HOW TO MOTIVATE YOUNG ATHLETES
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HOW TO MOTIVATE YOUNG ATHLETES

Many parents contact us each week because they struggle to motivate their kids in sports. We receive many questions from sports parents and coaches, including:

“We know the talent he has is far greater than what he delivers. How do we motivate our child to have more heart and be mentally stronger?”
~Hockey Parent

“How much should a parent ‘bug’ a kid to practice?”
~Golf Parent

“I am looking for tips on how to keep my daughter motivated even though she is now in an unfamiliar role of substitute.”
~Volleyball Parent

“The problem is that although he is quite the golfer he doesn't like to practice. How do you motivate a kid like this?”
~Golf Parent

“This year with the start of the new season, he has lost his drive. He does not push during a race to pass people, practically lets everyone pass him. By the end
of the race he has totally given up. What can we do to help him?"
~Racing Parent

“How do you enforce discipline and a better attitude with my players? I coach a 9-10 year-old travel team and lately my kids think more about playing around than playing the game.”
~Baseball Coach

“When do parents have to step in and get kids to re-focus on their goals? How do we motivate him? How firm or lenient do we have to be?”
~Baseball Parent

What is Motivation in Sports?

Motivation is the desire to achieve a goal. Athletes may be motivated to win a tournament, to play well, or to improve their skills. Motivation is the ability to commit to a goal and go after it with enthusiasm.

Motivation is critical to achieve success in sports. Many top athletes attribute their success in sports to high motivation and continued commitment.
“Desire is the key to motivation, but it’s determination and commitment to an unrelenting pursuit of your goal - a commitment to excellence - that will enable you to attain the success you seek.”

~Mario Andretti

Some athletes have the physical tools to be successful and might love sports, but lack the drive to work hard. They lack motivation to reach their full potential. Physical skills or talent alone cannot make athletes successful. An athlete’s mental game and level of motivation are just as important as physical talent.

If athletes don’t have the motivation to work hard or to improve, they can’t realize their full potential. As a parent, you can learn how to foster your kids’ motivation without pressuring or burdening them with high expectations. Sound difficult? Read on!

What Motivates Athletes?

The first step to improving your sports kids’ motivation is to know what gets kids motivated. You also need to understand what causes athletes to lose motivation and want to quit.
“When you lose, you’re more motivated. When you win, you fail to see your mistakes and probably no one can tell you anything.”

~Venus Williams

Motivated Kids:

- Love to practice and compete
- Like to work on weaknesses so they can improve
- Get excited about competition
- Want to win and hate to lose
- Have high expectations for their performance
- Are dedicated to their sport
- Stay committed even when challenged
- Go after their goals with intensity

Motivated athletes love to take on challenging tasks. Cheri Fuller, author of *Raising Motivated Kids: Inspiring Enthusiasm for a Great Start in Life* says, “They don’t give up just because a challenge is difficult, but rather they have the inner fire to keep going in spite of setbacks” (Fuller, 2004).

"Heart in champions has to do with the depth of your motivation and how well your mind and body react to pressure—that is, being able to do what you do best under maximum pain and stress."

~ Bill Russell, Boston Celtics NBA Veteran
Motivated kids keep trying until they get it right. Motivated athletes will not quit when they can’t master a slap shot in practice. Fuller says, “They keep plugging away until the light comes on” (Fuller, 2004).

“I love the challenge of the game. I love the work. My goal right now is to have a season next year that will make people forget about this one. I’ll use things like this for motivation. I'm pumped. I’m hungry.”

~Alex Rodriguez, MLB Baseball Player.

Motivated young athletes are dedicated and have a strong work ethic. They are the first to make it to practice and the last players to leave. They are open and willing to work on their weaknesses. Coaches love these athletes because they work hard and want to improve.

Motivated athletes also want to win. They are willing to put in the time and effort to make that happen. They strive for perfection.

As a parent, you should be aware of why your kids want to play sports. Kids participate in sports for many reasons. You’ll want to help motivate kids with the motivators that fulfill their needs.

Below is a list of the reasons kids participate in sports.
Top Reasons Kids are Motivated to Play Sports

1. To be with friends or part of a group
2. To experience the excitement of competition
3. To impress or make others happy
4. To learn and improve their skills
5. To improve their physical fitness
6. To experience a “flow” or feeling of enjoyment

Desire to be with friends
Some kids are drawn to sports because they want to be with their friends. They enjoy the opportunity to interact with others outside of school. Many athletes participate to be part of a group. If kids are motivated by being with friends, you want to encourage them to have fun with friends. Coaches don’t want to hear us say this because they want serious, focused athletes on their teams. But they have to realize that some kids participate to socialize.

Desire to Compete
Some athletes are motivated because they enjoy competing. They like the challenge of winning games and scoring points. They love the adrenaline rush that comes with playing sports. Doing boring drills all day long may not be the best form of practice for these kids. Without regular competition (in and out of practice), these kids may be less interested in practice.
“I just feel that my competitive drive is far greater than anyone else that I’ve met and I think that I thrive on that. I think that is my biggest motivation in life - to compete, find different competitions in certain things in life and try to overcome that, be it positive or negative.”

~Michael Jordan

**To make others happy**

Many kids play sports for others, not for themselves. They want to make their parents proud or their coaches happy. This type of motivation can be problematic. Kids may enjoy the sport less if they feel they are being pushed by a parent or are playing to make their parents happy.

**To learn and improve skills**

The desire to learn can be a sign of motivation. Some athletes are motivated to get better, master skills, or to learn new skills. As kids meet their goals of mastering sports skills, they feel more fulfilled, gain confidence, and want to continue to master new skills.

**To enhance physical fitness**

Some athletes enjoy getting in shape. They love the opportunity to move. They may like the challenge of reaching their top level of physical fitness. Parents can provide fitness opportunities for fitness-driven kids by helping
them get involved in sports that have strong physical elements. Long-distance running is one example.

To feel challenged and find “flow”
Athletes’ focus and their ability to control their focus can lead to a sense of flow or enjoyment because it helps sports kids feel immersed in an activity. In the athletic world, we commonly refer to highly focused concentration as “being in the zone” or “in the flow.” Experiencing flow helps athletes enjoy what they are doing in the moment. Young athletes are rewarded by having fun in and of itself—without the need to be rewarded by parents or coaches.

“A champion needs a motivation above and beyond winning.”
~ Pat Riley

Below is a list of what can undermine motivation.

What undermines kids’ motivation?
- Lack of success
- Criticism
- Little progress
- Little fun
- Not learning or improving skills
- Perfectionism or being too hard on oneself
- Inability to socialize with friends

Lack of excitement, improvisation and creative opportunities
Lack of exercise, meaningful movement and fitness improvements
Lack of optimal challenges that would provide the experience of flow

Lack of success. Every athlete has a need to feel successful. Most kids don’t like to lose. Kids become frustrated and lose motivation when they face constant failure. You should avoid enrolling your young athletes in a selective or elite baseball team if your kids are just beginning to play or want simply to be with friends.

Criticism. Some young athletes are overly sensitive to criticism. Criticism may discourage kids from trying and may prompt them to avoid making mistakes, which causes them to play sports tentatively. Too much criticism may cause athletes to believe they will never be good athletes. Parents can encourage children and teens by pointing out the small things they are doing right or improving on. Instead of saying, “You didn’t focus on the catcher’s mitt” to a pitcher, parents could say, “Nice job throwing that fast ball.”

Lack of progress. When they’re first learning a sport, young athletes progress rapidly with the right coaching. As kids move into higher levels of competency and competition,
their improvement may slow or even decline at times. If young athletes feel they aren’t making progress, it’s harder for them to stay motivated. They may have trouble mastering how to slide into home base or hit a double, for example. Parents need to remind kids that it takes time to learn physical skills and progress can be slow when they reach higher levels in sports.

**Not having fun.** This is a critical factor that determines whether or not kids will continue playing sports. Children and teens play sports because it’s fun to compete. Sports that are job-like or focus too much on winning are not fun for kids. They lose interest. When practice is too serious and lacks fun, athletes are likely to lose focus and become bored. Variety, competition, and challenge make practice more fun.

**Perfectionism.** Perfectionist athletes have trouble dealing with their own mistakes. Perfectionist athletes want so badly to win that this desire hurts their performance. They are often trying too hard. They work hard to perfect their skills. But they can’t transfer their skills to competition because they fear failure and feel tense. When they can’t be perfect, they become easily frustrated and give up or stop having fun.

**Failing to learn or improve skills.** Young athletes who struggle mastering skills or who can’t show any improvement are
more likely to stop trying. Good coaches break down skills into parts or phases that help young athletes feel more accomplished and successful.

**Not being with friends.** Sports can be an outlet for kids to make new friends. In addition, many children and teens want to play sports to be with their friends. Some kids play on high-level sports teams and find it difficult to make friends because it’s so competitive.

**Lack of excitement, improvisation and creative opportunities.** Sports are not as fun without excitement or creativity. And without excitement or creativity, sports become another boring activity. Practices that are focused on drilling or doing the same drills each day may be less exciting or have fewer opportunities for creativity. Coaches should mix up their practices by allowing kids to choose their own drills or games.

**Lack of exercise, meaningful movement and fitness improvements.** Children and teens love to move and feel physically active. When they spend too much time standing around, they become less interested in their sport. They may want to quit or try a different sport. They may feel they aren’t getting enough exercise when they stand in line or are given too many instructions (when learning a drill), picking up balls, or setting up equipment.
Lack of optimal challenges – no Flow. Young athletes who do not feel fully challenged by sports become bored quickly. Sports can provide for many flow opportunities, but kids must be given specific goals and feel that the challenge meets or exceeds their skill level.

Parents play an important role in fostering kids' motivation in sports.

According to author and motivation expert Fuller, parents can improve kids' motivation by building a strong relationship with their children, setting a good example, having high goals and maintaining a “healthy perspective” (Fuller, 2004). Below are four building blocks for raising motivated kids, according to Fuller.

(1) Build a Strong Relationship

A strong parent-child relationship encourages learning. Kids without strong relationships with their parents have more trouble learning than children who do have strong relationships with parents. Children and teens become distracted by their need for attention if there’s no strong parent relationship. The desire for attention blocks learning.
Kids who have good relationships with their parents generally have higher self-esteem and like themselves more. They are more motivated and willing to take risks.

Find an activity you both enjoy to build a relationship with your child. Playing sports can be an excellent way to foster good communication and a fulfilling relationship.

(2) Set a Good Example

Kids learn from parents every day. They learn by mimicking their parents. They might imitate their parents’ actions and communication style, for example.

You need to show that it’s okay to make mistakes. Most people think of mistakes as negative. Sometimes the best role models are the ones who make mistakes, but have learned from them.

Parents can set a good example by owning up to their mistakes. Explain to your kids that mistakes are chances to learn and change. Making mistakes is part of life and all you can do is learn from them. This will help your young athletes cope better with failure.

Dr. Carol Dweck, an expert in motivation says, “Parents can play a critical role in conveying this message to their
children by praising their effort, strategy and progress rather than emphasizing their ‘smartness’ or praising high performance alone. Most of all, parents should let their kids know that mistakes are part of learning.”

(3) Set High, Yet Attainable Goals

Motivated kids have parents who believe in their potential. Parents set high goals for their kids and offer opportunities to fulfill their potential.

“Negative suggestions” according to Fuller, can cause young athletes’ motivation to plummet. Negative suggestions include words such as “no” “don’t” or “can’t.” When you tell your daughter, “It’s okay not to be good at softball because your family lacks hand-eye coordination,” you may discourage her from putting forth the effort in the future. Negative suggestions foster negative thinking. Kids begin to think that they will always fail. They think that success really isn’t that important.

The key for parents is to focus on their young athletes’ small improvements. For example, golfers can learn simple tasks such as keeping their heads down during putting. These small improvements will help young athletes feel successful.
(4) Have a “Healthy Perspective” (Fuller, 2004).

It’s important for parents to foster a “healthy perspective” in their children in order to help motivate them. One way to do this is to help them focus on their own improvement. Ask your kids, “What did you learn at practice today?” or “What did you improve on?” for example. It’s important that kids examine their own improvement rather than always comparing themselves to others.

Siblings sometimes can foster competition among one another. Kids naturally compare themselves to others. Kids want to know how they size up to others – who is faster, who is stronger and who is the better athlete.

Even though children and teens may naturally make comparisons with others, parents don’t want to reinforce those comparisons. Kids feel that they are “not good enough” or compete for their parents’ attention with other siblings. These comparisons can lower kids’ self-esteem.

Parents should show their children and teens unconditional acceptance in regard to sports. Tell your kids that you love and accept them no matter how well or poorly they play. This will help them feel motivated to play well—for their sake, not their parents’.
Tips for Motivating Sports Kids

1. Tap into kids’ passions. Finding your young athletes’ passions will get them excited and motivated. Find out why your young athletes play sports. Is it to be with friends or to learn new skills? Foster their internal desire for a sport that satisfies their needs. For example, if young athletes love the social rewards of sports, you want to encourage participation in team sports or practicing with friends.

2. Create an age-appropriate sport environment. As we mentioned above, sports kids need to feel successful. Kids who feel some success are more motivated to continue playing sports. An athlete who can’t contribute to the team’s success by helping on defense or offense in soccer may lose interest. Parents and coaches can change the sport environment to encourage small successes. For example, kids have a greater chance of feeling successful in t-ball than full pitch ball. That’s because it’s easier. Shorten the soccer field, lower the basket, or allow kids to play on a shortened golf course.

Kids also need to feel challenged in sports. If kids aren’t challenged, they may become bored, which undermines their motivation. Parents who practice with their kids can match the challenge to their kids’ ability. You can modify drills to match kids’ ability and to challenge them. Ask them
to dribble a basketball with a non-dominant hand, for example.

3. **Allow kids to choose their sports activities.** Your best option is to provide many different experiences in sports. Allow your kids to choose the sports they prefer to participate in. Parents who pressure their kids to participate in sports they (the parents) played as kids can hurt their young athletes’ motivation. You don’t want athletes to feel forced to play. Kids who feel pressure no longer enjoy sports. A young athlete may play volleyball because her mother was a good volleyball player. That athlete may really like soccer instead of volleyball. She’ll play volleyball, but her heart won’t be in it. She might only play to satisfy a parent and may eventually drop out.

4. **Show enthusiasm.** It’s important for parents to show enthusiasm for sports. Parents should attend their kids’ games. They shouldn’t talk about the commitments or experiences they’re missing as a result of attending these games. You can also attend practices. Sometimes the best encouragement is simply showing up. It’s not necessary to yell from the sidelines. Yelling may embarrass kids or distract them from the game.

5. **Be a cheerleader – not a coach.** Parents can be their kids’ Number One cheerleaders. Be sure to say “Good job” after
a game. Be sure to celebrate your children's small successes in sports.

Don’t distract young athletes by overloading them with too many things to think about (i.e. keep your elbow up, hit the ball square on the bat, etc.) Your tips may also conflict with the coaches’. Parents who coach undermine the coach’s credibility. Young athletes don’t know which person to listen to. Kids may be confused about which way to execute the skill – the way their parent tells them or their coach.

6. **Downplay outcome and focus on effort.** We encourage parents to downplay the importance of the outcome of the game. We want parents to help kids focus on the process of the game and not feel pressure to win or be perfect.

Remind players that athletes do not have complete control over the outcome of the game. It can be influenced by the weather, the other team’s ability or the other team’s game plan, for example.

7. **Use external rewards sparingly.** Kids may be motivated externally. External rewards include money, clothing and trophies. When children and teens are motivated by external rewards, they play for the rewards and not because they enjoy the sport. This will undermine their motivation.
It’s more important for kids to be motivated internally. Internal rewards include playing for the love of the game and the joy of competing.

Parents also should reward kids for effort and not just performance. Parents can say, “Way to work hard and hustle out there” even though their kids didn’t win the game. Sports can be a rewarding experience, but children must have the motivation to continue playing. Parents need to be aware of the situations that can hurt their athletes’ motivation.

It’s critical for kids to play sports because they want to play. It’s best to encourage them to play sports that meet their own needs—the desire to be social, to run, or to compete, for example. You know your children. Be sure to help them sign up for and continue playing sports that satisfy their own needs—not yours.

Be positive and supportive. Focus on your athletes’ effort and the process—not the score or the outcome. Compliment kids for achieving small successes. These and the other tips in this ebook will help your kids feel motivated. They will help your young athletes enjoy the many benefits of sports—for the long-term.
References