

The Role of Parents in the Development of Outstanding Athletes

We cannot map people's lives in advance, but much can be done to make desirable outcomes more likely. Acquiring high abilities is one such outcome. We can and should act to make it happen more often.

Howe (1989, p.182)

Ten current or former U.S. Olympic champions with outstanding performances took part in in-depth interviews, as did one of their coaches (n = 10), and a parent, guardian, or significant other (n = 10). These athletes competed in one or more Olympic Games and had an average of 2.4 Olympic Games each (range 1 to 4). Collectively they had won 32 Olympic medals (28 gold, 3 silver, and 1 bronze), with an average of 3.2 Olympic medals per participant (range 1 to 5). They were chosen based on an analysis of Olympic Games performance records and participant availability. The interview questions focused on the psychological and emotional attributes of the athlete, the process by which these attributes developed, and the culture supporting his or her development.

Parents and families were found to play a critical role in the development of outstanding athletes. They provide financial, logistical, and social-emotional support. Specifically, they:

- are very committed to their child
- model an active lifestyle
- expose their child to different sports
- transport their child
- attend games and practices
- provide considerable encouragement and support

While families clearly support and encourage participation, in most cases they exert little pressure to win. They emphasize an optimistic belief in the child's ability to succeed -- in other words a "can do" attitude. This is consistent with research that has found that a higher rate of parental encouragement is correlated with perceived physical competence for children. Families also model hard work and discipline, a finding which is consistent with research showing that parents of highly successful individuals espoused or modeled values related to achievement, such as hard work, success, being active and persistence.

In the final portion of the interview, the participants were asked to identify recommendations for those working with talented athletes:

Parenting Champions: Advice from Athletes, Parents and Coaches

Achievement Strategies

- Emphasize a “can do” / “Don’t quit” attitude.
- Allow kids to learn on their own – stand on two feet.
- Challenge your child to reach as far as he or she can.
- Encourage your child to problem solve in a healthy and constructive manner (e.g., explore all the options, seek advice and help when necessary).
- Expose your child to elite achievers in a variety of settings. Let them see that “ordinary” people just like them can achieve extraordinary things.
- Help athletes understand and value the connection between hard work and achievement.
- Strive to provide your child with the optimal push – a mix of unconditional support and parental motivation. Recognize that the optimal amount of push will change as your child ages, and it will vary from child to child.
- Help your child cope with failure and frustration. Help him or her see set backs as a normal and helpful part of striving for and achieving success.

Encouragement

- Be enthusiastic and encouraging.
- Give encouragement.
- Be supportive/ your child’s biggest fan.
- Don’t criticize your child.

Self-Motivation

- The child-athlete needs to be self-motivated and self-driven. As a parent, you can help your child-athlete maintain his or her motivation, but you can’t create it for him or her.
- Understand that the key to developing talent in any area is to first foster and build an internal love of the activity and a solid base of healthy psychological skills (e.g., healthy coping mechanisms, determination, focus).
- Long-term commitment to an activity or a goal needs to come from within your child.
- Be dedicated to you child-athlete’s goals – but make sure the goals are his or hers.

Discipline

- Help kids make and follow through on short-term commitments, especially during the early years.
- Provide your child with both discipline and guidance.

Development

- Allow the child to be a kid, especially during the early years of involvement in activities.
- Listen to your athlete and strive to understand his or her developmental needs.
- Maintain a focus on development and enjoyment, especially during the early years.
- Sport involvement will help your child's confidence, provide him or her with a source of self-pride, and can help an adolescent through the perils of puberty. Encourage your child to remain involved in sport and physical activity, even if they decide to leave the competitive component.

Coaching

- Emphasize the importance of coach respect and good sportsmanship.
- Don't be a stage parent. Find a good coach, then let them do their job.
- During the early years, focus on finding coaches that will interact with your child, who will keep the activity fun, and who will not harm your child or his or her enthusiasm.
- Maintain a good relationship with your child's coach based on mutual trust and respect.
- Monitor your child's early coaches to ensure that they do not push too hard.

Unconditional Love and Support

- Let your child know you value who he or she is, not just what he or she does or what he or she can accomplish.
- Make sure your child knows that your love and support is unconditional.

Role Model

- Lead by example.
- Be a role-model – model the behaviors you would like to see your child exemplify (e.g., determination, and active lifestyle).

Perspective

- Maintain a sense of sibling/ family member equality in the home.
- Help your child keep his or her sport identity and winning in perspective with the rest of his or her life.
- Stress the importance of education and maintaining a well-rounded sense of being.
- Avoid an outcome-oriented philosophy (e.g., focusing only on winning). It will decrease motivation and enjoyment over time and may lead to the termination of the sport experience. Instead, focus on process and performance achievements.
- If your child experiences success early, strive to help him or her remain "normal" (e.g., winning Olympic gold does not exempt one from doing his or her chores).
- Focus on performance expectations/ keep your expectations realistic and low key.

General

- Provide your child-athlete with a safe and enjoyable environment.
- Don't try to live through your child.
- Encourage open and honest communication.
- Don't criticize the athlete's coach or teammates in front of the athlete.