

Negotiating the post-game conversation

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Youth sport competitions can be emotional experiences for children, parents, and coaches. The performance of the team and the eventual outcome of the game can greatly influence how children feel and what feedback they want from parents and coaches. Providing the “right” feedback at the “right” time can influence children’s perceptions of their abilities, their enjoyment of sport, and their motivation to continue participating. As such, ensuring feedback is well timed and delivered in an appropriate manner is very important. However, in such an emotionally charged environment, it can often be difficult for parents to know exactly what to say or how to say it. In this article I provide some suggestions regarding where, when, how and what feedback should be provided to children. I hope these suggestions will help parents (and coaches) more successfully negotiate post-game conversations.

Where should feedback be provided?

Whether children have won or lost, performed well or poorly, they generally do not like receiving feedback in front of their peers. This is particularly true with regards to excessively positive or negative parental reactions (e.g., shouting at children, extreme displays of affection, or appearing too proud of their performance). Younger children, especially as they enter adolescence, are extremely self-conscious and highly aware of how others view them. As such, any parental behaviours that may draw attention to them or their parents is usually not well received. Rather than providing post-game feedback in public it should be saved until children are in a private environment and away from their team.

When should feedback be provided?

Children and parents are emotional during the post-match period. Providing time for children to process their performance and for parents to become more objective about the match is important. However, choosing exactly when to provide feedback is likely to depend on the outcome and also the individual child. For example, some children like to discuss the match instantly, whereas others do not. As such, it is important to engage in discussions with children regarding when they would like to receive post-match feedback. However, as a general rule parental feedback should only be provided once the child initiates the conversation and not before the coach has had an opportunity to talk to the team. A helpful tip might be to ensure that no feedback (especially negative feedback) is provided before children have completed their cool-down and team discussion with the coach and teammates.

How should feedback be provided?

Feedback should be provided when the children are ready. Waiting until children indicate they want to talk about the game or asking them if they would like to talk (rather than just assuming they want to talk) is often the best way to initiate the post-game conversation. Providing post-game feedback through a two-way conversation, in which parents and children share their views, rather than a one-way lecture from parents is beneficial. Children should be asked for their views on their performance and parents need to take the time to really listen to what they are saying. Children and adolescents are highly sensitive to feedback from their parents, particularly comments that appear critical. Ensuring feedback is positive and focused on areas for improvement is important. Children have indicated that they usually prefer parents to provide general positive praise regarding their performance, then identify an area for improvement, followed by specific praise regarding one aspect of their game.

What feedback should be provided?

Feedback should focus on particular skills children have been working on and the goals they have developed with their coach. The information parents provide must be appropriate to their knowledge and experience and also be consistent with the coach's message. Feedback should focus on aspects under children's control, such as attitude, effort and behaviour rather than the game outcome. Focusing on the outcome of the game is likely to lead to players feeling under pressure to win. Emphasising effort and attitude helps players to remain motivated and interested in the match, regardless of how the match is progressing.

Concluding Thoughts

The above guidelines are presented to help guide the post-game conversation between parents and children. However, providing post-game feedback will never be easy, as comments need to be adapted to the game outcome, individual performances and any controversies that arose during the game. Parents also need to cope with their own emotions (either positive or negative) and ensure these emotions do not dictate the feedback that is provided to children. Engaging in frequent discussions with children regarding the types of feedback they like and how they perceive the comments parents make is likely to ensure the best possible reactions and responses to feedback.

Further information

The above tips are drawn from a range of sources included research articles and books. If you would like to read some of the research behind these areas I would recommend the following articles. Please note this list is by no means exhaustive.

Gould, D., Lauer, L., Rolo, C., Jannes, C., & Pennisi, N. (2006). Understanding the role parents play in tennis success: A national survey of junior tennis coaches. *British Journal of Sports Medicine*, 40, 632-636.

Gould, D., Lauer, L., Rolo, C., Jannes, C., & Pennisi, N. (2008). The role of parents in tennis success: Focus group interviews with junior coaches. *The Sport Psychologist*, 22, 18-37.

Knight, C. J., Boden, C. M., & Holt, N. L. (2010). Junior tennis players' preferences for parental behaviors at tournaments. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 22, 377-391.

Knight, C. J., Neely, K. C., & Holt, N. L. (2011). Parental involvement in team sports: How do athletes want parents to behave? *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 23, 76-92.

Omlil, J., & Wiese-Bjornstal, D. M. (2011). Kids speak: Preferred parental behaviour at youth sport events. *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport*, 82, 702-711.

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