athletes.



Park & Kim (2014) also found that some children did not respond positively to the presence of their parents at every single practice and game, while appreciating having this presence some of the time. The athletes also reacted negatively to comparisons with other players and indicated that the advice their parents give sometimes conflicted with what coaches said, causing some confusion.

In the case of parental behavior, those who argued with and criticized coaches and referees caused their children to feel embarrassed. These actions were frowned upon by the athletes and coaches mentioned from previous studies.

Preparing for the future

The behaviors and ideas expressed by parents that have been mentioned above provide examples that your youth athletes see, which in turn shape how they feel about themselves and how they react to situations they are faced with. Positive reinforcement, continued interest in their achievements, and encouraging communication from parents is important to boost their confidence.

This confidence can be carried with them as they progress through their sporting careers as well as enter higher stages of education and work. Your support can also extend to your influence in other factors of their athletic development, such as their maintenance of a healthy diet through the foods you buy, the amount of rest they get, and their psychological and physical health through development through the provision of experts as needed. Parents really do have a variety of means through which they can influence the development of their teenage athlete athletically, psychologically, and physically.



If your youth athlete is interested in attending college to play sports, parental support takes on an even greater dimension. Your ability to understand the process of eligibility for each level of college athletics and to motivate your son or daughter to achieve academically, as well as athletically, will be important as they go through the process of choosing how exactly they want to pursue that dream. They will need you every step of the way through this process, where your interaction with coaches who may be recruiting them is also important.

Every parent at one point or another has found themselves negatively involved in their student-athlete's experience. For that reason we offer some basic tips moving forward:

1. Never discuss an athlete's bad performance in the car ride home from a game. Constructively bring up your advice the next day after emotions are dissolved. Only provide positive feedback game-day.
2. Remember this is their experience, not yours. Give them space to make mistakes and learn!
3. Your son or daughter has a 1/1000 chance of playing in college and a 1/13,000 chance of going pro. With odds like that you might as well let them have fun with their sport while they play.
4. Finally, and most importantly, if you make a mistake with your athlete tell them you are sorry, you love them, you are proud of them, you approve of them, and you truly love to watch them play.

The joy they will bring you will far surpass any pain. Happy Sporting!