

The Parent's Role in Motivation

BY **MATT KRUMRIE** | **MAY 10, 2018**, 12:36 P.M. (ET)

When Olympic diver Greg Louganis needed and scored a perfect 10 on his last dive to win an Olympic Gold Medal in diving in the 1984 Olympics, the last thought that crossed his mind before the plunge was “no matter what I do here, my mother will still love me.”

Louganis was relaxed, and knew no matter what, he was giving it his best, and when all was said and done, his mother would be there, unconditionally, for him.

While parents mean well, verbal and non-verbal actions don't always show that, and when that happens, well-meaning parents can suck the fun and passion out of the sport for their child.

“Some parents, without knowing it, put too much pressure on their kids to perform,” says Mike Clayton, Manager of USA Wrestling's National Coaches Education Program.

Parents are at the core of their child's center of influence, and have the ability to make a significant impact on their child's sport experience, both positive and negative, says Rob Schoner, head coach of Wisconsin's Hamilton High School wrestling program.

“Almost all parents want the best for their children, and for them to be successful. That is universal and not the issue,” Schoner says. “The issue is what is defined as success in youth sports? It should be about development, learning about teamwork, the value of hard work, and building camaraderie with your teammates—not wins and losses.”

The hard part? “There is no one-size-fits-all answer that motivates every wrestler,” adds Schoner.

But one thing is certain: Negative attitudes, living your past athletic dreams through your child, and thinking that winning is the only metric to success is a surefire way to make your child not like wrestling or sports in general, Schoner says.

Frank Shinkonis has two young boys who participate in the Michigan Matcat Wrestling Club (South Lyon, MI). He admits he's had to practice, evaluate, and redefine his strategies on how to best be there for his two sons during those tough times. He's learned what he calls his “dad drills.”

“It's easy to be a wrestling dad when your child is 60-0,” Shinkonis says. “But I now try to embrace the tough times as my moment to shine as a dad. Those early mornings, on the lonely road to a tournament, as my son eats pancakes and is barely awake, I ask myself, ‘How will I model proper behavior if he loses? How can I support him after a loss? Will he need a little space this time? Will he need a hug? Will he need some positives pointed out from the match?’ Those are my version of double-leg drills. Those are my dad drills. And I do them every weekend.”

No parent should expect to be an expert in how to deal with the highs and lows of wrestling. Different strategies work for different parents. In fact, different strategies have to be tried with different kids in the same family. Jen Adams has three young boys in the Michigan Matcat Wrestling Club. And all three boys have unique motivational needs.

Adams admits she knew nothing about wrestling when her kids joined the sport two years ago.

“I had absolutely no idea how emotional this sport is,” Adams says. “I never in a million years would have believed that I would come to love and respect the sport as much as they do. The amount of physical, mental, and emotional energy it takes these kids to wrestle is amazing to me.”

One of Adams' boys is physically strong, has good technique, and loves the sport. But he suffers from confidence issues. Sometimes, Adams knows he has lost the match before stepping on the mat.

“The best thing for me to do when I sense this is the case is to let a coach know,” Adams says. “Most of our coaches know him really well and know just how hard to push him. I find that when they really get after him, he fights harder, and thus success, and then confidence, grows.”

Another son is sweet and kind off the mat. And a bit too kind on the mat. After almost a year of losing matches and crying after losing those matches, Adams and the coaches figured out the boy needed permission to become a beast on the mat, while still transforming back into that kind boy off the mat. So when they tell him to “spit out the good boy and put on the beast” that child knows it’s go time.

“Giving him permission has helped him tremendously,” Adams says.

Another child lost eight matches in a row. Adams sensed her son was deflated and discouraged. “I went into desperate mom mode and said ‘you did have success,’” Adams says. “The last match you got pinned in 14 seconds, this match it took 21 seconds!”

The next match her child made it to the second period, and in that 10th match, he completed two gator rolls and scored some points.

“My younger two boys and I were screaming and cheering as if he had just won an Olympic Gold,” Adams says. “That is what it felt like. He did not win that match either, but he finally scored some points. We just had to redefine success.”

Redefining success is a fantastic way to find unique ways to motivate a child. No matter what, focusing only on winning and losing is the worst way to motivate a child, says Dr. Alan Goldberg, a sports psychologist and Director of Competitive Advantage (<https://www.competitivedge.com/>), an Amherst, Massachusetts-based performance consulting firm.

“Do not equate your child's self-worth and lovability with their performance,” Goldberg says. “The most tragic and damaging mistake I see parents continually make is punishing a child for a bad performance by withdrawing emotionally from them. A child loses a race, strikes out, or misses an easy shot on goal and the parent responds with disgust, anger and withdrawal of love and approval.”

Embracing failure can actually educate and motivate, Goldberg says.

“The most successful people in and out of sports do two things differently than everyone else,” Goldberg says. “First, they are more willing to take risks and therefore fail more frequently. Second, they use their failures in a positive way as a source of motivation and feedback to improve.”

Finally, parents should be supportive, without taking on the role of coach.

“Provide encouragement, support, empathy, transportation, money, help with fundraisers, but do not coach,” Goldberg says. “Coaching interferes with your role as supporter and fan. The last thing your child needs and wants to hear from you after a disappointing performance or loss is what they did technically or strategically wrong. Many performance problems are unknowingly caused by well-meaning parents who get too involved in their child’s sport and, as a result, stop playing the correct role. Be supportive. Be your child’s best fan.”

Most of all, make sure they are relaxed and prepared when going for Gold—like Louganis’ mom did.

Related Resources:

Project Play Checklists: 10 Questions for Parents (<https://www.aspeninstitute.org/programs/sports-society/parent-checklists/>)

10 things Parents can do to help their kids wrestle their best (<https://www.wrestlingmindset.com/blog/10-things-parents-can-do-to-help-their-kids-wrestle-their-best>)

Are you a winning parent - parent’s sports quiz (<https://www.competitivedge.com/parents-are-you-winning-parent>)