



Helping Young Athletes Grow Mentally Tough:

***Lifetime Skills Parents Can Teach
Their Children—
On and Off the field***

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By

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PREFACE

“How can I, as a parent, ‘coach’ my child in a way that promotes growth in her intelligence and resilience?” “How can I help my child build ‘mental toughness’?” These are questions asked of me by parents of the young athletes I coach. Their questions are part of a dialogue opened up between us in response to *A Course in Mental Toughness*, which I authored. This course is founded upon principles, or *Keys*, I identified which dictate the level of mental toughness in an athlete.

It is important to note that learning how to build mental toughness is a process of continual development. During the course of a child’s education (K-12), he will spend well over 10,000 hours in the classroom and countless hours doing homework and other projects. Yet, the amount of time he spends learning about himself, his learning style, his motivation, how his brain works, how he develops emotionally, cognitively, and spiritually, is nearly non-existent. There is no true course in intrapersonal development for children.

As you read on, you will learn *Keys* that will make you feel more secure in your decisions as a parent. They will help you model mental toughness and teach it to your child. Through mastery of the *Keys* presented in this work, you will steer your child in the direction of growth and development of a healthy mindset, not only towards competition, but also towards life.

Enjoy the process.

Parenting Key 10: ***Process Emotions***

As parents, our responsibility is to help our children mature and become independent. They may start their lives dependent on us, but the process of development requires parents to teach and coach children towards becoming fully responsible for their own lives. A fundamental task is helping children develop self-awareness, which involves many facets, including self-concept, self-esteem, internal dialogue, and regulating and processing emotions.

Emotions provide a rich source for understanding the beliefs and expectations of your child. Emotions reveal what motivates, moves, attracts, and repels an individual. Regardless of the strength of the expression, we all have emotions. Sometimes we are conscious of the source, and other times, our reactions may come as a surprise. For example, a friend makes what you believe to be a bad call, and you react more intensely than you'd expect. Perhaps the intensity has been building up from a previous conflict that has not been completely resolved.

We can never be inside the mind of another human being. As parents, we can know our children well, but the only way to know how they truly feel is to ask... and ask again, since they change and grow so often.

Keeping an open dialogue about what matters most to your child is a gift that adds depth and richness to your relationship. Remember that motivation is tied to emotion; the energy that

drives us through successes and challenges comes from the personal meaning we choose to give it. And this meaning is connected to how we experience love and joy. There isn't much rational thought to the process. We endure and push ourselves because of the feeling that drives us. Consider that, in times of physical adversity, the mind will try to get us to stop enduring long before we have drained our body. But the emotion, the meaning of the effort, carries us through.

Here are some important ideas to keep in the forefront:

MEANING

The human brain continues to mature until our mid-twenties (and some research extends this age), with significant changes in the brain structure that integrates emotion and cognition. Given this, when we are talking to our children, we really can be worlds apart. Adults tend to favor logic, whereas children—particularly younger children—are often centered in emotion. Adults tend to ask, “Why?” (logic/reason), and children respond with, “I don’t know,” because they truly do not know. A common example is when a young child is angry or frustrated and yells, “I hate you!” to which the adult will respond, “Why?” or “You really don’t hate me...” At that moment, the child is steeped in emotion, while the adult is viewing the situation through logic. As you will learn in a moment, it is best to not put words in children’s mouths. It is best to simply label the emotion, and let them process it. Logic tends to seek closure, which can cut off the emotional process before it runs its natural course.

Another example of this potential gap is when coaches and parents label a young athlete’s actions without processing the emotion: A young golfer misses a short putt, then angrily ignores her pre-shot routine and drills the next one, a shorter putt, wide. She fumes more... The coach, or another adult, labels this occurrence as dumb and mindless. What did the young golfer learn?

Truly, she was doing the best she could at the moment. If she could have done something different, she would have. (We all hate to admit this, but we all must take responsibility.) By considering this as a process, she can learn what to do next time. By labeling the action as dumb and mindless, the adult has closed the story and made the event a likely possibility in the future—because the golfer did not learn from the process.

Processing takes more time and is a skill that is always being honed. If I label the event as “stupid” or “mindless,” it is short and quick and over. The adult took a superior position of judgment. Now, consider the same event from a different perspective:

Coach: I noticed you were really angry when you missed that putt.

Player: Yeah... (grumble, mumble)

Coach: What happened next?

Player: I missed the next one...

Coach: Is that what you wanted to happen?

Player: No!

Coach: It's perfectly normal to get angry about missing a short putt.

Player: Yeah...

Coach: What did you learn?

Player: I don't know...

Coach: Well, how do you feel when you give yourself a chance to make a putt?

Player: Pretty calm.

Coach: So, what did you learn?

Player: I miss when I am angry.

Coach: Because your anger is in charge, not you...

This can go on and on, but it is the up-front work required to set the conditions for future success.

SEE THEIR PERSPECTIVE

Entering the world of your child is vital to understanding her actions. Often, we interpret a child's actions through our own lenses, and this can lead to misunderstanding.

Here are a few tips for helping you process emotions with your child:

- **Notice:** It is better to notice than to judge. By noticing your child's actions, you are providing feedback to her without categorizing the action. Noticing helps build self-awareness, while judging can lead to self-consciousness. Here are a few examples:

Missing crucial free throws in Basketball:

Noticing: "I noticed that you didn't do your routine before you shot those free throws.

You usually bounce the ball three times."

Judging: "You missed those free throws, because you didn't take your time. You just let it fly without thinking about what you were doing."

An error in Golf while approaching the green:

Noticing: "You seemed to take a while to choose a club on that approach shot."

Judging: “You couldn’t make up your mind. That’s why you stiffened up.”

- **Label:** By labeling emotions, you open the door for the process to continue in the moment, or, perhaps, at another time. Remember, boys take longer to process emotions and often will bring up a situation at a later time. You can help the process along by labeling the emotion you see. By labeling, you allow your young athlete to step back and observe herself. A statement like, “You seemed frustrated..., etc.” helps the child broaden the context by moving her from the emotional centers to the thinking centers of the brain. This is a key shift in learning to regulate emotions.
- **Reflect:** Bring the process back to goals. Emotions will be in direct relation to a particular goal. Perhaps the emotions are telling us that we have the wrong goal or that the goal is too big, at the present time. Teaching your child to manage the gap between what she is capable of in the present and a future vision is of the utmost importance. Many athletes lose their way when the goal is too big, too far out, or not in alignment with what is meaningful to them. Which leads us to...
- **...Discover Meaning:** As human beings, we are curious by nature. We are driven by novel experience and the need to learn. This is the “how” and the “why” of motivation, but it is not the “what.” The content of motivation is very different and is what makes us very unique as individuals. There may be patterns, but finding out what moves an individual is not only enlightening but a way of deepening a relationship. Find out what moves your child. Find out what brings her enjoyment and excitement.

The goal of processing emotions is to move forward in a positive and productive light. We are born storytellers and are always creating narratives on some level of our experience. As parents, we can help our children create a story that is respectful, responsible and values life.

MOTIVATION

Recently, I attended a tennis event that featured the greatest players in the world. The top seed was ranked 18 in the world. His record was 35-20 for the year. An unseeded player, ranked 100 in the world at the time of the event, was 2-4 for the year, and 12-41 for his career. The top seed had lost 36% of his matches. (Interestingly, he had the same percentage for his career). The player ranked 100 in the world lost 77% of the matches he'd ever played. Both players had to deal with a lot of losses in their career. How does the athlete stay resilient and motivated despite these outcomes?

Remember that needs motivate action towards a goal. Below is a sample chart which looks at some basic needs and how emotions could be experienced when needs are met or not met. While an athlete's self-concept is heavily dependent on her sense of competence, there are other factors involved. If all focus is on the one goal of winning, then it is a short leap to feeling like a "loser" and identifying with this label, if she does not accomplish this one goal.

BASIC NEEDS				
Negative Reactions (examples)	Autonomy	Connection	Competence	Enjoyment
	Anger Sadness Doubt Confusion	Anger Sadness Distrust Guardedness	Deflated (suggestions: depression; exhaustion; emptiness) Anger Sadness Anxiety Nervousness Fear Grief	Disinterest Frustration Distraction Heavy Stressed
Positive Reactions (examples)	Confidence Empowerment Feeling composed Resilient	Security Trust Openness Generous	Confident Energized Empowered Joyful	In tune Happy Engaged Light Hopeful Upbeat

ACTION STEPS:

- Notice what emotions emerge and the intensity of the “reaction” when your child is challenged. Make a commitment to become more aware and to help her process her emotions.
- Commit to using the tools listed above (notice, label, etc.) to help your child get the most out of her experience.
- Consider the basic needs above. Are they being met in healthy ways?

NOTES: