

CHANGING THE GAME

*The Parent's Guide to Raising Happy,
High-Performing Athletes and
Giving Youth Sports Back to Our Kids*

JOHN O'SULLIVAN



NEW YORK

Contents

	Foreword	xv
	Preface	xvii
PART I	THE STATE OF YOUTH SPORTS	1
Chapter 1	The Benefits of Youth Sports	3
	Shifting the Paradigm in Youth Sports	14
	The Importance of Youth Sports	19
Chapter 2	The Problems We Face	23
	Our Values Have Changed	25
	Youth Sports Gone Mad	26
	Money Ball	33
	Chasing the Scholarship Myth	34
Chapter 3	What Can I Do?	37
	The Vision of Your Future Child	38
	Match Your Actions with Your Vision	41
	A High-Performing Mindset Is a Happy Mindset	43
PART II	THE 7 Cs OF A HIGH-PERFORMING STATE OF MIND	45
Chapter 4	The 7 Cs	47

Chapter 5	Common Sense	53
	Keep It in Perspective	54
	Be Patient	61
	Be Grateful, Express Your Gratitude, and Teach Your Child to Do the Same	68
	Matching Your Actions to Your Intentions	72
Chapter 6	Conditions	74
	The Factors Determining Athletic Performance	76
	Long-Term Athletic Development (LTAD)	80
	Providing a Safe Environment	94
	Helping Your Child to Learn and Apply Life Lessons	104
Chapter 7	Communication	107
	Be an Active Listener	109
	Paraphrase Their Main Points	110
	Respect Their Emotions	110
	Don't Put Your Child on the Defensive	111
	Control Your Emotions	112
	Practice What You Preach	112
	Be Consistent	113
Chapter 8	Control	116
	Let Your Kids Go	119
	Setting Goals with Your Child	120
	Start with Three Simple Goals	125
	How to Push Your Child	127
	The Ride Home and the Post-Game Talk	130
	Recognizing if You Have Not Released Your Child	132
Chapter 9	Competence	135
	The Definition of Competence	136
	The Games Do Matter but Not How You Think	139
	The Slanty Line Theory	141

	Relative Age and the Outlier Effect	142
	Overcoming Disappointment	146
Chapter 10	Confidence	150
	The Definition of Athletic Confidence	152
	Where Does Confidence Come From?	152
	Game-Changing Question for Parents	154
	Allow Them to Fail	154
	How to Praise Your Child	158
Chapter 11	Caring	164
	Love Is Not a Weapon	165
	Be Your Child's #1 Fan	166
	The Responsibilities of a Sports Parent	174
	The Parental Code of Conduct . . .	
	Written by Your Kids	176
PART III	CHANGING THE YOUTH	
	SPORTS MINDSET	181
Chapter 12	The Change Begins at Home	183
	Start Small	184
	Change Your Club	186
	Change Your Country	188
	Acknowledgments	193
	About the Author	195
	Notes	197
	Resources and Suggested Reading	201
	Helpful Web Resources	203
	Sports Parenting Resources	203
	Join the Changing the Game	
	Project Online	205

10

Confidence

Confidence is going after Moby Dick in a rowboat and taking the tartar sauce with you.

—Zig Ziglar

Confidence—or the lack thereof—is probably the number-one issue that affects athletic performance and development. Every athlete, even a top professional, has times of diminished performance due to a lack of belief, and other times when it all clicks and he is in the “zone” of high performance. No story better illustrates this than that of major league baseball player Rick Ankiel.

Ankiel was a promising rookie in 2000, winning eleven games for the St. Louis Cardinals, striking out 194 batters and finishing second in the National League Rookie of the Year balloting. Due to injuries to other pitchers, he was selected to start game one of the National League Division Series against the Atlanta Braves, and it all fell apart. After not allowing a run in the first two innings, in the third Ankiel

allowed four runs, walked four batters, and threw five wild pitches before being removed.

In his next start in game two of the National League Championship Series against the New York Mets, he was removed after throwing only twenty pitches, five of which flew past catcher Eli Marrero. A four-batter relief appearance in game five of the series yielded two more walks and two more wild pitches.

In 2001, Ankiel began the season with the Cardinals but was soon demoted to Triple A, where in 4.1 innings he walked 17 batters, threw 12 wild pitches, and had an ERA of 20.77! How can a promising young pitcher, who was the second best rookie in 2000 and had thrown thousands of pitches in his life, fall so far and so fast? Rick Ankiel lost his confidence to throw strikes.

Although Ankiel persisted and reinvented himself as a major league outfielder, his struggles were heartbreaking to watch. While his breakdown happened in front of millions of people, it can be even more painful to watch our children go through similar times. We feel helpless and are driven to intervene, which is often the worst thing we can do. Don't lose hope. Once you understand how athletes develop and maintain confidence, the next time your child falls down, you will know what it takes to get him to pick himself back up.

One of the greatest lessons that sports gives our children is the ability to believe in themselves and be confident no matter what obstacles they face or what challenges lie ahead. Confidence derived from sports carries many people through their entire lives. They learn to view challenges as opportunities instead of obstacles to fear. Athletic confidence helps children create a positive mindset throughout life. Confidence is a requirement of consistent high performance. In order to explore the concept further, we will:

1. Define athletic confidence
2. Learn where confidence comes from

3. Discover how kids need to learn from failure and not fear it
4. Explore how and when to praise our children

The Definition of Athletic Confidence

Confidence is a state of mind, a feeling inside that you are ready to perform, no matter what you encounter. It is a feeling of certainty and control that provides an athlete with a positive outlook regardless of the situation. It cannot be bought, it cannot be faked, and it cannot be wished for. Confidence is earned, refined, and developed through the acquisition of skill and the support of confidence-building mentors.

As your child develops competence in a sport, his confidence also increases. Let me say that another way: confidence is a natural byproduct of skill. From a small child to the world's greatest athletes, those who are confident are confident because they have taken thousands of shots, tried and failed many times, then tried again and got it right. Come game time, they believe that the skills they have developed will carry them through. This belief is always at the forefront of their thoughts, instead of the fear of failure that many non-confident athletes possess. Whatever happens, self-doubt rarely enters their thoughts; if it does, their belief in themselves drowns it out.

True athletic confidence is all about the process and the preparation and has little to do with the outcomes of games or events. Confident athletes see wins and losses as inevitable parts of the process, and their self-belief does not waver based upon results. Whether they win or lose, they examine the process that got them the result and recognize areas for improvement rather than find excuses for failure. In the end, the true confidence of high performers is consistent, controllable, and long-lasting.

Where Does Confidence Come From?

Confidence in young athletes is a byproduct of two things: proper preparation and adults who believe in them. Quality training, mental and

physical preparation, and even previous success do not ensure confidence. Young athletes also need connection.

It is very important that the adults in your child's life are confidence builders, and it is best when they come from both within and outside of your immediate family. They must model the discipline, hard work, and self-belief that you hope to see in your athlete. They must control their emotions and choose their words wisely and truly understand the specific needs of the athlete. They must also be trustworthy.

Many times in my coaching career I worked with younger coaches who ranted and raved all game long and grew increasingly frustrated as their players quit performing up to their potential. They micromanaged every play, huffed and puffed at every mistake, and yelled and screamed at the players before, during, and after the game. As we dissected the game afterwards, I would often hear the coach say, "I don't know what happened. We worked on that all week. I thought we were prepared." What happened was that the coach did not demonstrate to his players that he believed they were prepared. His words and actions demonstrated something entirely different. Players cannot trust themselves to perform well unless they are trusted by others to do the same.

One of the most important factors in determining confidence is the amount of control an athlete is given. If you want your young athlete to be confident, then do not do things for him that he can do himself. Give him the responsibility for his own actions and decisions. Encourage him to take risks, and allow him to fail. Do not make excuses or blame others; instead just let them go. Young athletes who are able to work out their own problems, and see in their adult mentors the belief and trust to take control, will learn to stand tall and confidently in the face of great adversity.

Confidence building is a long, drawn-out process, and ultimately the process must be owned by the athlete. We can help our children to become confident, but eventually they need to believe in themselves and be responsible for their beliefs. Unfortunately, many parents believe

that confidence only comes through success and positive outcomes. They do not realize that the actual process of achieving skill is what creates confidence.

Think about it this way. Is your child more likely to believe she can sink the game-winning free throw if she has made a thousand free throws in practice, or if you have told her a thousand times what a good free-throw shooter she is? Clearly, it is the former. Confidence is a natural byproduct of skill.

Some adults shelter their children from failure and shower them with praise when they succeed. The sad results of this kind of thinking are kids who never become confident athletes. They focus on outcomes rather than process, and they depend upon the adults to instill confident thoughts and behaviors. They cede control and personal responsibility. Building confidence is a process marked by highs and lows, successes and failures. If you always try to protect your child from disappointment, create excuses for failure, or expect self-belief to happen overnight, your athlete might get a lot of things, but confidence will not be one of them.

Game-Changing Question for Parents

Does my child have a confidence-building adult in our family?
Does he have a coach, teacher, or other adult outside our immediate family that helps him build confidence?

Allow Them to Fail

To try is to risk failure. But risks need to be taken, because the greatest hazard in life is to risk nothing. The person who risks nothing, does nothing, has nothing and is nothing. They may avoid suffering and sorrow, but they cannot learn, feel change, grow, love and live. Chained by their certitudes, they

are a slave; they have forfeited their freedom. Only a person who risks is free.

—Leo Buscaglia

One of the most valuable lessons your child will learn from sports is how to take risks, how to fail gracefully, and ultimately how to succeed by overcoming failure. Sport is a microcosm of life, and life is a series of challenges and disappointments, where many times you must pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and get on with it. Take a close look at the successful people you know. They have all failed. In fact, *the most successful people are often the ones who have failed most often.*

It has been said, “What would you dream to do if you knew that you could not fail?” Unfortunately the fear of failure is pervasive in our children and can eventually lead to low self-confidence, lack of motivation, depression, anxiety, and more

Studies show that the fear of failure is usually caused by parents and develops when children are under the age of ten. These children are so scarred by their fear of failing and disappointing their parents that they avoid any activities, sports, and educational challenges that may not end in success. It will be difficult for them to become high performers because they will be afraid to risk achievement in the first place. Remember Carol Dweck’s studies on fixed-mindset individuals? Children with a fixed mindset judge themselves completely upon achievement and thus will never risk anything that does not guarantee success.

It’s okay for our kids to fail, and they must not fear failure. It is our job as parents to make sure that our children are not afraid to strike out, to miss an open goal, to slice it into the woods, and to lose “important” games. It is our job to instill a growth mindset in our young athletes. They need such a mindset because they will fail many times in their life, and they need to learn from failure instead of fearing it. Youth sports should be the safest place for them to experience failure for the first time.

Sport allows them to face challenges and overcome adversity in a place and time where it matters in a small sense but does not matter in the big picture. It should be safe because these challenges and failures should not have the same consequences as failure at a job, failure in a relationship, and failure as a parent may have. They will learn incredibly valuable lessons in overcoming challenges, so when the stakes are much bigger, they face them with confidence and clarity of purpose.

High performers also need to learn that they can succeed without your intervention, because you will not always be there for them. Through youth sports, they can learn that even if they fail you are proud of them for trying and love them unconditionally. As a result, instead of fearing failure, high performers learn to embrace and overcome challenges. They learn that you have their back, unconditionally, always. If there is a better venue to learn this than youth sports, I have not seen it.

Game-Changing Question for Parents

What is your child's attitude toward failure? Does she see failure as part of the learning process or something to be avoided? Ask yourself, "Have I been forthcoming with my child about the times in my life when I failed, and how I overcame failure?"

Messy Is Good!

Youth sports is like feeding a two-year-old oatmeal; it's going to be really messy at first, with a lot of failure and very little success, but ultimately your child will learn to give herself nourishment. As a parent, you sometimes feel compelled to intervene on behalf of your frustrated (and hungry) child, and there are certainly times when you can and should step in. But you also have to recognize that as long as you keep feeding your child, she will never learn to eat on her own. Sports activities are the

same way, regardless of whether your child is five and playing a sport for the first time or getting ready to head off to college.

Many parents feel compelled to protect their young children from all adversity and failure. The need to protect our children is one of the strongest emotions we ever feel, and one of the hardest to ignore, yet deep down we know that eventually we have to allow our children, even compel them, to figure it out on their own.

Our job is to try to strike a balance between success and failure. Too much of either is harmful. Many young prodigies fizzle out as they encounter challenges at an older age, for they never learned how to fail when they were young. Their early success made them complacent, and they never learned to work hard and challenge themselves. Others who are protected by their parents from ever failing are unprepared when real obstacles and competition are present and their overprotective parents are not.

By the same token, a child who is put in an achievement activity and only experiences failure will become disillusioned, lose confidence, and eventually avoid the activity. Our goal is to strike a balance. When we do, as Dr. Jim Taylor says, “Success is not such an intoxicant that it inhibits further growth, and failure is not such a monumental loss that it diminishes the desire to pursue success. Rather, they are both inevitable and necessary parts of the process leading toward achievement and happiness.”

Think about your own life and what you learned whenever you failed at work, in sports, or in a relationship. You learned how to overcome disappointment, as well as how to be creative and work through problems. You learned how to tolerate and minimize frustration and eventually to ask for assistance if needed. These are incredibly valuable life lessons about which you probably look back upon and say “I’m glad that happened; I learned so much from that.”

Try to recall how good you always felt when you overcame adversity, when you solved a difficult problem and found success

where others failed. This is among our most powerful emotions, the feeling of achievement after challenging ourselves. It charges our spirit, gives us belief, and puts a big smile on our face and in our soul. Imagine if you never got the chance to feel this way. You wouldn't ever know what it feels like to live! Why take this away from your kids?

Your children will never learn to overcome the big disappointments in life if they are not allowed to overcome the small ones that sports activities bring to them. I know there is a great fear among parents that failure, no matter how small and inconsequential, is devastating for kids' self-esteem, but research demonstrates that this is not true. Bad experiences are not destructive to your child's self-esteem; in fact, quite the opposite is true. Self-esteem comes from achievement and not the other way around. So let them fail while daring greatly, and in the end they will find success and the great sense of accomplishment that comes along with it.

How to Praise Your Child

Parents often ask me, "How do I praise my child, and when is it too much or too little?" Many parents fear that if they do not excessively praise their children, their kids will feel unloved and uncared for. The result is over-praise, and their kids see right through it. I have seen many athletes tell their mom and dad, "You're just saying that because you are my parents," and they are right. Learning how to praise appropriately, and what to praise, is an important part of developing a child's confidence and raising a high performer.

Praise Effort

In *The Talent Code*, Dan Coyle explores where greatness comes from by analyzing various centers of excellence, from Brazilian soccer to Russian tennis, from music to education. It is an exploration of the best practices for nurturing and growing talented high achievers. Coyle also cited the

work of Stanford University psychologist Dr. Carol Dweck, specifically her studies on the relationship between motivation and language, and her analysis of the effect of verbal cues on response and performance. In one of her most fascinating studies, Dweck tested the effect of a single sentence of praise on the performance of four hundred New York fifth and sixth graders.

Dweck tested the children by giving them some simple puzzles to solve and then met with each of them afterwards to give them the results and a single sentence of praise. Half the children were praised for their intelligence (“You must be smart at this”) and the other half for their effort (“You must have worked really hard”).

The kids were given a second test and had a choice between taking a harder test or an easier one. Ninety percent of the kids who were praised for their effort chose the hard test, while a majority of the kids praised for their intelligence chose the easier one. “When we praise kids for their intelligence,” wrote Dweck, “we tell them that’s the name of the game: look smart, don’t risk making mistakes.”

Dweck then administered a third test, much harder than the previous two, and none of the participants scored particularly well. She was most surprised by their responses to the hard test. The group praised for effort “dug in and grew very involved with the test, trying solutions, testing strategies. They later said they liked it,” she reported. “But the group praised for its intelligence hated the harder test. They took it as proof they weren’t smart.”

Finally, Dweck administered a fourth test, similar in difficulty to the initial one. The results were shocking. The praised-for-effort group improved their initial score by 30 percent, while the praised-for-intelligence kids’ scores declined by 20 percent, all because of six words of praise. She was so surprised that she reran the study five different times, and each one had the same results. “We are exquisitely attuned to messages telling us what is valued,” says Dweck. “When a clear message comes, it can send a spark.”

Dan Coyle found a common denominator among the talent hotbeds that he studied; they all used a type of motivational messaging based upon effort and not outcomes. Brazilian soccer teams call their youth teams the “Aspirantes,” the Hopeful Ones. At the Spartak Tennis Academy in Moscow, the home of many of the top players in the world, they don’t “play” tennis; they prefer the word *borotsya*, meaning to struggle or fight. Talent hotbeds and the coaches that run them ignite passion in their children by focusing their praise on the process and emphasizing that learning is a struggle, that it is hard, and that it is not immediately gratifying.

Praising effort works because it gives credence to the baby steps, the difficulty, and the determination that constitutes the learning process. It gives credence to both failure and success. Focusing on the effort instead of the outcome keeps coaches and parents present with our children in their struggle, holding their hand and even carrying them at times. It makes us a partner in the process and allows our athletes to give their attention to the journey and not the destination. It also allows parents and coaches to recognize everything our young athletes are accomplishing along that journey. Praising effort prevents us from being so focused on the prize that we forget to give credence to what got our athlete there. High performers are all about the process, and the process is all about effort.

Be Clear and Concise

Dr. Carol Dweck’s research shows us that the clarity of the message, rather than the quantity of messages, has the greatest influence upon performance. It is therefore incredibly important that we understand not only how to praise but when to praise so that our message and our love come across crystal clear to our young athletes.

Your praise should come in the form of encouragement for your child and should be specific, clear, and focused on the process. “Good job today” is nice, but it’s not action-, effort-, or goal-specific. On the other

hand, “You’ve really been training hard, and today you put it all together in that race. You could not have done that last year” encourages your child for their effort, their perseverance, their progress, and their competence. It gives them ownership and control over the result and demonstrates that you have been paying attention to their effort throughout the year. It activates your child on multiple levels and sets the stage for further improvement, additional goal setting, and continued improvement.

Try not to over-praise your child. We all know parents who are afraid that their child’s self-esteem will suffer if they are not encouraged and praised for every outcome, and this is not true. Over-praising your child can be a negative on two fronts. First, children can become apathetic to praise, since they hear it all the time. You will run out of superlatives and be unable to discern real achievement from the everyday norm. Second, kids are smart, and they soon catch on if everything they do is “fantastic” or “brilliant” or “awesome.” It’s not, and your kids eventually know a good performance from a bad one. They will grow cynical to your words if everything is incredible.

Do not attempt to praise your child by comparing them to others. There are better ways to encourage your child than to constantly remind them “you are the best player on your team.” Maybe they are, and if so they probably know it already. They don’t need you to put down their teammates or opponents. This is also not process-specific because in the grand scheme of things the process is all about things you can control, and teammates and opponents do not fit that category. Being the best player on a team of average performers does not say much, while being the twelfth man on the 1992 Olympic Basketball Dream Team was quite an accomplishment for Christian Laettner, don’t you think?

Finally, be very careful about sarcastic praise, such as “You really tore it up out there today” after your son goes 3 for 20 from the field in a basketball game. Some players respond to sarcastic comments made at opportune times, but such comments are not appropriate before, during, or after an event or game. All sarcasm has a hint of truth, and

kids are so emotional that it is very difficult to know if it will go over well with a young athlete. While I have seen some coaches get away with it, I cannot think of a single instance where sarcasm came across well from a parent to their child. It is best to find other ways to encourage and motivate your athletes.

Game-Changing Question for Parents

When I praise my child, do I praise effort or outcomes?

Gaining confidence is one of the most important lessons youth sports can teach our children and a crucial component of high performance. Our kids need our help to recognize that confidence is a result of preparation. They need to know we believe in them and that they have coaches, teachers, or other mentors who believe in them as well. Once these things are in place, give them control and responsibility. Praise them for their hard work, allow them to fail, and through failure help them to be brave and overcome adversity. Make sure they not only feel better, but be better. That is parenting and coaching at the master level. That is how confidence grows. And that is how high performers are made. As inspirational author Mary Anne Radmacher says:

Courage doesn't always roar. Sometimes courage is the quiet voice at the end of the day saying, "I will try again tomorrow."²⁴

Action Steps for Developing Confidence in Young Athletes

1. Take a good hard look at your child in training and competition, and ask yourself "Does my child display confidence, or is he/she scared?"
2. Look for opportunities to give your child more control over the athletic process. This displays your trust, which helps to grow confidence.

3. Do not always intervene when your child is failing. Allow it to happen, and then discuss the reasons for the outcome (i.e., lack of preparation, lack of focus, etc.).
4. Keep your attention, and that of your child, on the process, on the controllable things, and look for ways to measure improvement.
5. Praise effort.
6. Try not to over-praise or praise sarcastically.
7. Do not compare your child to others; keep the focus on the process.
8. Love them and display that love no matter what.

Game-Changing Questions for Your Child

1. Do you feel confident? Do you know where confidence comes from?
 2. How can I help you be more confident?
 3. Discuss a recent time when your child has not been successful, and help them understand the reasons why.
 4. How do you feel when I praise you? Criticize you?
 5. What can I do differently to help your confidence?
-