

Empowering Conversations with Your Child

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by Jim Thompson

Question: What does a child need least when he or she returns home from the physically and emotionally taxing experience of a practice or competition?

Answer: A critic.

Question: What does a child need when he or she gets home?

Answer: Support.

Question: How does a parent best support his or her child after a practice or competition?

Answer: By engaging him or her in an "empowering conversation."

When we think about what makes people friends with each other, a number of things come to mind. For example, our friends like us and enjoy spending time with us, as we enjoy them. And what is it that we do when we are together with our friends? Mostly, we talk and listen to each other.

Conversations are the glue between people, the essential element in a strong relationship. Relationships wither without communication, and the very best form of communication is the conversation. Many parents fall into the trap of thinking that it is their job to talk while their child listens. Actually, that's only half right. It is also our job to listen while our child talks. It's a wonderful thing when both parent and child can talk and listen.

It is important that parents intentionally seek out conversations about sports with their young athletes. Here are some suggestions for how to engage your child in a conversation about sports:

Establish Your Goal - A Conversation Among Equals

A conversation is something between equals. Kings didn't have conversations with their subjects. They told them what to do. Prepare yourself for a conversation with your child by reminding yourself that sports is her thing, not yours. Remember that you want to support her, to let her know that you are on her side. Your goal is not to give advice on how to become a better skater. It should be to engage her in a conversation among equals, one of whom (you!) is on the side of the other (her!).

Adopt a Tell-Me-More Attitude

Adopt the attitude that you want your child to tell you more ("I really want to hear what you have to say."), and then listen to what he has to say - even if you don't agree with it or like it. The most productive conversation is one in which the child does more talking and the parent does more listening.

Listen!

In many instances you may know exactly what your child can do to improve. However, this is a conversation, remember? Your goal is to get your child to talk about her sports experience, so ask rather than tell. Save your telling for another time.

Use Open-Ended Questions

Your goal is to get your child to talk at length, so ask questions that will elicit longer, more thoughtful, responses, such as:

- o "What was the most enjoyable part of today's practice/competition?"
- o "What worked well?"
- o "What didn't turn out so well?"
- o "What did you learn that can help you in the future?"
- o "Any thoughts on what you'd like to work on at your next practice?"

Even if you saw the entire game/routine, the goal is to get your child to talk about the competition the way she saw it, not for you to tell her what she could have done better.

Show You Are Listening

Make it obvious to your child that you are paying attention through use of nonverbal actions such as making eye contact as he talks, nodding your head and making "listening noises" ("uh-huh," "hmm," "interesting," etc.). Listening is one of the greatest gifts you can give your child!

Let Your Child Set the Terms

William Pollack, M.D., author of *Real Boys: Rescuing Our Sons from the Myths of Boyhood*, notes that children have different "emotional schedules" that determine when they are ready to talk about an experience. Forcing a conversation right after a competition (when there may be a lot of emotion) is often less successful than waiting until the child gives an indication that he is ready to talk. And conversations don't have to be lengthy to be effective. If your child wants a brief discussion, defer to his wishes. If he feels like every discussion about sports is going to be long, he'll likely begin to avoid them. And don't be afraid of silence. Stick with it, and your child will open up to you.

Pollack also talks about "connecting through activity." Sometimes the best way to spark a conversation is through an activity that your child enjoys. Playing a board game or putting a puzzle together can allow space for a child to volunteer thoughts and feelings about the competition and how he performed.

Enjoy

The most important reason you should listen to your child with a tell-me-more attitude is because then she will want to talk to you, and as she gets older, you will find there is no greater gift than a child who enjoys conversations with you.

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