

The Art of Responsible Sport Conversation: Parent & Athlete

Once we recognize similarities and differences between our goals and our children's goals, we can better shape conversations with our children. As Responsible Sports Parents, we have to remind ourselves that our main goal is to help our children learn and apply life lessons.

As much as you, your children and their coaches want to win games -- only the players and coaches are ultimately responsible for winning. As fans and parents, our job is to make sure our children use their youth sports experience to grow into successful adults. If we become overly focused on winning, we are likely to miss opportunities to play this important role with our kids (and with other kids on the team).

Within that context, consider the following scenario, and remember, there are no "right" answers...only food for thought and a chance to educate and learn from your fellow sports parents:

What Would You Say?

Your son comes up to bat with two outs in the bottom of the last inning, with the tying and winning runs in scoring position. He strikes out, ending the game in a loss for his team. What do you say to your child on the way home?

"Something similar happened to my son, and the one thing I learned was that my immediate reaction was most important. I didn't know how badly I messed up until my son told me that right after he struck out, he looked over at me and saw me shaking my head, face down. He thought he'd let me down, and we had to talk it out. I think I eventually reassured but him, but one thing I would say about this is to remember the importance of body language."

- Rob, parent of 14-yr-old, Vancouver, WA

"I wouldn't say anything about is at-bat until he brings it up. I'd congratulate him on a good game, and a strong attempt to come back. If he brings it up, I'd tell him it's not the end of the world. Everyone makes mistakes and that's how we learn."

- Margaret, parent of kids 9 and 11, Hartford, CT

"Sooner or later you need to get him to correct his swing. Right after the game may not be the best time. He's probably really hurting. But you want to help him avoid the same outcome next time."

- Willy, parent of kids ages 8 and 15, Salem, VA

"Depending on how upset he seems, I might reassure him that we love him, that there is a lot more to him than just being a baseball player. Yeah, it's tough, but that at bat is not the most important thing in the world."

- Amanda, parent of 11-yr-old, Tallahassee, FL

"We always stop for ice cream after the game, and I think it's important to maintain that routine, win or lose, no matter the circumstances. Hopefully my son would want to talk with me about it, but if not, I would not push it."

- Brandon, parent of kids ages 5, 8 and 15, St. Louis, MO

There are no "right answers" and no one single way to approach tough situations like these in youth sports. But as you continue to read here, we hope you'll find tools and resources to help make conversations like these easier and more productive for both you and your child.

Parent & Athlete Conversation

Conversation with your children about their youth sports experience is the single most important factor in their ability to take life lessons from sports. The following pages will explore three principles that Responsible Sports Parents apply to those conversations:

- A Mastery Approach
- Filling Emotional Tanks
- Honoring the Game.

Responsible Coaches also implement these principles. When you incorporate them into Responsible Sports Parenting, you are reinforcing the messages your children receive from their Responsible Coaches.

Although all three apply to *talking* with your children, we all know that we also must "walk the walk." For our guidance to be meaningful with our kids, they have to see us acting on our own advice.

The Mastery Approach

What is the first question that people usually ask children when they see your child, for example, at the grocery store wearing their sports uniform?

"Did you win?"

Many of us have been raised to put scoreboard results ahead of everything else. Sure, as Responsible Sports Parents we care about the scoreboard. But we also know that some of the lessons learned in youth sports can be invaluable as adults.

Instead of focusing exclusively on the scoreboard, Responsible Sports Parents can take a Mastery Approach to sports, where success is tied not just to wins and losses, but also to mastering physical and mental skills. That way, win or lose, children still can gain life lessons from sports.

There are three elements of The Mastery Approach (and there is an easy acronym – ELM – to help remember them) – **E**ffort, **L**earning and **M**istakes.

1. **Effort** – we encourage our kids to always give 100%
2. **Learning** – we see sports as a way to constantly learn and improve
3. **Mistakes** are OK – it's how we respond to them that really matters

If we as parents, together with the team's coach can instill ELM in our kids – rather than focusing solely on the scoreboard – they will perform better on the field and will more likely apply the ELM approach to school, family relationships and other important aspects of their lives.



We've all seen it: too much emphasis on winning increases players' anxiety. They end up expending their emotional energy worrying about whether they will win or lose. And that higher anxiety causes them to make more mistakes -- they play tentatively and timidly.

Ultimately, anxiety undercuts self-confidence, which affects performance and takes the joy out of sports.

Why does the focus on the scoreboard increase anxiety? Because players can't control the outcome on the scoreboard! And players become anxious about things that are important to them that they can't control. A win on the scoreboard depends a great deal on the quality of the opponent, which is outside of the control of the athlete or team. (It's also outside our control as parents!)

Sports psychology research shows that teams and athletes who take the ELM Mastery approach (giving 100% effort, constantly learning, and bouncing back from mistakes) consistently win more contests. (To learn more about this research, visit [Positive Coaching Alliance](#).)

By moving our children's focus off the scoreboard results and on to their effort, our kids will be happier and more self-confident -- and the wins will come.

Introducing ELM To Your Child

Introducing your child to the ELM Mastery Approach can lead to rewarding conversation between you and your child as well as enhancing your child's sport experience.

At the start of the season, let your children know that:

1. You will always be proud of them as long as they **give 100% effort** (regardless of the outcome on the scoreboard).
2. You want them to **constantly strive to learn and improve**. This involves them comparing their own performance to their own performance (i.e. Are they better than they were two weeks ago?).
3. Mistakes are an inevitable part of the game. If they are giving 100% and trying new things (as they strive to improve), mistakes are bound to occur, and the best players are those who find ways to quickly **bounce back from mistakes**.
4. Teams that focus on giving their full effort, constantly learning and improving, and bouncing back from mistakes, **actually win more** than teams who consistently focus on the scoreboard.
5. You want your child to focus on the ELM Tree of Mastery (Effort, Learning and Mistakes) because players who do this well are **less anxious** on the field and have a **greater sense of confidence** in themselves and their abilities.

Mastery Approach Tools

Here are some tools from Positive Coaching Alliance to help you reinforce the ELM Mastery Approach:

Targeted Cheering

We all do it. Our kid's team scores, and all the parents in the stands start cheering. When the other team scores, of course we don't cheer. (Unfortunately too many of us have witnessed parents booing from the stands.) It's reflexive. It's how we are as fans at professional sports.

But as Responsible Sports Parents, we need to go beyond reflex to cheer for the things we want to see happen again. We call that Targeted Cheering. When we notice and reinforce desired behavior from our kids (and others on the team), we help ingrain into our kids those important life lessons we want them to get from their youth sports experience.



Before a game, remind yourself of the priorities you have set for what you and your children want out of sports. Consider keeping a "cheat sheet" in your pocket listing things you'll cheer for during the game, such as great effort or demonstrating good sportsmanship toward opponents.

To send your children messages about teamwork, cheer for their teammates by name. To teach sportsmanship, stretch outside of the box, and cheer great plays by the opponent. (Sure, it's tough sometimes to cheer for the other team – but if they make a great play, isn't it just the right thing to do to celebrate it?)

Mistake Ritual

In the ELM Tree of Mastery, mistakes are OK. One way to help reinforce this is through what the professionals call a Mistake Ritual -- something that reminds players to bounce back and focus on the next play.

You may have seen these Mistake Rituals and not even realized that's what they were. And some of the best coaches in sports today use them:

- Rutgers University Head Football Coach Greg Schiano has his players make a "chopping wood" gesture as a means of an effective mistake ritual.
- When sports psychologist Ken Ravizza introduced "flushing mistakes" - having players make a flushing motion after a mistake - the California State University-Fullerton baseball team turned a sub .500 season into the 2004 College World Series Championship.
- The USA Women's Olympic Softball Team used the technique of flushing mistakes to carry them out of the losers bracket and all the way to the Gold Medal at the 2000 Olympics in Sydney.

Establish a physical signal you can flash to your child from the sideline after a mistake, such as the "no sweat" motion of wiping your brow. Maybe even get all the parents together and agree on a team Mistake Ritual. (Responsible Coaches often have their own Mistake Rituals they use with their players.)

Whether you use the same signal as the rest of the team or your own private signal you establish with your children, it is important to let your children know that mistakes really are OK.

Filling Emotional Tanks

As Responsible Sports Parents, we try to keep our children's "Emotional Tanks" full. What do we mean by this? A person's "Emotional Tank" is like a car's gas tank. When it's full we can go anywhere we want to; when it's empty we can't go at all.

Players with full Emotional Tanks are:

- more coachable and likely to listen and respond without resistance
- more optimistic
- better able to handle adversity

So, how do we as Responsible Sports Parents fill our children's Emotional Tanks? By striking the right balance between specific, truthful praise and specific, constructive criticism. Educational research indicates a "Magic Ratio" of 5:1, five praises to one criticism, which fosters the ideal learning environment.

Five to one. Think about it. We're so used to our work environments where we don't get five positive comments to one criticism – but our kids really do need this level of praise and reinforcement.

The key is avoiding empty, unearned praise. The praise must be truthful and specific (i.e., not just "Way to go," but, "Good work, I noticed you got your glove all the way down on every ground ball hit your way.").

Be sure your non-verbal communication also maintains the "Magic Ratio." You fill Emotional Tanks when you listen, nod, clap, or smile. Tank drainers include ignoring, frowning, head-shaking, eye-rolling and yelling. If you happen to see a videotape of last week's game, are you embarrassed to see or hear yourself, or do you feel good about your actions on the sidelines?

It's not easy – we know that. But as Responsible Sports Parents, we're committed to working hard on this to make it happen. And in the next section, there are some helpful tools and phrases to help us all get started.

Honoring the Game

As Responsible Sports Parents, we aim to conduct ourselves by a code called "Honoring the Game."

The Honoring the Game Code is simple, but powerful. The elements of the Code are: Rules, Opponents, Officials, Teammates and Self (ROOTS for short!)

Honoring the Game is one of many opportunities where we as parents can lead by example. , When our children notice that we keep our temper in check, for example when an official misses a call, they are more likely to check their own tempers.

Honoring the Game starts with our own self-control. Take a deep breath, remind yourself about the discipline to NOT react, remind yourself that your child is watching you. If you find yourself on the verge of losing control, turn away from the action, count to 20 (or 50!) and take a deep breath. We can do this!

(And by the way – later on, you can use the experience as a teachable moment with your children: "I was pretty upset with what happened, but I controlled myself so I wouldn't do anything that would dishonor the game. And that's an important lesson I want you to learn from sports -- how to develop your own self-control so you will always Honor the Game no matter what.")

Because today's youth sports environment can so often be volatile, and even violent, it is important to prevent any outraged coach, player or parent from boiling over.

Responsible Coach Bookshelf

Following are links to books recommended by Positive Coaching Alliance, USA Football, US Youth Soccer *and ASA Softball* as well as other Responsible Sports resources collected by Liberty Mutual.

- [The Double-Goal Coach](#) - Jim Thompson (Founder, Positive Coaching Alliance)
- [Shooting in the Dark: Tales of Coaching and Leadership](#) - Jim Thompson (Founder, Positive Coaching Alliance)
- [Positive Coaching in a Nutshell](#) - Jim Thompson (Founder, Positive Coaching Alliance)
- [Positive Coaching: Building Character and Self-Esteem Through Sports](#) - Jim Thompson (Founder, Positive Coaching Alliance)
- [Sacred Hoops: Spiritual Lessons of a Hardwood Warrior](#) - Phil Jackson and Hugh Delehanty
- [A Coach's Life: My Forty Years in College Basketball](#) - Dean Smith
- [On Leadership](#) - John Gardner
- [Self-Renewal: The Individual and the Innovative Society](#)- John Gardner
- [Flow in Sports](#) - Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Susan Jackson

- [Values of the Game](#) - Bill Bradley
- [Building a Champion: On Football and the Making of the 49ers](#) - Bill Walsh
- [Friday Night Lights: A Town, A Team, and a Dream](#) - H. G. Bissinger
- [When Pride Still Mattered: A Life of Vince Lombardi](#) - David Maraniss
- [101 Ways to Be a Terrific Sports Parent](#) - Joel Fish
- [Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls](#) - Mary Pipher
- [Real Boys: Rescuing Our Sons from the Myths of Boyhood](#) - William Pollack
- [Catch Them Being Good: Everything You Need to Know to Successfully Coach Girls-](#)
Tony Dicicco, Colleen Hacker and Charles Salzberg
- [Feeding the Youth Athlete: Sports Nutrition Made Easy for Players and Parents-](#) Cynthia Lair
- [The Baffled Parent's Guide to Coaching Youth Soccer](#) - Bobby Clark
- [Season of Life](#) - Jeffrey Marx

USA Football

- [Online Coaching Guide](#)

US Youth Soccer Coaching Resources:

- [USYSA Assistant Coach Series - U6 and U8 Activity Aids for Parents and Coaches](#)
- [USYSA Assistant Coach Series - U10 Practice Activities for Parents and Coaches](#)
- [USYSA Assistant Coach Series - U12 Activity Aids for Parents and Coaches](#)
- [USYSA Coaching the U12 Player - Years of Refinement](#)

- [USYSA Handbook for Small Sided Games](#)
- [USYSA Soccer and Its Rules](#)
- [USYSA TOPSoccer Manual](#)
- [USYSA's US Youth Soccer BylawsUS Youth Soccer Policy on Players and Playing Rules](#)
- [USYSA Youth Soccer Parent/Coach Primer: Basic Philosophy and Technique](#)