

Teaching kids to draw lessons from any team, at any level



SPORTS PSYCHOLOGY

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Tryouts are over. The new season is underway and players have begun the season with their new teams. Some made the teams they were trying out for. Some didn't. Some are thrilled with where they're playing, and with whom. Others are not.

One of the biggest life skills we can teach our kids through sport is to help them decide how they will measure success, or learn from failure. We all want our kids to feel good about themselves, no matter what the outcome in sport. This is a tall order, and the hockey world isn't always an easy environment to grow up in. A big part of my job is helping players of all ages – from children to elite high performance – to draw out those tough lessons for themselves.

What are children supposed to do when they fall short of their goals?

Elementary and middle school-aged children often see their ability to achieve, in and out of sport, as related to their own abilities and talents. If the player doesn't make a certain team, or doesn't have success at certain tasks on a given team, such as making the starting line-up, the child may start to look for ways to improve and make the team next time, or change the outcome on their current team by improving individual skills. They're off to a great start.

Parents and coaches can help young players to look at their individual strengths and top interests, and help them choose the ones that make the best fit. Over time, as young people experience success in and out of sport, self-esteem will improve. However, if they consistently set goals – and fall short – self-esteem can suffer.

It's also around this time that some young athletes believe their lack of success is directly related to their lack of ability, and little else. When they are successful, many believe it's due to luck and not something they have control over. If difficult tasks or situations arise, they might feel like they'll have no control anyway, so they give up even before they try. By the teen years, they can draw the line between skill and luck, and in comes the dreaded ... "politics."

Children and teens seek positive evaluation from their coach, parents, teachers and others, as they struggle with believing in their own

ability to achieve success. No parent or coach wants to see a player give up – but there also comes a time when children need to learn to modify expectations or what their definition of "success" is.

There are many ways parents and coaches can help players take a closer look at their skills, ability levels, and interests. Players need to learn to evaluate why they were not successful – in making a certain team, in winning a game, at executing specific skills – and also evaluate their broader definition of success.

Does it mean you're not a good player if you don't make a specific team? Are you going to enjoy playing the sport of hockey only when you win? Score a goal? Have a shutout? What about all the times when you fall short of those goals?

Here are several things parents can do to help kids learn from success and failure:

- Take a good hard look at your own reactions and messages you send. Parents are powerful role models. Kids and teens are heavily influenced by your reaction to both success and failure. For example, what message does it send if you are impossible to deal with on a day when your child has a bad game or is cut from a team?
- Provide structure and routine at home that kids can count on. Research indicates that kids find the most comfort in homes where they experience structure, rules and well-established boundaries – the world keeps turning, regardless of things like sport outcomes.
- Help your child learn to deal with his or her emotions. Kids feel the same range of emotions that adults do: embarrassment, sadness, joy, guilt and pride. They need to find a safe place to talk about those feelings, and while they're young, one of those safe places should be at home.
- Encourage your kids to form other positive relationships. Peer groups, other caring adults or family members or a teacher that they can talk to. Friends, family and other mentors also serve as models of how to deal with success or failure for your child. Teens start to naturally withdraw from their parents as they move towards independence, and communication will become more challenging. If other positive relationships are there to provide a sounding board, a parent doesn't need to panic!

This season, make a commitment to help your children draw positives no matter what team they're on, or what their record is.

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