



How to Help Your Kid Become a Champion

“Confidence doesn’t come out of nowhere. Confidence is a result of one thing – hours and days and weeks and years of constant work and dedication.”

- Roger Staubach – Hall of Fame Dallas Cowboys Quarterback

I have two good friends who are world class coaches. One of them coached professional tennis players and the other was an Olympic coach. Both of them love coaching kids. That’s where their hearts are.

But both of them are frustrated as can be. They ask me, “What ever happened to coachable athletes? Where did they all go?”

They tell me that whenever they give their young athletes constructive criticism, the athletes complain and grumble. Sometimes they even complain to their parents. I’ve heard this from school teachers as well.

It seems like today’s kids just want their teachers and coaches to tell them how good they are. Worst of all, the parents side with their kids.

In the old days, after a kid’s soccer or baseball game, parents would analyze the game on the drive home and give their kids tips on how to improve next time.

That's what my dad did. He didn't tell me I was a great soccer player. Instead, he showed me what I could do to improve. He told me that if I worked hard enough I could do whatever I set my mind to. But it would be up to me. Dad showed me how to be responsible for my results. When I started getting better results, my confidence and self esteem grew.

Today's parents believe that criticizing and teaching their child will harm their child's self confidence and self esteem. So parents just blame the coach or the referee for their child's poor performance or when their team loses. By doing this, they are not helping their child at all. All they are doing is teaching their kid to be irresponsible. They are turning their children into whiners, blamers and complainers.

Athletes, students, children and adults need honest and constructive feedback. Constructive criticism. That's what coaching is. If parents protect their children from it, their kids will never learn the skills they need to improve their game.

Withholding constructive criticism does not help develop confidence, it only harms the child's future. Telling your child they are talented, intelligent, and gifted does not develop confidence either. It just creates a false image that only hurts the child in the long run.

I have always told my children that everything is hard at first. But if you persevere, work hard, and listen to your teacher or coach, eventually you'll learn the skills and it will no longer be hard. It will start to be fun.

But you have to be tough and do the work. You have to pay the price. Why? Because life is tough. So you have to be tougher.

I always look for opportunities to praise my kids' hard work and perseverance. I praise their effort because effort and hard work will result in improvement.

Don't praise your children's talent or intelligence. If you do, you will hurt their motivation and performance because they will think they have arrived. They will think they can use their talent and intelligence to coast to success. And worse of all, they will be afraid of making mistakes because in their mind, mistakes would show that they are not intelligent or talented.

Always praise effort and hard work. And explain to them that effort, hard work and the willingness to make mistakes is what makes champions. Think about Tiger Woods, Michael Jordan and Larry Bird. They are champions because of their work ethic. Because they are willing to outwork the competition.

Failure is not bad. Mistakes are not bad. They are just feedback of something that did not work. Failure is just an opportunity to improve. As long as you don't quit.

This is true in sports, in school, in learning how to play a musical instrument, and at work. It's a principle of success.

When you watch an inspiring musical performance in a theater or an incredible athletic feat like a gymnast, a diver or a figure skater at the Olympics, you are seeing the culmination of many years of purposeful practice under a top coach. That's what it takes.

A figure skater that can do a triple jump has fallen thousands of times more than a figure skater that can "only" do a double jump. It was the mental toughness and willingness to fall more times that made them better. And an Olympic figure skater that can do a quadruple jump is someone who was willing to fall even more times.

Everything is hard at first. You just have to keep fighting until you learn the skills.

My son Gracen started learning judo when he was six years old. He's fortunate enough to get to practice at the Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs under Coach Ed Liddie, the US Olympic Coach. Coach Liddie medaled in judo at the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics.

We live 45 minutes away from the Olympic Training Center. I drive Gracen and his older sister Gabriela to judo twice a week so they can practice in an environment that produces champions. Whether they decide to stick with judo or not does not matter. They are learning life lessons, not just judo lessons.

Three months after starting judo, Gracen started competing in tournaments. He struggled. For a year and a half Gracen did not win a single match. I joked that Gracen knew what the ceiling at every tournament looked like because he got pinned so much.

These 18 months were especially tough for Gracen because his sister Gabriela was winning medals at the time.

But I kept reminding Gracen that everything is tough at the beginning. I kept telling him that as long as he listened to Coach Liddie and practiced hard, he would be growing on the inside and one day he would start winning.

After about a year and a half of watching his sister win tournaments, Coach Liddie told me that Gracen was starting to get it. On his sixth tournament, Gracen won a Gold Medal. I told him I was not proud of him because he had won a Gold Medal. I told him I was proud of him because he continued to fight and train and work hard while he was not winning for a year and a half.

You don't determine a person's worth by what they accomplish. You determine a person's worth by what it takes to make them quit.

Will Gracen lose matches in the future? Sure he will. I make sure he understands this. He will face bigger athletes or faster athletes or athletes that have trained longer than him. When he does, he will know that he did not deserve to win. And that knowledge will motivate him to work even harder so he can win the next time.

Now Gracen is genuinely confident and knows what it takes to win. He knows the process. He understands that life is tough but that as long as he is willing to be tougher he can win in judo and in life.

If you will praise your kid's hard work and dedication, they will know they can win too.

January 2015 – Update

Gracen and Gabriela are still at it. They have been doing judo for over 3 years now. Today Gracen was honored as 2014 outstanding judo player in the Olympic Training Center Judo Club. And Gabriela won the Colorado State Championship in her weight class. Gracen got second place in his weight class. This stuff works.

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