

The home stretch: creating supportive environments



SPORTS PSYCHOLOGY

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The playoffs are approaching. Exams and assignments are being juggled. Social, personal, homework and hockey time are mixing into one. Your child is feeling (and looking) less motivated than at the start of the hockey season and school year.

“How do I motivate my child?” is the most common question I get asked by parents. It’s a loaded question, with no easy answer.

Whether getting them to put their best efforts in at school, at home, or in the sports environment, my answer starts out the same: “You can’t motivate your child directly, or sustain that motivation for them. What you CAN do is provide an environment that will be more conducive to learning to motivate themselves, and to finding out what really matters to them.”

What kind of environment do you create?

Your child’s mental and emotional health are the foundation for his or her physical performance on the ice. As a parent, you have the challenging role of providing support, but letting your child build his or her own confidence and decision-making skills.

Motivation is hidden within two related but different climates that exist at home, at the rink, and at school. One of these is task-oriented (skill building and character are of great importance); the other is ego-oriented (winning and superiority are of great importance).

They are very different. A task-oriented environment rewards hard work, is based on improving oneself, and goals and values are based on the social environment as a whole. In an ego-oriented environment, the child sets his or her own goals, success hinges on demonstrating superior ability, and only success matters.

Research has shown that the task-oriented sports environment is the most successful in bringing out the best in athletes, including those athletes who are highly ego-oriented. This means that the role of the coaches and parents is to help create the task-oriented climate by doing and saying specific things to nurture that environment. It’s

important for coaches and parents to understand what motivates their athletes and children and to then create the right climate for these young talents to improve.

What can we say? What can we do?

Responses which emphasize solid effort, improvement or mastering a skill can help provide that task-oriented environment (“Was it a good time?” “You’re really improving on those face-offs.” “You stayed positive when it would have been easy to get frustrated and down on yourselves as a team.” “It sure helps to have your support when things aren’t going well – you must be proud of that.”)

Responses that only focus on individual ability, comparisons and winning do not nurture the task-oriented and long-term player development (“Did you win ... get an All-Star etc.?” “You’re better than Jim/Jane. You should be on his/her line.” “You probably would have won today if you’d had the proper training or coaching or teammates etc.” “Your opponents cheated / were lucky.”)

Children learn by example. What adults do and say to them and others is a model for their future behaviour and belief systems. I cringe when I hear minor league coaches in any sport quoting Vince Lombardi’s famous saying: “Winning isn’t everything; it’s the only thing.”

This is not professional sport. And even in professional sport, is that really the powerful message we want to influence our children?

Avoid cutting yourself and/or others down in your speech both in and out of the hockey context. Try to be positive and forgiving – your children follow your lead.

If you find yourself being critical: Stop. Take a breath. Figure out how to change the message to be positive or neutral. Replace judging or critical statements like, “That’s stupid,” “You/I can’t do that,” with statements like, “How can you/I figure this out?” “I/You can’t do this...yet.”

Try to give compliments, not criticism. Have members of the family share what they appreciate about the other members of the family. Tell success stories. Talk about achieving past goals. Remember past victories and fun times in and out of hockey.

Cherish the whole child, not just the hockey side.

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